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Space and Identity: Bharati Mukherjee's Immigrant Writing

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Abstract. Indian American writer Bharati Mukherjee is a prominent figure in immigrant writing. Her works offer penetrating explorations of female agency, the vicissitudes of immigrant existence, cross-cultural tensions, interethnic relations, and postcolonial dynamics. In light of Mukherjee's immigration experiences at different stages of her life, the topographical space, discourse space and humanistic space intertwine in her novels, which reflects the dynamics of identity positioning, recognition and deconstruction for exiles, expatriates and immigrants. Her narrative practice demonstrates a layered intellectual complexity, encompassing both the expansive geographical and psychological journeys of her characters and the subtle transformations of their lived experiences. The theoretical framework of the "Third Space," by dismantling binary oppositions, creates a conceptual locus that accommodates contradiction, heterogeneity, and otherness, which is highly illuminating for revealing the matrix of ethnic American literature. Through the aesthetic interpretation of the space theory, this article aims to provide reference for the identity exploration of the marginalized, contributing to broader discussions of displacement, belonging, and transcultural poetics.

Keywords: Bharati Mukherjee, immigrant writing, space theory, identity

1. Introduction

Bharati Mukherjee is a highly influential figure among contemporary Indian American writers and a forerunner of both diaspora and female literature. Over half a century, she published eight novels, four collections of short stories, three non-fiction works, and a memoir co-authored with her husband Clark Blaise. Her female writing boldly resists the triple obstacles posed by colonial hegemony, patriarchy, and class oppression, actively exploring the path of contemporary women's liberation; Her diaspora novels linger on the living conditions of immigrants, documenting the everlasting loneliness of the homeless and rootless. She articulates the intrinsic quality of exile and migration, and the rich spatial imagery in her works including The Tiger's Daughter (1971), Wife (1975), Jasmine (1989), The Tree Bride (2004) and Miss New India (2011) all indicate the wide span of character growth and self-discovery.

Wegner first promulgated the concept of "spatial criticism" in "Spatial criticism: Critical geography, space, place, and textuality", stating that "space itself is both a product, shaped by social processes and human interventions at different scales, and a force that, in turn, influences, guides and defines the possibilities of human behavior and ways of being in the world" [1]. In this way, the

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focus on space has entered literary criticism from multiple perspectives, such as feminism, postcolonialism, popular culture and style studies, calling for more inclusive views to interpret literary space. It is imperative to transcend the spatial confrontation between center and edge, and instead develop new multidimensional perspectives to examine literary and cultural activities, exchange, and circulation. Space criticism, as a way of thinking and a tool for interpreting social phenomena, has taken hold internationally. Since it dovetails with Mukherjee's immigrant writing, this article explores the identity exploration of both Mukherjee and her characters through the lens of topographical space, discourse space, and humanistic space.

2. Topographical space and identity positioning

Human geography contends that environments participate in constituting self-identity. There exists such geographical spatial dimension in the real world, which is inevitably reflected in the literary narrative. Novels, on the whole, are thus inherently endowed with topographical attributes. Zoran first designated the topographical level as "space as a static entity" which is "self-existent and independent of the temporal structure of the world". In texts, the topographical structure is expressed by means of "direct description" or "narrative, dialogic, or even essayistic" unit [2]. Depiction of locations, orientations, scene boundaries and so on carries the author's self-awareness and emotional preference. In the early years in North America, Mukherjee considered herself as an exile in Canada. In spite of her family and career there, she was still overwhelmed by loneliness far from her hometown and often sought comfort in her memories of Calcutta. In terms of identity, Mukherjee saw herself as an Indian, a passive exile living in a foreign land. This mentality is evident in her works of the first stage. The Tiger's Daughter spotlights the author's psychological dynamics and practical efforts to pinpoint identity when she first arrived in another country.

In the novel The Tiger's Daughter, the Brahmin girl Tara is sent by her father to study in the United States at the age of fifteen. Leaving the shelter of class privilege and her familiar home in India, she suffers from homesickness and helplessness. The home space in her mother country is stuffed with tombs, temples, castles and other historical sites. The frequent appearance of these scenes and images alludes to Tara's eagerness to rush back to India and her confusion about positioning identity. The word "identity" stems from the medieval Latin word "identitas". Its root "idem" means "the same", and "identitas" accordingly refers to "sameness". It is safe to say that the decisive factor which triggers identity recognition is identity crisis. A person in a familiar environment shares roughly similar value, culture and custom with the community he/she belongs to, and hardly encounters identity problems, or in other words, identity problems exist in a recessive state. However, when an individual arrives in a foreign country or faces a heterogeneous culture, the discord may emerge, and the issue of identity might be highlighted by the vastly distinct value systems and even conflicts and confrontations in habits and ways of thinking.

The topographical space in India keeps changing, so does Tara's mentality. In Tara's previous view, India is well organized and affluent, but from her American classmates' angle of vision, India is a place full of low rent houses and beggars. In addition, Calcutta, which is dominated by the upper class before Tara's departure, witnesses immense changes in the wake of commodity economy. Years later, Tara gets married to an American, which breaks Brahmanical taboo regarding caste marriage. Returning home with this imprint, Tara's journey is full of conflicts, and she struggles to detect her place in the once familiar space, trying to rediscover herself, reevaluate her marriage, and contemplate the future.

Perhaps her mother, sitting serenely before God on a rug, no longer loved her either. After all Tara had willfully abandoned her caste by marrying a foreigner. Perhaps her mother was offended that

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she, no longer a real Brahmin was constantly in and out of this sacred room, dipping like a crow [3].

The "sacred room" here is the prayer chamber, which constitutes a space of cultural taboo. For pagans who are not absolutely devout or pure, they are not allowed to enter. The long-standing Indian religion has set rigorous regulations on women's behavior and marital life, and its influence even exceeds the effectiveness of the law, evolving into deep-rooted criteria of conduct and judgment. The Hindu classic Laws of Manu steers female followers to fulfill the connubial obligation in order to get transcendental gratification. "The ritual of marriage is traditionally known as the Vedic transformative ritual for women; serving her husband is (the equivalent of) living with a guru, and household chores are the rites of the fire [4]." This code also explicitly prohibits marriage across castes or races. In addition, the two major Indian epics "Mahabharata" and "Ramayana" vigorously promote the image of the perfect wife such as Sita, advocating that women should try to serve as ideal wives and mothers, focusing on the family even at the cost of enduring tortures and dedicating themselves. The mainstream ideology with this cultural accumulation completely refuses the marriage between Tara and her American husband, resulting in estrangement and misunderstanding from her Indian relatives and friends. Even her mother feels that Tara has tarnished the sublime lineage of Brahmin and is no longer worthy of entering the sacred prayer room.

As the badge of Indian religious culture, the topographical space of tombs, temples and castles originally carry Tara's spiritual sustenance and nostalgia complex while she studies abroad, but after returning to India, she cannot gain relief any more from those familiar landscapes of yore. These images redefine the field and mark an invisible gap between Tara and India, excluding Tara to the unhomely and uncanny periphery. Since "the uncanny is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar [5]", those familiar religious sites above have not changed; What have changed are the experience of the subject and the attitude of "the Other". Moreover, Tara's plan to drive around alone is reckoned as a risky challenge to social mores and some children look at her askance, calling her "Aunt America", all of which make her feel stifled and suffocated. "The universal truth of exile is not that one has lost that love or home, but that inherent in each is an unexpected, unwelcome loss [6]." At this point, the estranged protagonist loses her original enthusiasm when positioning her Indian identity.

As a decolonized country, India is more often than not "the place of ultimate refuge and gratification" for exiles on the spiritual level, as well as "the destination of retour [7]". Prior to Mukherjee, most nostalgic Indian immigrant writers recognize their cultural identity as Indians, viewing India as a source of creation and a harbor for the soul. In contrast, Mukherjee's works foreground immigrants' determination to embrace a new cultural identity, conveying a sense of joy in integrating into a new country. She once stated that her root was not in India, but in the United States; North America was actually her emotional home [8]. Such sentiment is also projected on Tara. For Tara, India is a familiar foreign land. If she wants to acquire an absolute sense of security in India, she will have to isolate herself from the foreign cultures absorbed during the long process of growth, which is not realistic or worth the loss. After being ostracized and pushed away time and time again, Tara's reminiscence for her city of birth fades away, and she constantly thinks of her husband's comfort and shelter. This reaction actually derives from her deep dependence on Western culture. Her home country with strong religious and historical sedimentation does not accept her any more, and Tara tries to trace the call of Western thought and desperately seizes this life-saving straw. This plot also helps explain many critics' comments on the weakening of "Indianism" and the strengthening of "Americanism" in Mukherjee's writing.

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The novel The Tiger's Daughter ends with Tara trapped in a car by protesters, wondering whether she can escape the riot and leave Calcutta. Re-entering is prohibited, and this returning "alien" could not discern a sense of belonging in India. Instead, the shattering of dreams even gives her the impulse to flee away and give up her Indian attribute. In Tara's root-seeking visit to her mother country, topographical space and identity positioning of the subject deviate from each other. This metaphorical pattern forms a pungent irony and subtly reflects the dilemma of immigrants in diverse backgrounds.

3. Discourse space and identity recognition

Space in the text is embodied not only in the visible topographical domain, but also in the intangible dimension. In order to acquire a sense of belonging and self-identity, individuals constantly attempt to figure out and adapt to new discursive communities. Discourse space can provide migrants with locations of possibility, and thus help them accurately recognize their identity. Such discourse space is particularly what Mukherjee searches in her life and her works. After returning to India in the 1970s, Mukherjee reexamined her relationship with the home country and found that after her life for more than a decade in North America, there was a massive cultural barrier between India and herself. At this very moment, Mukherjee's mentality changed, and gradually turned to North America psychologically. However, she was humiliated and tormented by Canada's racist policies. The tone of the second phase of Mukherjee's immigrant literature is relatively gloomy, conveying the predicament of communication for immigrants. The representative work of this stage, Wife, demonstrates the burdensome process of identity recognition for exiles, and resonates with the author's own "banishment".

Both the author Mukherjee and the protagonist Dimple of the novel Wife confront the plight of being left out in silence. Due to the anxiety caused by the enhancement of self-awareness and unclear self-orientation in the heterogeneous context, as well as the curiosity about Indian ethnic group in western mainstream society, Mukherjee chose the genre of autobiography to voice prudently and carefully construct her self-identity. Dimple's trials in surmounting problems in the marital life, and her tribulations in dealing with the psychological trauma of being uprooted from her hometown are all key clues that Mukherjee zeroed in on. In other words, Wife covers Mukherjee's "dual introverted" observation perspectives, that is, a woman's observation of women and an immigrant's observation of immigrants. Insights from this kind of dual perspectives are not parallel, but intersect with each other, which enables Mukherjee to foster expansive empathy.

In Wife, the protagonist Dimple comes from a classic Brahmin family in India. She assumes marriage as the ultimate goal and life before marriage as just a rehearsal. Reading novels, learning skills, and flipping through magazines are all strategies for her to marry a qualified husband, and even obtaining a degree from university is merely an additional guarantee to find a conjugal partner. In the prime of her twenties, Dimple is agonized by the torment of premarital waiting and almost commits suicide. Ironically, Dimple's married life does not work out as she imagined before. When it comes to the roles in a family, there is "double ethical standard for men and women [9]", that is, social stereotype presumes the husband as bread-maker and the wife "angel in the house". Deriving from Coventry Partmore's narrative poem, "angel in the house" refers to the woman who is endued with well-recognized female temperaments: sweet and selfless, delicate and diligent, romantic and enchanting, gentle and obedient. Influenced by such rigid view, Dimple's mother-in-law renames Dimple Nandini and attempts to reframe her as a perfect wife in line with antiquated customs. Without the initiative to voice inner feelings, Dimple is completely confined in a state of aphasia and disillusion, and she cannot help venting her spleen on innocent animals. Discourse power defines

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"not the dumb existence of a reality, nor the canonical use of a vocabulary, but the ordering of objects [10]". The utterer, hearer, along with the content of discourse are all involved in the distribution and counterbalance of discourse power. Whoever holds such power in the discourse space obtains the initiative to persuade and discipline the other side. Dimple gradually strives for her own discourse power and gains illumination in female emancipation with the baptism of modern education and advanced ideological trends. A statement in the magazine evokes visceral empathy and triggers in her an epiphany. "Express yourself in your surroundings. Discover your own grand passion and indulge it to excess. Then simplify the rest, throw out, be ruthless. This's the secret to happiness [11]." For her, the fetus in her womb belongs to "the rest", a remnant of the old social ideology as well as a stumbling block that militates against nurturing her own voice. So, she deems abortion as a "a sacrament of liberation from the traditional roles and constraints of womanhood [12]", and chooses violent abortions by rope skipping and cold water flushing to break free from motherhood status and presupposed expectations, so as to declare control of her own body.

Afterwards, Dimple moves to the United States with her husband Amit. This voluntary "exile" does not alleviate her inner identity anxiety, but instead exposes her to more intense cultural clashes between East and West. They live with Mr. Sen's family in the Indian immigrant community which emblematizes Indian culture overseas, and there are portraits of Sita hanging on the walls, stressing women's faithfulness and loyalty. As a devout guardian of Indian ethos, Mrs. Sen values traditional marriage and scorns Indian female immigrants who date men of other races. Furthermore, she is ashamed of giving birth to a daughter rather than a son. These tensions in the new discursive community constantly reminds Dimple that not only do conventional shackles and outdated values make a great clamor in India, but they also persist in foreign lands. Mr. Sen's house has actually become another space imprisoning Dimple's free will and discouraging her from recognizing identity in the United States.

Under the catalysis of new western culture, the heroine goes through certain cultural shock and identity dislocation. Her husband Amit, through imposition of a metaphysical center on the field, intends to manipulate Dimple's spiritual world and make her take such control for granted. Since Dimple's own vision collides fiercely with external expectations, her identity construction tends to be unavailing. At last, Dimple kills her husband, engaging in a radical rebellion against the morbid illusion of "angel in the house". Dimple's neurasthenia connotes Mukherjee's frustration with the aloofness in exile. At first glance, Dimple acts like "the madwoman in the attic [13]" who is not accepted by secular society. However, this round character cannot be judged unilaterally. Her actions do make sense in view of complex immigration experiences and smothering discourse space.

The novel Wife adopts flashback narrative and other textual spatial forms, seamlessly interweaving past and present, Indian memories and foreign experiences, creating a sense of entanglement, ambiguity, and elusive drift. The struggle for discourse space unfolded in Mukherjee's novels shows the "grievances of immigrants' uprooting and re-rooting in other places [14]", and at the same time exhibits women's pursuit to follow their hearts and discover their genuine appeals.

Mukherjee believes that overgeneralized criticism only focuses on the macroscopic rules behind the text and regards individual characters with prominent personality traits in works as spokespersons for a broader group in reality, which goes against the author's original intention. It is wise to avoid simply treating literary works as cultural and anthropological documents, or falling into the trap of stereotyped image. Making use of spatial theory and close reading to specify the discourse space in Mukherjee's works is especially effective in delving deeper into the emotional connections between the author and the protagonist, in order to dig into the author's original idea as much as possible.

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4. Humanistic space and identity deconstruction

Feeling that Canada cannot accept her as a member of society, Mukherjee decided to immigrate to the United States, which marked a brand-new stage of her diaspora life and writing. In her works of the third stage, including Jasmine, The Tree Bride, and Miss New India, Mukherjee explicitly expressed her willingness to reside in the United States as a new citizen. She was eager for the promising life in the near future, which injected vitality to her literary creation. "Lying at the heart of Mukherjee's cultural politics is her espousal of the 'immigrant' aesthetic, integral to which is a rejection of fixed conceptions of national-cultural identity [15]." Most of the protagonists at this stage are no longer entangled in a given identity, but instead flexibly examine their own characters through the deconstruction of "fixed conceptions of national-cultural identity". Approaching the cross-cultural exchange, interpersonal communication and globalization process from the scope of humanistic space, we can construe valid ways for immigrants to deconstruct identity sensibly.

The protagonist of Jasmine is like Kali, the Hindu goddess of destruction. She subverts her subordinating identity predicament and combats cultural hegemony including colonialism and patriarchy in a constantly changing way. The protagonist's name shifts from Jyoti, Jazzy, Jane, Jase to Jasmine, gravitating towards the Western style. By weakening exotic features, Jasmine strives to break free from the restriction of traditional dogmata and actively integrates into American society. It is worth noting that as for above mentioned names, their initial letter "J" remains unchanged. This can be presented via a circular trajectory in the diagram below, with "J" as the center, and it can also be seen as a rewriting of the reincarnation theory in India. "As a Hindu, I (Mukherjee) believe that changing names is like experiencing reincarnation in a lifetime. When you try to solve problems in diverse ways, you are actually trying polymorphous identities [14]." In Mukherjee's view, cultural identity is not a fixed, static, or conventional concept grounded at birth, but a dynamic, modifiable, and transformable state. By slipping the leash of the inopportune part of Indian tradition, immigrants in America welcome myriad transformations of themselves, going to great lengths to deconstruct and redefine their identity, for the sake of re-rooting in the new space and ultimately gain a sense of belonging as American citizens.

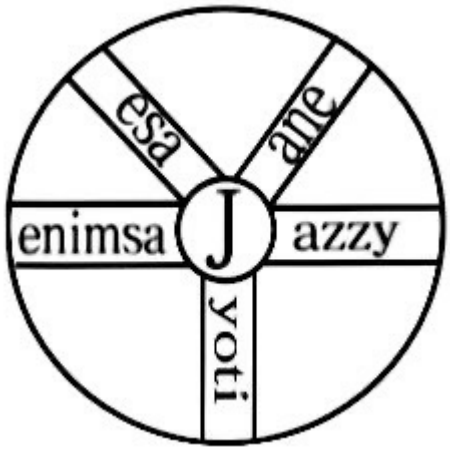

Figure 1. Circle of the heroine's changing names

Born in a Brahmin family in India, the protagonist of The Tree Bride, Tara Lata Gangooly, is one of the victims of arranged child marriage. After her fiancé dies from poisoning on the way to the wedding, Tara's father marries her to a tree out of expediency and inserts a branch in the yard as her child with the tree husband. In India, child marriages alike are prevalent. "Girls facing similar fates

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were married to rocks or crocodiles [16]." However, Tara refuses to be resigned to her lot and keeps learning knowledge to broaden horizons. In addition, she espouses the national independence movement, donates all her dowries to resist British colonial aggression, and ultimately contributes her precious life. Tara walks out of the space under Sari and deconstructs the formerly stigmatized identity. She gains respect from family members and compatriots, transforming her image from a jinx into an altruistic goddess. The protagonist's behavioral choices are engraved with the author's life trajectory and value orientation, demonstrating female nirvana in a thought-provoking way.

The novel Miss New India returns to the Indian narrative, elucidating issues of migration and home rebuilding within India. The protagonist Anjali, who comes from a traditional Indian family, treasures her right to pursue happiness. She moves to the economically expanding city Bangalore and works for a top enterprise in the field of information technology. For the first time, she has full control over her life: She goes to the pubs, buys branded garments, and gets immersed in foreign cultural symbols, all of which might lead her astray. After all, consumerism contains corrupt factors. In the context of globalization, immigrants face adventurous thrills and challenges of multicultural diversity. Although various cultures are endowed with unique particularities, they also share comparability and relevance, thus giving rise to interactivity. Anjali, in this interaction, does not abandon herself to consumerism or cut off from India, but rather swigs the best of Eastern and Western cultures. She deconstructs the illusion of consumerism and realizes that she is a member of New India. This novel "of broken identities and discarded languages" eulogizes the progressive Indian women who would like to "bond [themselves] to a new community [17]" in the intricate network of globalization.

Mukherjee deems that immigrants' life in America involves a kind of "fusion", a two-way interactive process. Immigrants draw power from the soil of a new country and equip themselves with skills for intercultural communication, and in return, they also exert an influence on the surrounding circumstances in the humanistic space. Mukherjee further puts forward that white people and immigrants create "a third thing" through interactive experiences [18]. The "third thing" herein uncannily corresponds to Homi Bhabha's "the third space", namely, a space for negotiation at the edges and boundaries between diverse civilizations. The positioning of cultural identity today no longer comes from the pure core in any conventional sense, and in an intercultural world, a sort of "intermediate" and "hybrid" identity is forming [19]. Mukherjee accentuates this intermediation and hybridity in her immigrant writing. Even though claiming to conceal her Indian attribute, the writer still deploys inter-lingual poetics through a lot of Indian English in literary creation, especially in Jasmine, where Punjabi is widely used to signify spots and people. The blending of mother tongue and acquired language accurately mirrors the impact of humanistic space on Jasmine's identity exploration. Besides, Mukherjee excels in the rewriting and transfer of Eastern and Western cultures. The Hindu classic Laws of Manu strictly stipulates female obligation of marriage, and the Indian epics "Mahabharata" and "Ramayana" speak highly of the image of perfect wife. Mukherjee combines these ideas with the western expectation of "angel in the house", reminding readers that certain factors that prevent individuals, especially immigrants, from deconstructing identity may originate from not only their homeland, but also the new cultural space.

5. Conclusion

Exploring the implicating and imbricating relationship between space and identity in Mukherjee's works is of vital significance to provoke critical introspection on diaspora literature. Space is not a hollow or stagnant existence, but rather it is full of meaning and constantly constructs and reproduces meaning. People interact with the surrounding via an array of unconscious emotional and

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thinking paradigms, forming inclusion or exclusion links with "the Other" in various spaces. It is the spatial field in Mukherjee's immigrant literary texts that participates in the construction and deconstruction of the protagonists' identity and echoes the writer's personal life trajectory. On the one hand, Mukherjee reflects on herself through writing, interpreting her own spiritual requests, cultural aesthetics and female orientation; On the other hand, she comes to feel the world through writing, contemplating globalization, immigration, cultural conflicts and integration between East and West. The stages of exile, expatriation and immigration experienced by Mukherjee herself can be captured evocatively in her literary creation. Straddling both hemispheres, her works erode the boundaries between diverse cultures, which deconstructs the thinking mode of binary opposition and offers space for seemingly contradictory heterogeneity. She indicates that unhomeliness should not be the permanent state of immigrants, nor is the culture of home country the sole and supreme spirituality. Immigrants ought to integrate into the new space with an optimistic and resilient attitude. In her scintillating poetics, Mukherjee curves the shapes of impressive female protagonists, showcases the process of immigrant transformation, and represents in microcosm the pain, struggle, and joy of immigrant nirvana. Her penetrating and profound writing not only voices for immigrants in today's society to yearn for a promising life, but also throws light on feasible ways to achieve this goal.

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