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A Study on Cultural Displacement in Bharati Mukherjee's Novels

Rekha Rani

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INTRODUCTION

In her first novel, The Tiger's Daughter (1971), Mukherjee uses the return to India of her nostalgic and 'homesick' Bengali Brahmin heroine as the context for undermining national myths of origins and foundations. In other words, the migrant's return 'to recover her roots' and the stability of her cultural identity as an Indian is not equated uncritically with an unexamined sense of what being 'Indian' means.

Instead, Mukherjee uses the migrant's moment of return to elaborate a much more complex and mediated understanding of national and cultural identity.

Mukherjee's novel further captures the chief resonances of Bhabha's argument by staging the migrant's return at a particularly visible intersection of history. The anarchy and chaos unleashed by the Naxalite rebellion disrupts the nation's temporal and cultural coherence by bringing to the fore the differences between ruler and ruled, minorities and majorities, empowered and disempowered, past and present.

More specifically, Mukherjee deploys the minority discourse that this movement represents to contest the appeal to 'origins' that authorize and legitimize dominant identities by claiming authenticity and unity. In this case, the hegemonic upper-class, Bengali Brahmin identity that Tara upholds is challenged by the diverse discourses and different kinds of address and knowledge's that the Naxalite uprising uncovers within the nation space In relation to this, it must be emphasized that it is through the ambivalent spaces of Calcutta city that the narrative of the nation is rewritten. Thus, Tara is confronted by a multiplicity of Calcutta that confounds any notion of the existence of a single or unchanging India. These multiple narratives of Calcutta are criss -crossed by various temporal and spatial narratives on the basis of the ethnic, religious, caste and class differences in the city. Indeed, it is a Calcutta 'too immense and blurred to be listed and assailed one by one.

First, there is the Calcutta of the once plush and fashionable but now decaying Catelli-Continental Hotel, a disturbing obsolescence of British culture which towers over the stench and decay of busy Chowringhee Avenue, the city's main thoroughfare. Once the 'navel of the universe', when Calcutta was the imperial city of British India and also its centre of commerce and political power, the Catelli is now a symbol of Calcutta's decline; its 'entrance is small, almost shabby', its 'walls and woodwork are patterned with mold and rust', the 'sidewalks along the hotel front are painted with obscenities and political slogans'. On them 'a colony of beggars' jostle for space with 'shrivelled women' and vendors selling their wares. Frequented in the past by people in positions of power and influence who would come together and talk, it is now the haunt of the Calcutta elite, people without passion and conviction, who come to take 'their daily ritual of express or tea while flicking through old issues of The New Yorker. Then, there is the capitalist Calcutta of moral bankruptcy evoked by Tara's coterie of upper-caste, upper class Bengali friends -- Sanjay, Pronob, Reena and Nilima -- which disdains the vulgarity and insurgence of the working class while lamenting the loss of an earlier Calcutta, 'one they longed to return to, more stable, less bitter'. Juxtaposed with this is the revolutionary Calcutta of class equality espoused by the Marxist vision of the Naxalite movement. And there is also the 'Third World' Calcutta of economic underdevelopment, poverty, disease and overpopulation that is the target of the American visitor Antonia Whitehead's zealous prescriptions of 'democratization' and socio-economic reform. There is also the agricultural and feudal Calcutta symbolized by Pachapara, the old Bengal of order and stability represented by Tara's great-grandfather, the zamindar HariLal Banerjee. And then there is the

graceful and stately Calcutta, representative of the high culture associated with the Bengal renaissance past, which is now both mourned and kept alive by the elegiac poetry and nostalgia of Joyonto Roy Chowdhury, a once wealthy tea-magnate whose failing fortunes is another metaphor for Calcutta's own crumbling social order.

Through him, Tara is exposed to another, tubercular, Calcutta symbolised by the bustees of Tollygunge with their squatters, beggars, lepers and 'open dustbins, warm and dark where car casses were sometimes discarded. There is also the Calcutta of industry and progress symbolized by the new township of Nayapur which is associated with the rising prominence of a new class of Marwari businessmen represented by Tuntunwalla, who have accumulated their riches in contrast to the old wealth of the Bengali Zamindars and businessmen like Tara's father, the 'Bengal Tiger'.

The text thus constructs the Indian nation not as a simplistic and polarized space, but as a configuration of diverse spatial and temporal determinants. In fact, Mukherjee's fictional technique to fracture the space of the nation into its multiple spatio-temporal indicators can be traced to her espousal of what she calls the 'Mughal aesthetic', named after the style of the Mughal miniature painting, which she describes as a cultural form that is crammed with narratives and sub-narratives taut with detail and dramatic function, with its insistence that everything happens simultaneously, 'bound only by shape and colour'. Central to Mukherjee's embrace of the Mughal aesthetic is its ability to bring into sharper focus the time-space continuum of the novel in order to problematize the linear and unified narrative of national culture and identity.

'A WIFE'S STORY'

Mukherjee's interrogations and reconstructions of the 'stable' cultural narratives of home are launched primarily through the figure of the migrant woman. My intention in the following section is to examine how Mukherjee's attempt to construct a viable cultural and national narrative is carried out through a reworking of the ideological structures and imperatives that shape the construction of the migrant woman's identity in America.

The Indian woman, as Partha Chatterjeeh as demonstratedin his important essay, 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question', bears an immense ideological load in Indian nationalist discourse. Chatterjee identifies the dual discourse of the material and the spiritual, the world and the home as the strategy aimed at resolving the binary opposition between tradition and modernity put into place by the workings of colonialism: The material/spiritual dichotomy, to which the terms 'world' and 'home' corresponded, had acquired ... a very special significance in the nationalist mind. The world was where the European power had challenged the non-European peoples and, by virtue of its superior material culture, had subjugated them. But it had failed to colonize the inner, essential, identity of the East which lay in its distinctive, and superior, spiritual culture.... the world, imitation of an adaptation to western norms was a necessity; at home, they were tantamount to the annihilation of one's very identity.

The opposition between outer and inner, world and home, as Chatterjee argues, was hierarchized by Indian nationalist discourse in such a way that home soon came to be seen as the space of inner, 'pure, Indian culture; accommodations to the West in the outer or material sphere were represented as superficial changes that did not compromise the 'essential' inner culture. The inner sanctum of home thus came to be regarded as the crucial marker of the purity of Indian culture and tradition which had at all costs to be guarded against the threat of contamination posed by modernization. Since home has historically been gendered feminine, the place of the woman in securing this 'true' nationalist Indian culture has been crucial.

Accordingly, within the workings of this binary, the Indian woman, who represents the inner sanctum, the pure space, had to be protected from the contamination of Westernization. It is she, through her feminine purity, who is the representative of the continuing traditions of the community.

In addition to the cultural construction of the woman in nineteenth-century Indian nationalist discourse, there are numerous other cultural narratives of the Indian past which establish chastity as a dominant cultural trope for ideal womanhood: the most famous of the legendary 'good wives' in Hindu culture and tradition being Sita of the Ramayana and Savitri of the Puranas. In all these cases, the rhetoric of purity highlights women as crucial symbols of communal identity and as bearers of tradition and culture.

One of the ways in which Mukherjee negotiates a new cultural identity for her women characters is by undermining the fixity with which these cultural narratives construct the subjectivity of the Indian woman. This process of interrogation is carried out primarily through her dismantling of the binary construction of social space for women as private and public or pure and polluted.

Eschewing such static representations and understanding of cultural meaning and experience, Mukherjee demonstrates in her fictions that the act of migration allows her characters to discover alternative meanings of home. Her Indian women, especially the wives, for instance, find out that the private and public are never absolutely distinct categories, however much it is in the interests of their husbands or their community to insist on this structure of strict and binary opposition. Since the discourse of culture operates

within a system that defines purity in terms of the woman's lack of Westernization, the community makes sure that the woman's contact with American society is kept to the minimum.

Thus, Wife highlights the tragedy that can result when the migrant is prevented from effectively engaging in new inscriptions of self by a hegemonic view of home as fixed and immutable, and hence of national and cultural identities as fixed and irrevocable. Such an essential zed view of culture, as Mukherjee posits in Wife, forecloses any possibility of a negotiation of one's identity.

The novel demonstrates that the act of simply transposing one cultural narrative onto another geographical and cultural location without leaving space for interaction and negotiation with the new culture -- in this case, the American culture – is unhealthy, even unnatural.

Jasmine is a novel of emigration and assimilation, both on physical and psychological levels. In this novel, Bharati Mukherjee fictionalizes the process of Americanization by tracing a young Indian woman's experiences of trauma and triumph in her attempt to forge a new identity for herself.

The story is told from the first-person point of view by the female protagonist, who undergoes multiple identity transformations in her quest for self-empowerment and happiness. Mukherjee uses the cinematic techniques of flashback and cross-cutting to fuse Jasmine's past and present. The novel is steeped in violence.

The book begins with the twenty-four-year-old narrator, Jane Ripplemeyer, living as the common-law wife of Bud Ripplemeyer, a fifty-four-year-old invalid banker in Baden, Elsa County, Iowa. Through flashbacks, she recalls her story from childhood in Hasnapur, a village in Jullundhar District, Punjab, India, where she was born as Jyoti, the unwanted fifth daughter in a poor, displaced Hindu family. When she was seven, an astrologer predicted that she was doomed to widowhood and exile. Determined to fight her destiny, Jyoti begins to empower herself through learning English, for "to want English was to want more than you had been given at birth, it was to want the world."

Mukherjee explores the sociopolitical issues that determine this position on American identity through the migration narrative of its title character. Several well-known scholars find what they interpret as Mukherjee's celebration of assimilation and adoption of Western feminist values problematic, arguing that she idealizes the United States at the expense of her homeland. Moreover, these critics contend that Jasmine's development relies on American and European models of personal success, thereby reinforcing notions of the ever-victimized "third world" woman rescued by liberal Western values. In her article "Reading and Writing the South Asian Diaspora: Feminism and Nationalism in North America," Inderpal.

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