



## **Space and Transnational Empathy in the Works of Bharati Mukherjee**

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The burgeoning presence of Diaspora across the world has triggered a new consideration of the cultural theories of nation, identity and international affairs. In a preliminary definition, nationalism could be understood as a devotion to one's nation or a policy of national independence. In other words the concepts nationalism and nationality are preceded from the very existence of a nation and a sentiment or belief that produces devotion to and identification with the nation. It can also be said that nation is the gravity centre upon which a sort of national identity or nationality is founded. In a broader analysis, nationality can be seen as the distinct characteristic features of a group of people, closely associated with each other by common descent, language or history. However they are usually organized as a separate political state and occupying a definite territory. Benedict Anderson goes beyond this idea when he says a nation can be an "imagined political community" that is a subjective state of mind. In terms of psychology, as Walker Cannor put forward, the essence of the nation is a psychological bond that unites the people. However the nature or sources of such bond remain obscure emotional rather than rational. From a more anthropological perspective Max Weber speaks of ethnic group formed on the belief of common descent explains that a sense of affinity to a particular nation relies on the qualitative degree of the belief in common nationality.

Every nation socialises its subjects differently as they have different cultural backgrounds and value systems As a result of the large scale migration, there is a tendency to emerge a globalised culture whose challenge is to combat with the heterogeneous societies who do not completely leave aside their cultural and the

historical particulars. The need for a cultural identity which is more transnational in its essence has been recognised for many years. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the American intellectual Randolph Bourne wrote an article entitled "Trans-National America". To Bourne, 'melting pot' metaphor is no longer useful and practical and he urges his readers to reject it, which he says will result in a culture that is "washed out into a tasteless, colorless fluid of uniformity" (1736): he dreams instead of a world in which a variety of cultures co-exist, "inextricably mingled, yet not homogeneous. They merge but they do not fuse" (1737). In the past, notions of the American "melting pot" have been set in opposition to those of the Canadian "mosaic"; however, the "mosaic" metaphor, too, is increasingly being replaced by ideas concerned with hybridity and multiculturalism.

The discussions on the construction of transnational space and identity of the diaspora points out the requisites of what is called transnational empathy which is of growing demand in the dynamic cross cultural interactions of the globalized world. Empathy is the capacity to recognize, acknowledge and identify what the other person thinks, feels and perceives. The origin of the word empathy can be traced back to the Greek word *empathia* meaning physical affection and passion. The first use of the equivalent word of empathy seems to be found in the usage of a German word by Hermann Lotze and Robert Vischer meaning 'feeling into'. The term was later translated in to English as 'Empathy' by Edward B. Titchener. Inter personal empathy is directly proportional to the similarities in the living condition, culture, education, family back ground etc. Naturally there exists a

dynamic interpersonal relation when people are empathetic to each other. However the concept of empathy is crucial and complex when it comes in the arena of International relations and transnational Politics. Without empathy world will become chaotic and uncivilized. It allows us to make the bond of trust. Dr. Carolyn Pedwell has rightly pointed out that the empathy is differently felt, constructed and mobilized across range of key sites where issues of social justice and transnational politics are at stake. In *The Audacity of Hope*, President Barack Obama argues that the United States is suffering the effects of an ‘empathy deficit’ and calls on Americans to develop more empathetic attitudes towards those less advantaged than themselves as a means to create a global society built on greater respect, cooperation and equality (67). For the popular philosopher Roman Krznaric, empathy ‘has the power both to transform our own lives and to bring about fundamental social change’ (2013: ix). Indeed, he argues, ‘Empathy can create a revolution’ (ix).

Bharathi Mukherjee has established herself as a powerful member of the American literary scene, one whose most memorable works reflect her pride in her Indian heritage, but also her celebration of embracing America. As she said in an interview in the *Massachusetts Review*, the immigrants in her stories go through extreme transformations in America and at the same time they even contribute to the country’s appearance and psychological makeup. Like Malamud, Bharati Mukherjee writes about a minority community which escapes the ghetto and adopts itself to the patterns of the dominant American culture. She also bears a close literary kinship with Joseph Conrad who despite his polish origin, came to be regarded as one of the best mainstream British writers. Mukherjee does not write from the vantage point of an Indian expatriate like VS Naipaul who writes about living in perpetual exile and about the impossibility of ever having a home. Like VS Naipaul Mukherjee is a writer from the third world but unlike him, she left India by choice to settle first in Canada and then in the US.

In Bharathi Mukherjee’s first novel *The Tiger’s Daughter* the protagonist Tara Banerjee a Bengali Brahmin, the great granddaughter of Hari Lal Bannerjee a landowner, and daughter of ‘Bengal Tiger Banerjee’ a rich and powerful industrialist of the elite Calcutta aristocracy, returns to India after seven years stay in America. Tara finds herself uncomfortable with her relatives. Here, Tara’s Bombay relatives who cannot accept a woman not accompanied by her husband. According to Indian tradition, a man should

lead the woman. He plays a protective role. Travelling alone, living alone and moving alone are part of unfamiliarity in many parts of India. In Indian tradition, one should marry in his own caste. If anyone marries from another caste, he will be treated as an outcast or a sinner. But the protagonist Tara violating these rules and marries a foreign man who is a Jew. The difference in the value systems of a more individualistic American Culture and the more family oriented Indian culture creates a gulf which neither Tara nor her relatives could easily deal with. As a result, Tara feels alienated in her native land and becomes mentally turbulent and makes her return to the USA.

Unsure and embittered with her being treated as minority in America; she is nostalgic about her peaceful existence in India. Tara, realized that she had become the other; that her exposure to the ways of the West now marginalize her from her country men. It provoked her to identify herself as an immigrant not just as an expatriate –It dawned upon her then that identification with North America as an immigrant not just as an expatriate – was where her own personal quest for psychic fulfillment would begin. Consequently this switch from thinking of herself as a foreigner in North America to identifying herself with and developing an empathy for the generations of immigrants to the new world, would find reflection in the themes and the narrative voice of her subsequent novels.

Torn between being the ideal wife, Sita and the need for self expression, dooms Dimple, the protagonist of another novel *Wife*, to her fate. Unable to root her in the new environment, she fumes with fury which finds an outlet through the butchering of her husband .Dimple commits suicide as she could not solve the cultural clash between East and West. She is both a mainstream in the third world and a marginal in the first world. The repeatedly rejected individuality and identity of Dimple seems to be replica of the homogenized helpless native under the colonial rule. Fanon claims that it is the rejection of any identity of the inferior other and the reinforcement of this image in the native psyche is capable of driving the colonized to a kind of madness.the lack of transnational maturity and deficit of transnational empathy could be pointed out as the sole reasons for the rejection of the identity of Dimple, the inferior other.

Born as jyoti of Hasnapur a rural village in Panjab, married to prakash a progressive man who named her jasmine, widowed unexpectedly, the protagonist of *Jasmine* leaves to America. After getting raped by half

face on her journey, she perceives herself as goddess Kali and stabbed him to death. With forged documents, she landed New York city managed to get a job of a care taker in Taylors house and becomes Jase, to whom Taylor later falls in love. The change from Jasmine to Jase is a symbol of her acceptance of American culture and life style. Then she made her final identity as Jane, when she flees to Iowa as a result of her encounter with her husband Prakash's killer in New York City. Bud, a rural banker, proposes Jane. The novel closes as Taylor, her now-divorced former employer in Manhattan, asks her to come with him and his daughter to California. Carrying Bud's child in her womb, she leaves him anyway to be with Taylor in California. Taylor exhibits a kind of transnational empathy towards Jase in an exceptional level and is revealed in her opinion of him.

Taylor didn't want to change me. He didn't want to scour and sanitize the foreigners... I changed because I wanted to. To bunker oneself inside nostalgia to sheath the hurt in a bullet proof vest, was to be a coward. On Claremont Avenue, in the Hayeses' big clean, brightly lit apartment. I bloomed from a different alien with forged documents into adventurous Jase. (185)

In the process of her transformation, Jasmine has graduated from vulnerability to power and feels the need to survive or the need to reconcile these conflicting perspectives without allowing it to wage a psychological war within her. Her means of reconciliation is to reinvent her identity completely. She creates a new self whenever confronted with contradictory self perception. Jasmine does not simply perceive herself differently; rather she becomes different persons in each new environment and thus she possesses an identity which is more transnational capable of having empathy for not only Bud's Vietnamese adopted son Du but also for the native American Professor and his child.

I began to fall in love.... With what he represented to me, a professor who served biscuits to a servant, smiled at her and admitted her to the broad democracy of his joking, even when she did not understand it. It seemed entirely American. I was curious about his life, not repulsed (167).

W.E.B. Du Bois in his analysis of African American people explains the term double consciousness, which is equally useful to trace the transnational empathy in Mukherjee's novels. Duality and conflict are not merely a feature of immigrant life in America. Mukherjee's women are brought up in a culture that present them

with such ambiguities from childhood. The breaking of identities and the discarding of languages actually begin early, their lives being shaped by the confluence of rich cultural and religious traditions, on the one hand, and the new learning imposed by the British colonialism in India on the other. These different influences involve them in tortured processes of self recognition and self assimilation right from the start, the confusion is doubled upon coming to America.

In *Desirable Daughters*, Bharathi Mukherjee reverts once again, to the creation of a south Asian female protagonist called Tara Bhattacharjee, a first generation Indian immigrant from Calcutta, who arrived in America through her arranged marriage to a Bengali engineer named Bishwapriya Chatterjee (Bish). Unlike her former Indian female heroines, who arrived in the New world locking even the basic psychological urge for survival, Tara Bhattacharjee is educated, articulate, opinionated and feisty until the recent reversal in trends, South Asian female immigrants were generally portrayed as subservient, feeble and mindless creatures Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* attempts to reverse the stereotype by designing her heroine, capable of, moving freely between continents, straddling opposing cultures with ease and fortitude and experiencing none of the discomfort of cross-cultural inertia.

She rejects to be an object of sacrifice, a showpiece and a silent and subservient creature to her husband. She aspires to be loved and respected and does not want only to be provided and protected by her husband as is desired in the case of other women. So she differs from other women. She is the protagonist of the novel because she has the indomitable courage to transcend the boundaries, to take initiations on an unknown path which may lead her to ruin. The revelation of her son's different sexual orientation leaves her shell shocked for a moment, but the maturity and readiness with which she accepts the above relation speaks of her modern consciousness and empathy. While her other sisters Padma and Parvati lead a complacent and passive life, adopt a middle path, remain suspicious about their new identity, do not feel the need to widen their horizons and are less assertive, Tara emerges as a powerful figure to meet every adverse situation; to march ahead with all her limitations to an unknown and unfathomed path of realizing her full potential as an independent human being.

In spite of moving towards complete freedom from traditional roles, Tara can never completely shed her native culture traces. She nurtures Indian family norms

and feels isolated and incomplete after being divorced. Presence of Bish gives her inner solace which she lacks in Andy's company. She feels emptiness after separation from Bish because in her mind Bish is still her husband, 'the sheltering tree'. The need for a husband in form of Bish shows that trans national identity of Tara neither completely rejects her native culture and value system nor embraces the host culture as the dominant and the superior one.

Transnational identity of the characters of Bharati Mukherjee, problematizes the very notion of hybridity itself. All cultural relations depicted in the novels mentioned are ambivalent, subversive, and hybrid. To Bhabha, hybrid is not a thing, but a process. In the same way identity of an individual in general and identity of diaspora in particular is not a stable static product instead it is a dynamic process. Cultural identity of the diaspora is not comprised of two cultural spaces from which the third emerges but points to an ambivalent third space of cultural production and reproduction where identities cannot be straightway preserved or lost in processes of acculturation, assimilation, pluralism and multiculturalism. The protagonists of the novels *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters* perceive neither of the cultures as superior and never attempt to judge one using the episteme of the other. They neither baffled at the more individualistic American culture nor alienated like Tara of Tigers Daughter and Dimple of Wife, when confronting with the native Indian culture. But they go even beyond the binaries of host and native nationalities and seems to possess an identity which is more Transnational and global. It is the transnational empathy provides some of the characters of Mukherjee with the capacity to acknowledge their roots and accept their roof.

Depicting the process of negotiating the borders, both physical borders of states and countries and the metaphorical borders, between genders generations and cultures, Bharati Mukherjee, an American writer of Indian origin, raises the question of space and identity of the Indian immigrants in the US. The experience of migration as depicted by Bharati Mukherjee is dynamic and multi dimensional which involves a continual process of evolving and belonging. Edward Said comments that "No one today is purely *one* thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind" (Said, *Culture* 336).

Right from the migration of the indentured labour to that of the Silicon Valley young brains, the meaning of the term 'assimilation' has undergone drastic change. Earlier it was thought of as a wholly unquestionable acceptance of the mainstream culture and disowning one's native culture. Today minority cultures have become integrated enough to involve as part of the mainstream culture of the US. These new trans national identities may be construed as occupying what Homi K. Bhabha terms as "that Third Space" which "though unrepresentable in itself ... constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity;" so that "even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, re-historicized and read anew" (*Location* 37). Bharati Mukherjee in her novels rejects the orthodox view that all cross cultural interactions will end up with the hierarchal polarisation, rather it throws light on the insight that transnational empathy a relevant topic of profound gravity, is going to play a vital role in international politics and affairs of the upcoming days.

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