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Migration and Exilic Exclusion: Construction of the Female Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's Major Novels

Dr. Rajib Bhaumik

Asst. Professor, Dept. of English, Alipurduar College, West Bengal, India

Abstract

Questions of origin and Diaspora come up with particular surface-tensions between internationalism and nationalism; the relationship between place and identity; and the ways cultures and literatures interact. In the process of diasporic cross-over new patterns of mobility are being drawn on the familiar landscape of migration and exilic exclusions. In the context of diaspora there is a process of structuring the shared identities in the making of a new subjectivity. Instead of being seen as fixed, becomes a dynamic and polyphonic construction that adjusts continually to the changes experienced within and surrounding the self. In Mukherjee's novels female identity is constructed through such multiple codes, components, language, myth, history, psychology, gender and race. It is directly connected with the subject's self- image and the unconsciously inherited positioning. Mukherjee's thinking is chained to the paradigms of Western thinking. Caught within a system of binary oppositions that label her as an outsider, and the 'other', she tends to highlight differences and unstable configuration and assumes an exclusivity that negates the dominant principles within hegemonic Western discourse.

KEY WORDS: *origin, Diaspora, surface-tensions, diasporic cross-over, exilic exclusions, polyphonic construction.*

Globalization has produced a new structure and outline of migration and provoked conflicting structures and responses worldwide. The seemingly homogenizing effect of globalization cannot hide the different responses it has prompted in the different regions within its reach. As Avtar Brah observes, 'Home is a mythic space of desire in the diasporic imagination[...]It is a place of no-return even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin.'ⁱ The geographical dislocation raises several questions with respect to the poetics of exile, the nature of expatriate writing, the writer's relationship to his culture and his work. It's at one level, a moving out of the expatriate's dilemma of avoiding a schizophrenic split, of being pulled in two contradictory directions. The creations of this third location, does also at another level, destroy the concept of 'purity' of cultures and brings into being a self-reflexive self and a self-reflexive text. As Homi Bhabha has pointed out in the *Location of Culture*, the creation of a Third spaceⁱⁱ disrupts 'The logic of synchronicity and evolution which traditionally authorize the subject of cultural knowledge.'ⁱⁱⁱ It makes 'The structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process and destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated open, expanding code.'^{iv}

The preservation of Indian cultural ethos is neither a sole sentimental quest in her life nor a photographic representation made by an 'outsider.' It is endowed with deep emotional and psychological significance. It endows her vision with a rare humanitarian quality and universal appeal. In one of the interviews to Alison B. Carb, she categorically points out:

I was born into a Hindu Bengali Brahmin family which means, I have a different sense of self existence and of immortality than do writer like Malamud. I believe that our souls can be reborn in another body, so the perspective I have about a single character's life is different from that of an American writer who believes that he has only one life.^v

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and literatures interact. In the process of diasporic cross-over new patterns of mobility are being drawn on the familiar landscape of migration and exilic exclusions. In the context of diaspora there is a process of structuring the shared identities in the making of a new subjectivity. Instead of being seen as fixed, becomes a dynamic and polyphonic construction that adjusts continually to the changes experienced within and surrounding the self.

In Mukherjee's novels female identity is constructed through such multiple codes, components, language, myth, history, psychology, gender and race. It is directly connected with the subject's self-image and the unconsciously inherited positioning. The creation of this *third space* and its *cultural locationality*^{vi} reflects these complexities. Space provides in itself a dynamics for history. Space is an important determinant of the kind of relationships which are produced in the intersection of power in the diasporic combination of exclusion and inclusion in global ethnicities.

In an out-of-joint situation of space and culture the transplanted must encounter splitting and dislocations. To quote Bhabha- 'We are now almost face to face with culture's double bind-a certain slippage or splitting between human artifice and culture's discursive agency. To be true to a self one must learn to be a little untrue, out-of-joint with the signification of cultural generalizability.'^{vii}

Mukherjee's thinking is chained to the paradigms of Western thinking. Caught within a system of binary oppositions that label her as an outsider, and the 'other', she tends to highlight differences and unstable configuration and assumes an exclusivity that negates the dominant principles within hegemonic Western discourse. Yet this projection of contrariness and difference basically arises out of a social content in which fixation is translated into a new location in contrast to racial and cultural stereotypes. Thus the cultural space that is created is crisscrossed by a series of dislocations, dissensions, and the location becomes a transcription and translation of the originary into a new ambivalent identity.

Bharati Mukherjee with her peculiar sensibility for the cross-cultural crisis in the era of globalization endeavored to dive deep into such 'slippage' and 'splitting' and the distorted psyche of those immigrants who had been surviving in the conflict of traditional Indian values, inherent in their personality. The uprooted immigrants and their fascination for Western mode of living that they had chosen out of their professional compulsions or for their urge to achieve a greater freedom in liberal and dynamic society of America is also an area of Mukherjee's interest. In her fiction she has sincerely dealt with multiplicities of home and the recurrence of splitting and slippages in the process of identity construction in an alien country under a specific situation of social transformation.

Home in a diasporic condition is either disintegrating or being radically redefined. In her personal life Bharati Mukherjee witnessed the anguish of Indians both as expatriates and immigrants and in that given situation, Indian life, Indian values, rituals, fidelity to traditions and the grace of human relationship in social and religious modes of existence constantly stirred her imagination and moulded her creative sensibility.

The affinity to Indian soil and culture is rooted in the mental map of Bharati Mukherjee. And hence her approach to life and its complicated pattern of struggle is designed and shaped in a peculiar narrative structure. To quote Maya Manju Sharma- 'in her fiction Mukherjee handles Western themes and settings as well as Characters who are Westernized or bicultural. Yet she is forced to admit that the very structure of her imagination is essentially Hindu and essentially moral.'^{viii}

However, the critics like Mala Shree Lal still express their aversion to the Indian sensibility, scattered in the novels of Bharati Mukherjee and considers her only as an 'outsider' over- reacting to her native Indian tradition of typical Bengali origin. Mala Shree Lal's argument is:

Mukherjee has deliberately problematised her identity perhaps overreacting to the likelihood of being enclosed in a coterie culturally, geographically and ideologically separate from her chosen home and citizenship. One must allege here that her sense of Indianness is narrow, restrictive somewhat bigoted for no writer is characterized by his or her passport details.

What matters is the literary material to which imagination is superimposed.^{ix}

Bharati Mukherjee through her female protagonists expresses her concern for the problem of dislocation and assimilation, the assimilation of traditional Indian mode of living with new materialistic values encouraged by American society. Fear, constant anxiety, the obsession of not belonging, the panic of the New World, consciousness of Indian spiritualism and assimilative fusionism are the recurrent motives in the novels like *Jasmine*, *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Wife*, *Desirable*

Daughters and *The Tree Bride*. Her *The Holder of the World* and *Leave It to Me* deal with the issues of reverse diaspora not included in detail in this study. Commenting on this aspect in the novels of Bharati Mukherjee, Pushpa N. Parekh remarks- 'Fear, anger, pain, bitterness, confusion, silence, irony humour as well as pathos underline her observations as she discovers for herself the undefined medium between the preservation of old world and the assimilation into the new.'^x

Mukherjee also commonly engages in what might be termed as contested subalternity. An analysis of Mukherjee's novels –especially her earlier ones– confirms this view, although in so doing she also sometimes reveals (as in *Wife*) a far more ambivalent, and at times even negative, portrait of immigrant life, one which is sometimes strikingly at odds with her multicultural vision. Mukherjee says- 'Others who write stories of migration often talk of arrival at a new place as a loss, the loss of communal memory and the erosion of an original culture. I want to talk of arrival as gain.'^{xi}

A notable recurrent feature of Mukherjee's novels is that they tend to depict fundamentally problematised new immigrant women who as immigrant subaltern are forced to undergo a series of transformations before they can become fully-fledged, self-confident and self-aware members of American society in negotiating the fixed and static borders. In these five novels, each woman is metamorphosed from one ethnic identity into another. In the earlier two novels, *Wife* and *Jasmine*, this metamorphosis occurs alongside and in the wake of a physical move from India to America. In *The Holder of the World*, this physical move occurs in reverse, as the novel's heroine, Hannah Easton, travels to South India, where she becomes an Indian concubine. In *Leave It to Me*, the central female character undergoes a voluntary transformation that tracks a physical and psychological search for her Indian roots. In each case, this transformation is captured by a name change, as the female protagonist adopts multiple identities, each representative of a different stage in the process of adopting a new identity. Each woman – Wife/Sita/Dimple, Jyoti/Jasmine/Jane; Hannah Easton Fitch Legge/Salem Bibi/ 'Precious as Pearl' and Debby/Devi – undergoes radical changes that are sometimes voluntary, but more often are the unjust requirements of a society prejudiced of distinction and intrinsically unstable, contingent and relational.

Mukherjee's characters do not simply *claim* America, they *transform* it, but in a different way in each novel. Uma Parameswaran has noted that a characteristic feature of much Indian expatriate writing is the inability to either 'wholly repatriate' or 'wholly impatriate.'^{xii} *Wife* demonstrates this inability since Mukherjee leaves her central character stranded midpoint at the end of the novel. In contrast, in *Jasmine*, according to Gurleen Grewal, the eponymous character Jasmine is a 'born again American.'^{xiii} Bharati Mukherjee seems to assert that in the process of assimilations, one seems to experience reinscription and grafting before being located after dislocations. In the process of mutative change and translation, the immigrants can neither adopt alien culture nor can leave their culture of 'home' and finally a new hybrid culture comes to flourish in a new location after disjuncture. This 'race difference doubling and splitting'^{xiv} results in 'cultural enunciations in the act of hybridity, in the process of translating and transvaluing cultural differences.'^{xv}

Thus 'Location' has become to a great extent an absorbing preoccupation with the postcolonial writers, especially the postcolonial immigrant writers. Exiled by choice or circumstance, the immigrant woman finds displaced from her roots, her antecedents, and her centre. She sheds her monolithic national and regional identity and becomes a repository of dualities and multiplicities. Her position as an outsider in the country of her adoption leaves her to create a distinct geographical and textual space that is contrary to the colonial discourse. In her novels Bharati Mukherjee has consciously created a cultural myth that is rooted in a multi-dimensional projection of the history and culture of the countries to which such women belong. About geographical boundaries and margins Said's point of view is important:

The geographic boundaries accompany the social ethnic and cultural ones in expected ways. Yet often the sense in which someone feels himself to be not-foreign is based on a very unrigorous idea of what is "out there," beyond one's own territory. All kinds of suppositions, associations, and fictions appear to crowd the unfamiliar space outside one's own. [...] Yet there is no use in pretending that all we know about time and space, or rather history and geography, is more than anything else imaginative. There are such things as positive history and positive geography which in Europe and the United States have impressive achievements to point to.^{xvi}

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- ⁱ Avtar Brah. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. New York and London: Routledge, 1996. p.192.
- ⁱⁱ Homi K. Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. NY: Routledge, 1994. p.53.
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*
- ^{iv} *Ibid.*, p.37.
- ^v Alison B. Carb. 'An Interview with Bharati Mukherjee,' *The Massachusetts Review*, Winter 1988, p. 650.
- ^{vi} Homi K. Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. *op.cit.*, p.53.
- ^{vii} *Ibid.*, p.196.
- ^{viii} Maya Manju Sharma. "The Inner World of Bharati Mukherjee: From Expatriate to Immigrant." *Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspectives*. Ed. Emmanuel S. Nelson, New York: Garland, 1993. p.18.
- ^{ix} Malashri Lal. "Bharati Mukherjee: The 'Maximalist' Credo." *Contemporary Indian English Fiction: An Anthology of Essays*. Ed. K.N. Awasthi, New Delhi: ABS Publications, 1993. pp.57-58.
- ^x Pushpa N. Parekh. "Telling her Tale: Narrative Voice and Gender Roles in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*." *Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspectives*. Ed. Emmanuel S. Nelson, New York: Garland, 1993. p.113.
- ^{xi} Bharati Mukherjee. (1997) "American Dreamer", *op.cit.* 1-2.
- ^{xii} Uma Parameswaran. "What Price Expatriation?" *The Commonwealth Writer Overseas: Themes of Exile and Expatriation*. Ed. A. Niven, Brussels: M. Didier, 1976 p.41.
- ^{xiii} G. Grewal. "Born Again American: Immigrant Consciousness in *Jasmine*." *Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspectives*. Ed. Emmanuel S. Nelson, New York: Garland, 1993. p. 181.
- ^{xiv} Homi K. Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. *op.cit.*, p.360.
- ^{xv} *Ibid.*, p.361.
- ^{xvi} Edward W. Said. *Orientalism*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2001. pp.54-55.