

Multiplicities of Home and the recurrence of Splitting: Existential truth of Female Diaspora

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ABSTRACT

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. Globalisation 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. Their quest for identity leads them to several dislocations, subsequently emboldening the empowered, emancipated woman on the one hand, and confused undecided characters who resort to violence and mutation in order to self assert in the new geopolitical locale and new sexual orientation. The new breed of immigrants negotiates the conflicting components of their ethnicity and Americanism. They emerge triumphant, and some characters dwindling between two cultures- nomadic, decentered, and contrapuntal, subsequently become split personalities, and reside in the self-made ghettos negotiating multiple dislocations.

KEY WORDS: cross-cultural crisis, mutation, ethnicity, dislocations, ghettos, Globalisation, slippage, splitting.

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Diasporic history as *minority discourse*,ⁱⁱ thus contests both dislocations and the continuing irreversible causality of history where home is a scattered location in the travails of the present time. It consequently authenticates the theory of re-inventing selves by re-birth. The heroines undergo pangs of re-birth to immerse into imperialistic America which believes in colonizing the immigrants and aliens and as such 'their strategic ploys, resilience and willingness to shed the old, don the new, make the stuff of Mukherjee's novels.'ⁱⁱⁱ The scattered

unpredictable minority, in the language of Bhabha, may emerge as a new gathering point of political solidarity at the transgressive border of history:

Minority discourse sets the act of emergence in the antagonistic in-between of image and sign, the accumulative and the adjunct, presence and proxy. It contests genealogies of 'origin' that lead to claims for cultural supremacy and historical priority. Minority discourse acknowledges the status of national culture and the people as a contentious, performative space of the perplexity of the living in the midst of the pedagogical representations of the fullness of life. Now there is no reason to believe that such marks of difference cannot inscribe a 'history' of the people or become the gathering points of political solidarity.^{iv}

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. Globalisation 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*.'^v

The uprooted women 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 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.^{vi}

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.’^{vii}

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.^{viii}

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.'^{ix}.

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.'^x

The narratives of dislocation have given rise to new aesthetics and new rationalities, not merely in terms of post-colonial aesthetics but also by using fluidity and ethnic acculturation as a new concept. It recognizes translational alternative version as equally relevant, and a new narrative of cultural fragility is born out of this conflict. Bharati Mukherjee writes on the Indian Diasporas. Like diasporic writers she is inclined to inhabit the same liminal or threshold region of intercutting subjectivities that define the experience of the migrant and the sense of

dislocation. Dislocation can be of different kinds, physical, psychological, emotional and political. It can be estrangement, self- alienation and social ostracism, an exclusion from familiar environments of family, kinship and culture. It can come through political upheaval, mass migration or natural disaster. It can be individual or collective.

But no dislocation is ever absolute, terminal or enduring in itself. In it there is always a kind of holding back, a sort of nostalgia, and the perception of difference. There is always a looking back at the transgressive edge of history. This may be through memory, recollection, history, images and fantasy. Dislocations are unavoidable, perhaps essential for the voyage towards maturity, self-knowledge and recognition at the historical and discursive margins of the New World.

In a diasporic condition, cultures go across boundaries, transgress lines and take root after multiple dislocations, and the transplanted subjects feel nostalgia, or experience amnesia amid contestation and ethnic disavowal under specific conditions. Such migration has resulted in most cases politically and socially mobilizing category of nationalism in a diasporic space. The word 'Diaspora' is literally a 'scattering', carrying within it the ambiguous status of being both an ambassador and a refugee. The requirements of the two roles are different.

Literature of Diaspora occupies a significant position between cultures and countries. It generates theory and defines positions as it constructs new identities which negotiate boundaries and confines, and relate to different temporal and spatial metaphors. While one requires the projection of one's culture and the ability to enhance its understanding, the other seeks refuge

and protection and relates more positively to the host culture. Further categories emerge through the use of such words as immigrant, exile and refugee.

ⁱ W.Benjamin, 'On Language as such and the language of man,' qtd in Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*.p.303.

ⁱⁱ Homi K. Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. NY: Routledge, 1994. P.225.

ⁱⁱⁱ Malashri Lal. "Bharati Mukherjee: The 'Maximalist' Credo." *Contemporary Indian English Fiction: An Anthology of Essays*.Ed. K.N. Awasthi, New Delhi: ABS Publications, 1993.p.58.

^{iv} Homi K. Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. *op.cit.*,p. 225.

^vAvtar Brah. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. New York and London: Routledge, 1996. p.192.

^{vi}Alison B. Carb. 'An Interview with Bharati Mukherjee,' *The Massachusetts Review*, Winter 1988, p. 650.

^{vii}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.

^{viii} Malashri Lal. "Bharati Mukherjee: The 'Maximalist' Credo." *op.cit.*pp.57-58.

^{ix}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.

^xBharati Mukherjee. (1997)"American Dreamer", *op.cit.* 1-2.