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Moving Metaphor of Dislocation: Women in Bharati Mukherjee's Fiction

Rajib Bhaumik

Asst Professor
Department Of English
Alipurduar College
Alipurduar, Wb

Bharati Mukherjee explores many facets of feminine consciousness and immigrant experience in her fictions. She has dealt with the ambivalence of their psychic and spatial identity and the trauma of dislocations at multiple levels. The impact of patriarchy on the Indian society varies from the one in the West and therefore Mukherjee has tried to evolve her own stream of *feminism* grounded in the truth of compulsory displacement that they recurrently undergo. Indian expatriate writers do not write from all exclusive foreignness of their identity but their writing reflects the perspective of someone caught between two cultures. Bharati Mukherjee has been especially attentive to the changes taking place in the control mechanism of south Asian women in the New World, their otherness and alienation in 'the larger flow of a transnational history.'¹

Mukherjee consciously avoids glorification of the native country she also doesn't allow herself to demean or lower the adopted country or the center of the new location although there are criticism on her bicultural perception. Mukherjee has emerged with a postmodern counter narrative of assimilative and celebratory American citizenship. This new perspective preserves sufficient Indianness to be exotic but merge gleefully into American materialism. From this category of experience Mukherjee wishes to carve her own exclusiveness within the broader genre of American Literature.

Migrancy and dislocation, either consensual or conflictual, is a global and trans-cultural necessity. Mukherjee's protagonists are all sensitive and are differently trained in the new ethnic imagination. They are tossed in an environment of ambivalence regarding their identity, racism, sexism and other social oppression. They negotiate displacement and face the multicultural reality in the process of cultural differentiation and assimilation. The multiculturalism ethos with which they are confronted leads to the struggle for a new life and a near break with the past. They are shown at an emotional transit point and from their dual and bicultural perception they attempt to measure the disjuncture and persecutory paranoia. In the USA Mukherjee explores the immigrant sensibility, recognizing its duality and fluid identity and acknowledging realities.

She is an outsider in a no man's land. She recreates herself into a new personality and forms emotional ties with the place where she lives and 'behave in accordance with a neurotic orientation.'² Mukherjee's novels and short stories express the same dislocations and the neurosis in their wandering impulse and their deliberate search for materially better life. They migrate to the West and consequently face tension of adaptation and assimilation. She depicts the cross-cultural conflicts and shows how her heroines turn febrile and *phantasmic*³ to take control over their destinies.

Mukherjee's writing largely reflects her personal experience in crossing cultural boundaries. In novels such as *Jasmine*, *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Wife* and *The Desirable*

Daughters, as well as in her award winning short stories, Indian born Mukherjee adds to her character's multicultural background a delicate undercurrent of translational upsurge which sometimes expresses itself through violence and existential disorderliness. Mukherjee's women characters such as Tara Cartwright, Dimple, Jasmine or Tara Chatterjee, all quest for a location and show a subaltern dread and anxiety to be visible. They are not concentric to adopt racial stereotype at the cost of identity. They accept a mutative change through displacement and replacement of culture.

She prefers showing them acquiring the power in order to control their fates and neutralize the forces that split her presence. Not a single character can be defined traditionally because each has a dimensional facet to its personality and each is endowed with some paranoid fantasy to acquire the same *phantasmic space*.⁴ Each character, caught in the tension of demand and desire, represents different characteristics of feminism and displacement. The necessity is that one has to step out of the rigid confines of conventional rules and adapt to new environment. The imbalance in personality takes place if one rigidly refuses to walk with changing times while still retaining one's fragile values and tradition in a massive role reversal.

In Mukherjee, the heroines face uncertain interstices of personal history and take to violent acts and encounter the *transgressive and transitional truth*⁵ and tend to become violent as to kill their husband or by other means. This frustration seems to have its seeds in the author herself as she mentioned it in her work, *Days and Nights in Calcutta*. The frustration comes out loud and clear at her own helplessness in understanding the old society she had left and the eccentricities of the new world which did not embrace her:

And sometimes in the flickering darkness and heat of our guest room during power cuts, propelled by the same misplaced bitterness, I quarreled with Clark, accusing him of having forced expatriation on me. Could he live out his life in Calcutta where he would have to learn a new language a new way of making friends, where he could not expect his readers to understand too well intents of his fiction?⁶

Blaise observes in *Days and Nights* that Human relationships are fragile in America. In India the human relations are stable to a large extent, and the stability of these relationships in India is due to the traditional virtues of our culture. In the United States of America and Canada and the Western countries, civilizational matters tend to develop, more on rational scientific and materialistic likes.

Dimple in *Wife* aborts her child in order to gain freedom in the New World yet does not have the grit to find a foothold for herself because she is always insecure and dependent on Amit Basu to offer freedom on the platter of marriage in terms of material emancipation. Naturally the husband becomes an adversary when he is not as per her fantasies. Adverse conditions faced by the female characters in the novels of Bharati Mukherjee are faced with clarity in case of Hannah Easton, with ferocity by Devi and resilience to survive by Jasmine and someone like Dimple ends up in a bloody quagmire and all of them face dislocation and mutation.

Mukherjee's women are constantly combating the unresolved contradiction between culture and location in order to exist in a world of 'othernesses.' This *othernesses* could not be limited to new culture, but in the process of the assimilation of the contraries, a silent rupture exist within their own identity. It is persistently the negotiation of self and other or the mutation

outside, unleashes a split space which consists in the free play of dislocations and politics of polarity.

For Dimple the 'other' is American society and the wilderness is its cultural ethos. America and its open society expedite the hunger in Dimple to refashion her self. Her act in killing Amit is more like relinquishing of her 'self' out of her failure to understand the dreadful presence of a concurrent void. Her reincarnation, in a way, exonerates herself from the bondage of repression, the 'self' blending with the 'other'. Tara in *The Tiger's Daughter* to Devi in *Leave It to Me*, Dimple Dasgupta in *Wife* to Hannah Easton in *The Holder of the World* are or seem to be, a part of the author's early and late life, first as an expatriate and then as an immigrant. Jasmine of *Jasmine* being the adjoining juncture rather than the transit.

The women characters of Bharati Mukherjee belong to different cultural perspectives and feel marginalized in new culture in their new interstitial role. Their aesthetic image discloses varied gender and ethnic presence in the transitional world. Bharati Mukherjee herself had to face this as an expatriate in Canada. Considered exotic due to her skin color and facing the problem of racism and non acceptance as a writer, made her caustic. The same conditions are faced by three of her characters- Tara, Jasmine and Dimple in the initial stages of expatriation in the new world. All of them face the trauma of dislocation and marginalization. Standing at the historical and discursive boundaries they make efforts to carve a niche for themselves.

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 geo-political locale and new sexual orientation. The new breed of immigrants equipoise between the ethnicity and Americanism. They emerge triumphant, and some characters dwindling between two cultures- nomadic, decentered, and contrapuntal subsequently who become split personalities, and reside in the self made ghettos negotiating multiple dislocations.

Bharati Mukherjee's journey to India and Tara Banerjee's journeying back home have the same resounding echo of finding the 'self' after being battered as the 'other' in the foreign land, both antagonistic and affiliative in nature. Both of them, after the journey, decide to return to the foreign land amid the ongoing negotiation with the metaphysical past and the physical presence, home becoming a bygone phase, a liminal space to which one could return from time to time. The gesture is a basic necessity to anchor their lives. The immigrant women in Mukherjee find themselves in a fix after their marriage and feel vulnerable in new household, a more difficult situation arises when they migrate to a wholly new world, especially the women of colonial India who learn to keep quiet in order to adapt. The immigrants have the difficult task to **forge** a re-creation and re-location of their identity.

Refashioning of self is a dire disciplinary struggle in Bharati Mukherjee's fictions. The immigrants in an inevitable cultural politics transform their self to emerge with a new identity like Jasmine, Tara and Dimple. The process of reincarnation once started, through dislocations and re-locations, the women in Bharati Mukherjee's fictions cannot regress back nor can they stop it. The only thing they resort to is to be re-placed into the new world with violence, rupturing the body, mind and soul in a strategy of sequential and ongoing illumination.

The existence in servility of women even in affluent families, disgusts Bharati Mukherjee and she finds the freedom of the West friendlier to the restraining and exasperating existence in India and that sets the demand for re-historicize oneself.

Under its impact the self emancipation of female protagonists comes through in the form of transmutation and translation of indigenous tradition. Unconfined from the traditional attitude the protagonists of Bharati Mukherjee surge forward, exuberant in their *Americanness* and also to recapture the lost harmony. The initial hesitant moves, either through self-inflected violence, as in Dimple's case in *Wife*, or violence from outside, as in *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Jasmine*, pushes these individuals into self-mutating heroines permeating the novels, while *Desirable Daughters* re-inscribe the root search and defines the relocation of subalternity in different way.

Each of the characters of Bharati Mukherjee re-incarnates itself into new self with a new name to pave a path to a future, which provides freedom of expression, be it in their sensuality or be it the voicing of their suppressed selves. Jasmine savors the freedom of new world, renouncing the old tradition which is not difficult, though the self-recrimination haunts her, before the shelving of old self.

The manifestation of self-empowerment is in the hands of the women. Another motif from Hinduism, an integral part of the female protagonists, is the self-realization of their 'Power,' either forced through violence like rape as in *Jasmine* and *The Tiger's Daughter* or the internalized like rape as in *Jasmine* and *The Tiger's Daughter* or the internalized conflicts leading to murdering the symbol of oppression in *Wife*. Compared to this manifestation of female power, the women of West lament the status of passivity and powerlessness. In spite of the freedom of expression and liberation of sexual liaisons, their position is that of a second citizen. 'Now, woman has always been man's dependent, if not his slave, the sexes have never shared the world in equality.'⁷

Bharati Mukherjee's decision to immigrate to U.S.A is her refusal to settle down for the obscurities and dual existence in India and extremities of Canada. Balance in her life-the balance of freedom of expression and recognition as a writer and responsibilities as an American citizen- is achieved.

In terms of psychic violence and female sexuality, I grew up at a time and in class in Calcutta when you couldn't say the word 'sex.' I'd never said the word 'sex' and we certainly were not allowed to think it; I didn't even know how the male anatomy was constructed, so for me and my characters who are coming not from villages but upper-class, urban Indian settings, sexuality becomes the mode of resistance or a way to rebel. After all, if you're coming out of society where sex is unspeakable, the unutterable, then doing it or acknowledging your sexuality results not only in individual rebellion but actually constitutes an attack on a whole patriarchal, Victorian, hypocritical society.⁸

In her novels Mukherjee has dealt with the peripheral signifying boundaries of culture of an Indian woman. She has also dealt with the long and harsh histories of power and misrecognition and its possible expansion beyond home to reach away from geographical limits. As an evocation of freedom she shows the re-emergence of the immigrant women from the scars of dislocations and the traditional bondage of domestic role playing. For Mukherjee this dislocation and relocation is metaphoric whereas the inherited culture has its metaphysics of presence.

The woman characters in Mukherjee's fiction are moored to their Indian origins the same way the author is. Like her, they shed their external connections with India, but carry a core of

beliefs in the interior of the self against all new experience measured and what part of the Indianness is retained through the adaptive process remains to be seen. And in what way, if any, do the immigrants broaden the horizons of American experience is another point for consideration. Mukherjee's celebratory note for her Maximalist credo is based on the signification of change. She says:

I see my immigrant story replicated in a dozen American cities, and instead of seeing my Indianness as a fragile identity to be preserved against obliteration (or worse a 'visible' disfigurement to be hidden), I see it now as a set of fluid identities to be celebrated.⁹

Maximalism is supposedly a philosophy of expansionist tendencies yet the Credo is theoretical if the immigrant's fluid identity is to add a valuable voice to the existing polyphony of the nation, it is not clear however, whether an individual is subsumed in the white mainstream. As Vrinda Nabar points out: 'All very well in fiction, but isn't life a little more complicated? ... Mukherjee's ebullience does not negate the grimmer reality of immigration.'¹⁰

Jasmine is appropriating the social norms and the spirit of the new nation in the new age of transnational movements. Faced with the dilemma of her own cultural location in the new nation, Mukherjee observes:

We immigrants have fascinating tales to relate. Many of us lived in newly independent or emerging countries which are plagued by civil and religious conflicts. We have experienced rapid changes in the history of the nations in which we lived. When we uproot ourselves from those countries and come here, either by choice or out of necessity, we suddenly must absorb two hundred years American history and learns to adapt to American society. Our lives are remarkable, often heroic.¹¹

Mukherjee is therefore very forthright in the matter of scripting a more inclusive history of the nation and is very clear about the role of a creative writer from the Third World in reshaping its new demographic map. She also refers to the transformative energy in her other characters and says: 'They take risks they wouldn't have taken in their old, comfortable worlds to solve their problems. As they change citizenship, they are reborn.'¹²

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³Homi K. Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. op.cit.p. 62.

⁴Homi K. Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. op.cit., p. 63.

⁵*Ibid.*, p.57.

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