

East, West, home's best: But where is Bharati Mukherjee's home?

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The postcolonial context has created new diasporas: writers who have moved to the canonized literary centres have become dislocated men and women of letters living »simultaneously in a multiplicity of competing cultures« (B. King). The literary utterances of these typically post-modern, dislocated, ambiguous individuals focus on certain specific relations: the relation of the centre to the periphery, the relation between different cultural and civilizational frames, the relation of the writer as a part of some collective context towards himself/herself as an »otherness« on the edges of cultures. Some writers, e. g. Naipaul or Stow, transcend their difficulties in taking root through the process of writing, where writing itself becomes home, identity, and a way of self-creation.

As an example of an attempt to define cultural identity we have considered the writer Bharati Mukherjee who by origin is an Indian from Bengal but has spent her adult life in Canada and the USA. She tries to solve the problem of identity through her writing and by creating a world of her own, while also negotiating between herself and her context in the process of making a new history for herself.

Postcolonial literatures (or new literatures in English) are in their essence postmodern, even paradigmatic expressions of dislocations and decentrings caused by intensive social and cultural changes. The field of postcolonial literatures or new literatures in English has already proved its ever growing importance in English literary and language studies. It is therefore the right moment for those involved in English comparative and literary theory in Croatia to contribute to the well developed process of theoretical reconsideration of postcolonial writing and supporting cultural studies. This is the more so as the new literatures in English seem to be the most vital and productive fields of literature.

Perhaps, at the beginning, we should consider the meaning of the terms »post-colonial« and »postcoloniality«. How are they to be understood and accepted? It is

a field that has itself become so heterogeneous that it is very difficult to give any particular definitions. It may be understood in two different ways: there are those who see it as an amorphous set of discursive practices, akin to postmodernism, and those who see it as a set of more specific cultural strategies. This last group is not univocal: some think that the term postcolonial refers only to the period after the colonies become independent, for others the term has to be taken as a designation for all practices which characterize the societies of the postcolonial world from the moment of colonisation to the present day, because they see colonisation as continued even today in neo-colonial forms.

When we talk about postcolonial theory we have in mind a whole set of literary theoretical and critical approaches used in an attempt to dismantle and deconstruct colonial ways of knowing and grasping the Other. This means that colonial discourse is determined by dominant imperial attitudes. Somehow unexpectedly interaction between imperial culture and indigenous cultures came into being. Postcolonial theory was in fact born the moment the imperial culture became incorporated in the counter-colonial resistance discourse. Postcolonial theory is at heart a set of subversive strategies that are supposed to give a real objective picture of postcolonial conditions, but are also an attempt to reconstruct on this basis some constructive responses to the very conditions.

The parallel term, »(New) literatures in English« that we use for postcolonial writing, is connected with the notion of colonial language. One approach is that we »need to distinguish between what is proposed as a standard code, English (the language of the erstwhile imperial centre), and the linguistic code, english, which has been transformed and subverted into several distinctive varieties throughout the world.« (Ashcroft et al., 1989:8)

Thus English is appropriated by the colonised in english (written with small letter) to express their own cultural specificities, their own spirit and sensibility and, partly, even the structure of their own mother tongues. Instead of one English we have several »englishes« by which »the Empire writes back«. About this subject Salman Rushdie writes as follows: »One of the changes has to do with attitudes towards the use of English. Many have referred to the argument about the appropriateness of this language to Indian themes. And I hope all of us share the view that we can't simply use the language in the way the British did; that it needs remaking for our own purposes. Those of us who do use English do so in spite of our ambiguity towards it, or perhaps because of that, perhaps because we can find in that linguistic struggle a reflection of other struggles taking place in the real world, struggles between the cultures within ourselves and the influences at work upon our societies. To conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free.« (Rushdie, 1992:17) Or let us quote Raja Rao's words: »The telling has not been easy.

One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word 'alien'; yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up – like Sanskrit or Persian was before – but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will some day prove to be as distinctive and colorful as the Irish or the American. Time alone will justify it.» (Ashcroft et al. 1989:296)

One of the major features of postcolonial literatures is the concern with place and displacement. We are faced with a special postcolonial crisis of identity, with the important relationship between self and place. Some critics, have even made this the defining model of postcoloniality. This dialectic of place and displacement is always a significant feature of postcolonial societies in whatever way these have been created.

Place in this context is not identical with the idea of »landscape« but it is a complex interaction of language, history and environment. One can talk of several kinds of displacements: the displacement of those who have moved to the colonies, the displacement from the imported language, the displacement of those who moved to colonial centres etc. The gap between the language and place, the lack of »fit« may be experienced by both those who possess English as a mother tongue and those who speak it as a second language. They both feel dislocated and this experience of displacement somehow becomes a creative power expressed in language, in text, in writing.

As we noticed, the overall postcolonial conditions are outlined by a constant flow of fact, ideas and people. And it is this notion which is the theme of this paper. The postcolonial context has created some new diasporas, a new breed of so-called writers in exile, namely those writers who have moved to the traditional literary centres and therefore have become dislocated men and women of letters living »simultaneously in a multiplicity of competing cultures«. (King, 1992:38)

Such a life in the state of diaspora naturally questions identity, not only the personal one, but also the other, literary or, even wider, cultural identity. The diversity of answers offered to such questioning of identity, as expressed by means of the literary creations of those typically postmodern, dislocated, ambiguous souls, focus on certain specific relation of the centre to its periphery, the relation between different cultural and civilizational frames, the relation of the writer, the individual as part of some collective context and in relation to his or her closer or wider collective context and in relation towards himself or herself as an »otherness« living on the seams of the dominant culture.

To live between different frames and contexts further divides the inner self and demand from it to accept or not to accept the characteristics and determinants of different cultural and civilizational realities. To be the »Other« in a dominant culture means to separate oneself with difficulty from the omnipresent image of a sample exotic being; it means a difficult struggle to prove that only the very initial civilizational assumptions are different. It is not easy to harbour in oneself two different cultures, and furthermore, not to be able to belong fully to either of them or to participate fully in both of them.

Some writers transcend their difficulties in taking root by writing about it – by the self-creative process of writing, where writing itself becomes a home, identity and the way of self-creation (as in the cases of Naipaul or Stow). Rushdie tries to surpass this by literary shaping the clashes and contradictions between cultures and mentalities and by developing the sensibility of »living simultaneously on multiple levels of reality«. Sometimes, such writers, as suggested by Amin Malak, need to inhabit an alternative world, a real »third world«: the world of their imagination, their memory and their nostalgia. Can it be that perhaps language itself, the English language, replaces identity or even becomes one's only identity? Are we to understand the question of cultural identity, as Stuart Hall suggests, not as an accomplished fact, but as a »production«, »creation«, never quite an accomplished process, a »production« that will connect the sense of belonging to the purity of »oneness« with, while at the same time, expressing a sense of diversity and heterogeneity? In his essay »Imaginary homelands« S. Rushdie expressed himself on this problem as follows: »... Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools. But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy. If literature is in part the business of finding new angles at which to enter reality, then once again our distance, our long geographical perspective, may provide us with such angles. Or it may be that that is simply what we must think in order to do our work.« (Rushdie 1992:15/16).

As one possibly typical example of how to define a cultural identity we shall look at the writer Bharati Mukherjee who is an Indian from Bengal, born in Calcutta, educated in Switzerland and England and who spent her mature life sharing both life and literary realities of Canada and the United States. Her work as well as her life is, according to Brigitte Scheer-Schäzler,¹ »characterized by recurrent dislocation and enforced or desired transition and change«. In her writings »the violent tensions between the monocultural self and its multiculturally transformed versions« are reflected. Bharati Mukherjee has a specific approach to the question of identity

¹ Brigitte Scheer-Schäzler, »The Soul at Risk: Identity and Morality in the Multicultural World of Bharati Mukherjee«, paper on EACLAL's conference in Graz 1993.

which is one of the central questions of immigration literature. Her writing is determined and somehow burdened by a need to define her own identity not only in context of some more fixed »taking root« but also in the context of belonging to some literary tradition. In 1966 she moved with her husband, writer Clark Blaise, to Canada where they lived till 1980. She exchanged Canada by America in 1980 because of explicit racial and antiimmigrant troubles which made her feel endangered. The United States became for her the land of »romanticism and hope« where she could invent a whole new history for herself. In her opinion, »America is a total and wondrous invention«.

She was born into a quite well-off Hindu Bengali family which meant that she would have a different sense of herself, of existence and of morality than her North-American colleagues. As a Hindu she was brought up in an oral tradition and epic literature, so she says: »I believe in the existence of alternate realities, and this belief makes itself evident in my fiction.«² In an interview with Geoff Hancock she said: »I was born in Calcutta. Yes, I am positive that Calcutta shaped me... I am what I am because I was born into an upper-middle-class Bengali family in a city where to be Bengali was to be part of the mainstream. I didn't grow up in a multi-racial society in which to be Indian was to be a patronized or hated minority, as did V. S. Naipaul. North Americans don't always understand that an Indian growing up in India as part of the confident mainstream has a very different sense of self than an Indian growing in a multi-racial country.«³ It is, in my opinion, important to point this out because it says something about her obvious unreadiness for multi-cultural and multi-racial life in Canada and its difficulties. Belonging to the highest Indian caste and upper-middle-class family even separated her from the »other« India in India itself, in her case, from the bigger and perhaps more real India than was hers. Certainly she was not ready for the life in which she would become a »visible minority« – in fact there is no India which prepares its own privileged individuals for this. And, somehow Canada and Bharati Mukherjee didn't come to terms. While for her husband America was »a place where he knew vast suffering«, and where there was »turmoil and chaos« and while in Canada he had »a certain place, in a certain world, with certain identity« and where he belonged and he knew it, Bharati Mukherjee wanted »to get away from that sense of belonging«. She didn't want to fit in because she wanted »to be anywhere and keep moving«. In Canada she wrote the novels *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Wife*, and a non-fiction book, *Days and Nights of Calcutta*, which she wrote as a sort of diary together with her husband. In the mid-70s she started to notice the visible effects of racism, so in the text »An Invisible Woman« a kind of farewell to Canada, she wrote: »It creates double-vision when

² From an interview with Bharati Mukherjee by Alison B. Carb, *The Massachusetts Review* 29 (1988):645-54.

³ From an interview with Bharati Mukherjee by Geoff Hancock, *Canadian Fiction Magazine* 59 (1987).

self-perception is so utterly at odds with social standing. We are split from our most confident self-assumptions. We must be blind, stupid or egomaniacal to maintain self-respect or dignity when society consistently undervalues our contribution... Knowing that the culture condescended toward me I needed ways of bolstering my self-respect – but those ways, at least to politely raised, tightly disciplined women of my age and origin, can only be achieved in society, in the recognition of our contributions... Calcutta equipped me to survive theft or even assault; it didn't equip me to accept proof of my unworthiness.«⁴

And she left it, »unable to keep her twin halves together«. Canada, which portrays itself as a multicultural mosaic, doesn't accept these explanations of hers. That the 80's were not easy years for the immigrants, particularly, for those of a different colour of skin, many Canadian writers will affirm, and not only those who migrated from Asia, the West Indies and so on. Many of them will understand her decision, but the dominant Canadian mainstream has a negative attitude towards her act even when it did acknowledge that times had been trying.

And so, after many transit stops she found her way to the United States as she wrote in an article entitled »A Fourhundred-year-old Woman«⁵. In the same article she said almost decisively: »I am an American. I am an American writer, in the American mainstream, trying to extend it. This is a vitally important statement for me – I am not an Indian writer, not an exile, not an expatriate. I am an immigrant; my investment is in the American reality, not the India... The foreign-born, the exotically raised Third World immigrant with non-Western religions and non-European languages and appearance, can be as American as any steerage passenger from Ireland, Italy or the Russian Pale.« So she confirms that America has transformed her and she has to express this. In that way her main theme becomes the making of new Americans which in turn resulted in two excellent books of short stories, *Darkness* (1985) and *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988), and one novel, *Jasmine* (1989).

It seems that after a long search for a home she has found one. So she says, »... for me, America is an idea. It is a stage for transformation... Home is a state of mind... So making the change from thinking of home as a place, to thinking of it as an idea, was radical metamorphosis for me... I came out of a continent of cynicism and irony and despair. A traditional society where you are what you are, according to the family that you were born into, the caste, the class, the gender. Suddenly, I found myself in a country where – theoretically, anyway – merit counts, where I could choose to discard that part of my history that I want, and invent a whole new history for myself.«⁶ Bearing this in mind we can notice that through immigration

⁴ Bharati Mukherjee, »An Invisible Woman«, Saturday Night, March 1981, 36–40.

⁵ Mukherjee, »A Four-hundred-years-old-woman« The Writer on Her Work, vol. II, ed. by Janet Sternberg, W. W. Norton, 1991:33–38.

⁶ Tucheck Andie, ed, Bill MOyers: A world of Ideas II, Dobubleday, N. Y., 1990.

America has become for her a continual narrative process of »uprooting« and »rerooting« or, in Clark Blais' terms, of »unhousement« and »rehousement«. Concerning the belonging to some literary tradition she said, »I see myself as an American writer in the tradition of the other American writers whose parents or grandparents passed through Ellis Island.«⁷

On the literary level this process took a shape of its own. First of all, the novel *The Tiger's Daughter* (1972) deals with an Indian woman who lives in America and is married to an American, and who returns after seven years to visit India and becomes aware that she does not belong to her India anymore. She never finished the process of »rehousement« in a new Land; she had simply lived simultaneously both her »halves«, neither inhabiting completely one nor the other.

In her second novel *Wife* (1979), the protagonist is a simple uneducated Indian girl whom her husband takes to America in order to find a better life. Young Dimple's experience of her new and different culture is frustrating so she escapes into a world of imagination and TV soap-operas, she loses any feeling for the borderline between imagination and reality and so kills her husband, the only real link with both her former home and the place which is supposed to become a new home for her.

After these novels, she wrote two collections of short stories that belong to the new literature of immigration or immigrant stories. These stories are about new immigrants living in a continent of immigrants who »re-invent themselves«; they are about characters who change with the change of citizenship; they »center on a new breed and generation of North-American pioneers«; they are about people who do not experience themselves as lost, marginal people, but they are people with a double-perspective, with »an unexpected 'insider's' view«; they are about fighters, survivors.

Novel *Jasmine* (1989) grew out of one of the stories in the last collection. It is about a woman who despite all troubles (war, loss of husband, rape, murder) succeeds both in reaching and in surviving in America and in choosing the best option for herself – which means that after the sentence, »I shuttled between identities« she finds America as a possible place to create herself anew, to determine herself by herself, to invent and create a new world and a new history for herself.

And after all, has Bharati Mukherjee really found her home? If we are to understand identity as a process, then there is no real end to this search. She says now that she is an American of Bengali origin, meaning her Indianess is now a metaphor, a particular way of comprehending the world, and her new Americaness gives this metaphor a ground for an omnipotent imaginative »rereading« and »inreading« of self. One cannot deny that Bharati Mukherjee shaped her writing, her discourse along the lines of this »rehousement«. With her writing she has

⁷ From Introduction to *Darkness* (1985).

confirmed her need to live simultaneously on multiple levels of reality, but with strong feeling of an American identity. And English is a language she has appropriated. In her opinion, those who appropriate English are perhaps more aware of the power of language than native-speakers. She thinks that language has given her her identity and that she is the writer she is, because she writes in North American English about immigrants in the New World.

And what about literary canons? It is a fact that her work today is considered part of Indian-English literature, but also American and even Canadian literature. If we take into account that Maxine Hong Kingston is today included in anthologies of canonised American literature, we may not be wrong in expecting a place for Bharati Mukherjee there, too. But, it is also a fact that she is included in collections like *Stories from the American Mosaic* or Kunapipi's special issue *Post-colonial Women's Writing* but under the heading Pakistan and India. So she wants to be accepted and understood as an American writer with a different and rich background which gives her particular perspectives. The question of identity is even found among postmodern so-called »homed« personae, many people know very well how hard it is to fight for an identity even when it seems that they have one. It is good to feel at home wherever and whatever that may mean. As we see, dealing with post-colonial literature includes dealing with the postcolonial context, that means dealing with the intertwined relations between life and work. At the same time the post-colonial literature open up many new perspectives and persuade us to shed new lights on our European and Eurocentric attitudes, new light on established values which demand that we question them once again.

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Postkolonijalni kontekst stvorio je neke nove dijaspore: pisci koji su prešli iz bivših kolonija u kano-nizirana književna središta postali su raseljeni/iz-mještene književnici, književnici koji žive »istodobno u mnogostrukosti kultura što se među sobom nadmeću« (B. King). Književni izričaji tih tipičnih post-modernih, dislociranih, podvojenih duša, usredotočuju se na neke osobite odnose: odnos središta i periferije, odnos različitih kulturnih i civilizacijskih okvira, odnos pisca, kao dijela nekog kolektivnog konteksta prema njegovoj (njezinoj) bližoj ili daljoj kolektivnoj pripadnosti i odnos prema sebi kao »drugosti« koja živi na šavovima kultura. Neki pisci, poput Naipaula ili Stowa, nadilaze te poteškoće ukorjenjujući se u proces pisanja, gdje pisanje samo postaje dom, identitet i način samo-ostvarenja.

Kao primjer za temu definiranja kulturnog identiteta poslužit će spisateljica Bharati Mukherjee, podrijetlom Indijka iz Bengala, ali koja je svoj zreli život provela u Kanadi i Sjedinjenim Američkim Državama. Ona pokušava riješiti pitanje identiteta svojim pisanjem i stvaranjem vlastita svijeta, dok istodobno pomiruje sebe i svoj kontekst procesom stvaranja vlastite nove povijesti.