
Theorizing Literature of Diaspora: Contestation and Praxis in the Cultural Mapping of Bharati Mukherjee's Fiction**Dr. Rajib Bhaumik***Asst Professor, Dept of English, Alipurduar College, Alipurduar, (W.B.) India***Abstract**

The literature of Diaspora deals with such challenged ethnicity and provides sufficient evidence of the fact that diasporic space is pressing on the space of the home country. It is not that the centre has shifted alone; the margins have also been expanded to push the home cultures further to outer space. This inevitably demands the need to realize the significance of the cultural encounter which takes place in diasporic writing, the bicultural mechanics as well as the construction of a new culture born out of the transparent translation in a diasporic space. Diasporic writing is a powerful counter-narrative and is perhaps necessary to create another centre and subjectivity as against the all absorbing design of colonial authority. In the era of globalization diaspora is a general component of contemporary world. This diasporic identity is often constructed through a negotiation with the politics of the country of settlement as well as a recasting of their relationship to the past. As the exemplary condition of late modernity, Diasporas do not tend to substantiate domination or territoriality as a prerequisite of nationhood. They inhabit and occupy the liminal spaces of the nation where the most creative interaction take place and where essentialist notions of ethnicity and belonging are distanced as against inherent specificities.

Key Words: ethnicity, margins, bicultural mechanics, transparent translation, territoriality, globalization, dislocation, location, ethics, space

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. 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. 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.

The varied migratory movements attempt to give some indication of the ideologies,

choices, reasons and compulsions which may have governed the act of immigration. While 'immigrant' defines a location, a physical movement and a forward attitude, 'exile' indicates an unavoidable isolation and a nostalgic anchoring in the past. The word exile evokes multiple meanings covering a variety of relationships with the mother-country such as alienation, forced exile, self-imposed exile, political exile and so on. In the Indian context the migratory movements are governed by the movement of indentured labour and of the trading communities; the same is also governed by the pursuit of higher standard of living, opportunities for work, education and corporate service assignments among others. In the trans-cultural global context a migrant is an important postcolonial subject. Rushdie remarks:

[M]igrant is perhaps, the central or defining figure of the twentieth century [...] A full migrant suffers, traditionally, a triple disruption: he loses his place, he enters in an alien language, and he finds himself surrounded by beings whose social behavior and codes are very unlike, and sometimes even offensive to, his own. And this is what makes migrants such important figures: because roots, language and social norms have been three of the most important parts of the definition of what it is to be a human being. The migrant, denied all three, is obliged to find new ways of describing himself, new ways of being human.ⁱ

The whole process of trans-migration results in multiple homes and diasporic spaces and a migrant, in the process of new ways of being human, suffers dislocations and acquires a non-exclusionary hybridized global identity. Yet, this multiplicity of 'homes' does not bridge the gap between 'home' – the culture of origin; and the 'world' – the culture of adoption. In such precincts of history, the boundaries have an uncanny pattern of persisting in thousand different ways, and are very often conflictual. Homi Bhabha shifts this conflict to a theoretical gain; he transforms the diasporic 'scattering' to 'gathering,'ⁱⁱ and thus shifts the focus from nationhood to culture and from historicity to temporality. Such hybridity cannot be contained either in hierarchical or binary structures. Others, like Rushdie turns to India, to mythologize the history. Naipaul transforms his sensibility to a perpetual homelessness, while Bissoondath rejecting the homogenization of ethnicity, projects immigration as essentially about renewal and about change. It is unjust, he points out, to expect – that the communities from which the immigrants emerge be required to stand still in time. To do so is 'to legitimize marginalization: it is to turn ethnic communities into museums of exoticism.'ⁱⁱⁱ

Abdul Jan Mohammed describes the expatriate's position as being one of either 'the specular border intellectual'^{iv} or the 'syncretic border intellectual.'^v He seems to say that one finds oneself unable or unwilling to be 'at home in these societies.'^{vi} Such intellectuals are engaged in defining other possibilities and in their

position and functioning as exiles they are likely to be critical of the new culture. Citing the example of Edward Said, Jan Mohammed comments, 'Quite often his position, which allows a kind of distance from Western literature and discursive practices, permits Said a secular role — that is he is able to provide in his writing a set of mirrors allowing Western cultures to see their own structures and functions.'^{vii}

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*.'^{viii}

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. This is the same kind of assertiveness that is present in Brah's use of the term 'homing desire,'^{ix} simultaneously

expressing a desire to construct a home in the new diasporic location and leaving the whole concept of 'home' open to analysis and criticism. This process of a 'homing diaspora' does not imply a nostalgic desire for 'roots,' nor 'is it the same as the desire for a 'homeland'; it is realized instead as a construction of '*multi-locationality* within and across territorial, cultural and psychic boundaries.'^x

The literature of Diaspora deals with such challenged ethnicity and provides sufficient evidence of the fact that diasporic space is pressing on the space of the home country. It is not that the centre has shifted alone; the margins have also been expanded to push the home cultures further to outer space. This inevitably demands the need to realize the significance of the cultural encounter which takes place in diasporic writing, the bicultural mechanics as well as the construction of a new culture born out of the transparent translation in a diasporic space. The process results in '[u]ndoing, dissolution, decomposition [which] are accompanied by processes of growth, transformation, and the reformulation of old elements in new patterns.'^{xi}

Diasporic writing is a powerful counter-narrative and is perhaps necessary to create another centre and subjectivity as against the all absorbing design of colonial authority. In the era of globalization diaspora is a general component of contemporary world. This diasporic identity is often constructed through a negotiation with the politics of the country of settlement as well as a recasting of their relationship to the past. As the exemplary condition of late modernity, Diasporas do not tend to substantiate

domination or territoriality as a prerequisite of nationhood. They inhabit and occupy the liminal spaces of the nation where the most creative interaction take place and where essentialist notions of ethnicity and belonging are distanced as against inherent specificities. Diasporic consciousness locates itself squarely in the realm of the hybrid where one can see 'Bones splitting breaking beneath the awful pressure of the crowd.'^{xii} It creates a new space and a new location of culture 'that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy.'^{xiii} According to Victor J. Ramraj:

The attachment to the ancestral homeland varies considerably among the diasporans and is inversely proportional to the degree individuals and the communities are induced to or are willing to assimilate or integrate with their new environment, or remain wedded to ancestral customs, traditions, languages and religions. Those tending towards assimilation are less concerned with sustaining ancestral ties than with coming to terms with their new environment and acquiring a new identity. Writers like Bharati Mukherjee expect the assimilation to be mutual.^{xiv}

The term *diaspora*, first used for the Jewish migration from its homeland, is now applied as a metaphoric designation for expatriates, refugees, exiles and immigrants. It refers to the work of exiles and expatriates and all those who have experienced unsettlement and dislocation at the political, existential and psychological levels. From the original particular reference to the scattering of Greek, Jewish, and Armenian people,

diaspora has become a narrative to signify more metaphorical journeys of people from their initial homes to other places of dwelling and working, resulting in a divisible nature of identity. Said reflects on such cultural map of imperialism:

[I]t is one of the unhappiest characteristics of the age to have produced more refugees, migrants, displaced persons, and exiles than ever before in history, most of them as an accompaniment to and, ironically enough, as afterthoughts of great post-colonial and imperial conflicts. As the struggle for independence produced new states and new boundaries, it also produced homeless wanderers, nomads, vagrants, unassimilated to the emerging structures of institutional power, rejected by the established order[...]their condition articulates the tensions, irresolution, and contradictions in the overlapping territories shown on the cultural map of imperialism.^{xv}

In the field of literature, diasporic writing emerges from the margins, contested boundaries and the contradictions in the overlapping territories. The post-nation migrants negotiate to occupy a new meaning while illustrating the identity construction in the new global context. The liminal and marginal status of diasporic writers comes through, for example, in the terms that are used to describe this extremely heterogeneous group such as expatriate, exile, diasporic, immigrant, migrant, hyphenated, dislocated and the NRI. The Indian diaspora as mentioned earlier, has been formed by a scattering of population

and not, in the Jewish sense, an exodus of population at a particular point of time. This sporadic migration traces a steady pattern if a larger view is taken over a period of time from the indentured labourers of the past to the IT technocrats of the present day.

In the above context, Diaspora is also a popular term in current research as it captures various phenomena that are prevalent in the numerous discourses devoted to current transnational globalization, borders, migration, 'illegal' immigration, repatriation, exile, refugees, assimilation, multiculturalism and hybridity. However, Brah claims that in such negotiation 'the notion of diaspora is the image of journey [...] not every journey can be understood as diaspora.'^{xvi} What distinguishes Diaspora from some other types of travel is its centripetal dimension. It does not only mean that people are dispersed and dissolved in different places it also leads to the possibilities of congregation in other places, forming new communities. Scattering, as Homi K. Bhabha notes, becomes a gathering:

I have lived that moment of the scattering of the people that in other times and other places, in the nations of others, becomes a time of gathering. Gathering of exiles and émigrés and refugees [...] Also the gathering of the people in the diaspora: indentured, migrant, interned; the gathering of incriminatory statistics, educational performance, legal statutes, immigration status - the genealogy of that lonely figure that John Berger named the seventh man.^{xvii}

In such gatherings, new allegiances are forged that displace and supplant former obligations of cultural necessities. The newly emerged imagined communities not just simply replace the old ones but form space in-between different identifications, a hybrid space, accommodating often the problematic components of culture. Diaspora, according to Bhabha produces incompatible systems of signification. Meaning is produced in the interstice that introduces creative invention into existence.^{xviii} Bhabha insists that all cultural systems are constructed in the 'Third space of enunciation.'^{xix} He further says:

The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The 'past-present' becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living.^{xx}

The cultural identity that emerges out of necessity and nostalgia in this ambivalent space, makes any claim to a pure culture untenable; dislocations are inevitable and even necessary and the resettlement of the 'borderline community of migration'^{xxi} ultimately turns out to be a search for new location of culture. Mukherjee depicts this diasporic truth in her analysis of the textual politics resulting from the colonial encounter. Mukherjee's position as a writer

of Diaspora has aptly been described by Kellie Holzer:

Mukherjee has explored the multiple self-reinventions possible as a result of continual displacement. Her major themes include immigration to the West, psychological transformation and the violence that accompanies it, women's perspective and search for autonomy, and a hybrid worldview that relies on her Hindu roots, Americanization, and, increasingly, on transnationalism.^{xxii}

Postcolonial transnational counter-textuality began by affirming the contestation between estrangement and search for identity. The counter-textual mood of anti-colonial or nationalist writing finds its resources in the transcultural restlessness of writers such as Salman Rushdie, Ben Okri, Michael Ondaatje and Bharati Mukherjee. However, Mukherjee's position is different from that of other writers of Diaspora. In the language of Jasbir Jain, 'Diasporic writers have worked variously with their material. Ondaatje moved from culture to culture, several others have accepted the Janus-faced hyphenated self, choosing to locate themselves in hyphen, yet others like Bharati Mukherjee have shed their pasts, if not as material, at least as professions about it.'^{xxiii}

Thus, the textual mapping of the colonial encounter concludes with the new 'migrant' novel, a form which is explicit in its commitment to hybridity. Such trans-cultural narrative possesses a serious challenge to the cultural stability of the metropolitan centers. In its transformational

quality, Diaspora is typically a site of hybridity which questions fixed identities based on mono-centric essentialisms. Specifically in the context of Caribbean Diaspora, Stuart Hall talks about 'imaginative rediscovery' of 'Caribbeanness.'^{xxiv} Furthermore, Hall explicitly connects this imaginative effort with the concept of hybridity:

The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of "identity" which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference.^{xxv}

Different responses to migration, whether as an essential and inevitable phenomenon of globalization or a transformative consequence of political persecution, ethnic cleansing or natural disasters are articulated in literature produced in places where diasporic communities exist. The interaction between the 'host' and 'immigrant' cultures, complicated by translation, asks new questions of identity politics and the issues involved. It also problematises conventional notions of location and ethnicities, bringing to the fore an urgent need to re-explore the ways in which aesthetics, politics and ethics interconnect, and out of this intersection cultural differences delineate patterns of such intercutting subjectivities. Being an amalgamation of diverse cultural materials, backgrounds, and identities, it nevertheless differs from other types of heterogeneity,

implying at the same time a markedly asymmetrical relationship between the different elements of a given fusion. It also asks new questions of how culture and literature interact, more particularly, how the overlapping of old and new patterns of voluntary and forced migration is re-mapping cultural and identity politics.

Identity politics driven by migration, Diaspora and exile have in turn mapped literary imagination and produced literary writings of distinct characteristics. Rushdie in his *Imaginary Homelands* states: 'Migrants must, of necessity, make a new imaginative relationship with the world, because of the loss of familiar habitats.'^{xxvi} This change of habitat often results in translational representation of Diaspora and displacement, both spatial and psychological. However, their diasporic condition, their sense of exile and alienation, their metaphoric existence and their efforts to seek replenishment by making symbolic returns to their origins bind all this writing into a unity. Rushdie comments that migration 'offers us one of the richest metaphors of our age.'^{xxvii} He adds, 'Migrants-borne-across humans-are metaphorical beings in their very essence; and migration, seen as a metaphor, is everywhere around us. We all cross frontiers; in that sense, we are all migrant peoples.'^{xxviii} In her novels, Bharati Mukherjee has dealt with such moving metaphors of culture- their displacement, dislocation, mutation and translation.

Bharati Mukherjee traces her descent from the early immigrants arriving at Ellis Island to those who arrive legally and succeed in living the American Dream. The status of

Bharati Mukherjee as an immigrant writer in the United States has been confirmed by the publication of a critical anthology on her writing. In his Introduction, the editor Emmanuel S. Nelson asserts that the publication:

[I]s also an unequivocal acknowledgement of Mukherjee's emergence as a major American writer with an international audience. Her works, collectively, provide us with a poignant chronicle of her own search for home, wholeness, and stability. Her greatness however, derives from her discovery in our immigrant lives of an occasion for art of epic dimensions.^{xxix}

Mukherjee has declared that she is for mutual assimilation an acculturation of the dominant and immigrant communities, seeing the process as 'a two-way metamorphosis'^{xxx} and advocating what she calls 'mongrelization' of people and cultures.^{xxxi} Diasporan Indian critic R. Radhakrishnan analyses the notions of being Indian and belonging to India of such exotic and uprooted immigrant subjectivity. He considers the significant disconnection between first generation immigrants and their successors, and the anguish experienced by them in not belonging either to India or the United States. He problematises the concept of 'authenticity and the role it occupies in the diasporan imaginary.'^{xxxii} He warns against the capacity of capitalism to produce a phenomenology of the present that reduces the diasporic individual to forget the past and bracket the future. Radhakrishnan considers the options open to first generation

immigrants in their quest towards an 'authentic' identity. He emphasizes the need to make 'a distinction between information about the knowledge of India and an emotional investment in India.'^{xxxiii}

In anthropological context the term Diaspora has ethnographic implications. Here it functions as a critical discourse and as a site of difference and becoming. Diaspora involves the conflicted space of centre-periphery, home-location, self-other, nation and post-nation, citizen-outsider, original-hybrid, sameness-difference, rooted-uprooted and so on. All these conflictual combinations collide before intersection; these are multi-referential and multi-dimensional. What emerges from such construction of the complexity is that the diasporic components have homogenous,

collective identities bound together by shared feelings of alienation and dislocations and nostalgic affiliation with the past.

But the imperatives of such affiliation are different for the emergent new space for enunciation. The need to form affiliations within the mainstream ethnic range in the United States is the other essentials substantiated by Radhakrishnan. In such global climate 'therefore the politics of proximity has to negotiate dialectically and critically with the politics of distance.'^{xxxiv}

People who have lived away from their originary culture 'return through critical negotiation to aspects of their culture that they had not really studied before and [...] develop criticisms of their chosen world.'^{xxxv}

References:

ⁱ Salman Rushdie. *Imaginary Homelands*. London: Vintage, 2010. pp. 277-278.

ⁱⁱ Homi K. Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. NY: Routledge, 1994. Pp.199-200.

ⁱⁱⁱ Neil Bissoondath. "The Uses of Ethnicity," *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada*. Toronto: Penguin, 1994. p.111.

^{iv} Abdul R. Jan Mohammed. "Worldliness- without-World, Homelessness-as Home: Towards a Definition of the Specular Border Intellectual," *Edward Said: A Critical Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell. 1992. p.97.

^v *Ibid.*

^{vi} *Ibid.*

^{vii} *Ibid.* 105.

^{viii} Avtar Brah. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. New York and London: Routledge, 1996. p.192.

^{ix} *Ibid.* p.193.

^x *Ibid.* p.197.

^{xi} Victor Turner, 'Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites *de Passage*', in *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967,

p.99.in Victor J Ramraj. "Diaspora and Multiculturalism." *New National and Post-colonial Literatures* .Ed. Bruce King, New York: OUP, 2000. p.228.

^{xii}Salman Rushdie. *Midnight's Children*. (London: Picador, 1982), p.533.qtd. in *The Location of Culture, op.cit.* p.xxiv.

^{xiii}Homi K. Bhabha. *The Location of Culture. op.cit.* p.5.

^{xiv} Victor J Ramraj. "Diaspora and Multiculturalism." *New National and Post-colonial Literatures* .Ed. Bruce King, New York: OUP, 2000. p.217.

^{xv} Edward Said. *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Vintage, 1994.p.402.

^{xvi} Avtar Brah. *Cartographies of Diaspora. op.cit.* p.182.

^{xvii} Homi K. Bhabha. *The Location of Culture. op.cit.* pp.199-200.

^{xviii} *Ibid.* p.12.

^{xix} *Ibid.* p.54.

^{xx} *Ibid.* p.10.

^{xxi} *Ibid.* p.12.

^{xxii} Kellie Holzer. "Bharati Mukherjee." *South Asian Novelists in English*, Ed. Jaina C. Sanga. Greenwood: London, 2005.p.170.

^{xxiii} Jasbir Jain. "Identity, Home and Culture Through Dislocations." *Dislocations and Multiculturalism*. Ed. Jasbir Jain. New Delhi: Rawat, 2004.p.238.

^{xxiv} Stuart Hall. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Identity, Community Culture, and Difference*. Ed. Jonathan Rutherford. London: Lawrence & Wishert, 1990.p.393.

^{xxv} *Ibid.* 401-2.

^{xxvi} Salman Rushdie. *Imaginary Homelands*. London: Vintage, 2010.p. 125.

^{xxvii} *Ibid.* pp.278.

^{xxviii} *Ibid.* pp.278-279.

^{xxix} Emmanuel S. Nelson. "Introduction." *Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspective*. Ed. Emmanuel Nelson. New York: Garland, 1993.p. xvii.

^{xxx} Patricia Holt, 'Mukherjee's vision of America', San Francisco Sunday Examiner and Chronicle, 17 Feb. 1991, p.2 in Victor J Ramraj. "Diaspora and Multiculturalism.op.cit" p. 228.

^{xxxi} *Ibid.*

^{xxxii} R. Radhakrishnan. "Ethnicity in an Age of Diaspora" in Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur eds. *Theorising Diaspora*. Malden N.A: Blackwell, 2003: p.124.

^{xxxiii} *Ibid.* 125.

^{xxxiv} *Ibid.* 126.

^{xxxv} *Ibid.*