

Christine Kutschbach

The Literariness of Life

Undecidability in Bharati Mukherjee's Writing

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For Pelle and Rufus

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Introduction: Bharati Mukherjee's Fiction and the Postcolonial Debate

Bharati Mukherjee published her first novel in 1971, when postcolonial theory as an intellectual discourse was still in its infancy, and her latest novel, dealing with (as she writes in an email) “identity searches [...] in the age of globalization,” has come out four decades later, in 2011.¹ In a recent interview she remembers that over the course of her literary career she had to face a number of “angry postcolonialist[s]” (Edwards 2009, 172), since the “current scholarly discourse [...] hadn’t yet gathered momentum” (ibid., 173). And still, Mukherjee has pursued her literary career seemingly unperturbed by academia’s agitations, although as a professor in the department of English at the University of California, Berkeley (and before that in comparable teaching positions at colleges and universities in Milwaukee, Madison, Montreal/Canada, Saratoga Springs, Montclair and New York), she has for the most part of her life been a member of the Western academic institution herself.

A naturalized immigrant (first to Canada and then to the U.S.) of Indian parentage, writing in the English language, this writer fits so well into the parameters of postcolonial/transcultural authorship that the heated debates within literary studies can often be found to resonate against her work. Not just as an author but on a personal level, too, Mukherjee has had to live through the pitfalls of essentializing categories, for instance that of ‘race’ as pitched against the more heterogeneous concept of ‘citizenship’: Although we may have “entered a supra-national age, in which traditional citizenship is likely to be a murky identification” (Mukherjee 1999, 84), she calls attention to the fact that after “fifteen years of aggressive correction, [it is still] a rare literary

¹ Bharati Mukherjee’s fiction has been discussed almost exclusively within the discursive parameters of postcolonial theory and has, in P. Rastogi’s words, stimulated “divisive polarities – either effusively laudatory or sharply critical – that have shaped academic discourse on her writing” (Rastogi 2005, 268). Publications on the agenda and definition of Postcolonialism (or postcolonial theory) as a critical approach abound; the compilation *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (Ashcroft et al. 1989) is regarded by many as ‘initiating’ study to which most contributions to this date refer. Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon 1965) and *Black Skin, White Masks* (Fanon 1994), Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (Said 1979), and Homi K. Bhabha’s *Nation and Narration* (Bhabha 1990a) and *The Location of Culture* (Bhabha 2004) are commonly perceived as hallmarks within this field of literary studies.

notice that does not identify me as ‘Indian.’ It’s apparently easier for Monica Seles to be accepted as American than me, and I wonder why that might be” (ibid., 82). Under these circumstances it is most astonishing that during her long writing career, Bharati Mukherjee has never ceased to combine the belief that “the ultimate goal of literature is to achieve universality” (ibid. 72) with the highly personal credo to “manifest love, for just a paragraph or two, to cut loose” (ibid., 85).

While as a person she seemed to fit the postcolonial parameters, her writing obviously did not. Indeed, having received enthusiastic endorsement by some critics, Mukherjee’s work has also met with definitive, sometimes even below-the-belt rejection.² It is certainly possible, as Inderpal Grewal suggests, that “one of the reasons for [Mukherjee’s] success at the end of the century was that she was able to articulate the trope of the Asian woman within the context of a liberal idea of America” (I. Grewal 2005, 62). Yet at the same time, the writer’s “celebration of the United States and her continuing use of ‘Indianness’ in texts that are published and consumed predominantly in the West continue to be a matter of a critical postcolonial debate” (J. K. Singh 2000, 245). Mukherjee’s fiction certainly deviates from a strict theoretical definition of the postcolonial text “as a kind of aetiological construct through which the immigrant writer performs his or her retrospective relocation” (Sen 1997, 21), and it is therefore predestined to provoke all kinds of charges: That the author is “reenacting colonialism” (D. Banerjee 1993, 178) with her fiction, for instance, or that her “authorial gaze corresponds to that of the Orientalizing West” (A. Roy 1993, 129).³ Predominantly academics of Indian background accuse Mukherjee of “colonizing” the immigrant experience and turning it into a “fictive construct by circumventing and suppressing the historical exigencies of Third World immigration” (ibid., 127–128).⁴ Indeed A. S. Knipling somewhat bluntly calls the author “a product of British imperialism” (Knipling 1993, 148):

² For instance, Brewster’s “A Critique of Bharati Mukherjee’s Neo-Nationalism” serves as an example of criticism that is vehement yet raises doubts as to how thoroughly the critic has read any of the books she discusses. In fact, it seems she has a problem with Mukherjee as a person rather than with the products of her writing (see Brewster 1993). Almost a ‘classic’ of furious reviewing (and revealing the sore spot behind such furor) is Rosanne Klass’ 1975 rant against Mukherjee’s novel *Wife* in the feminist magazine *Ms.*: “Some bad books are just disappointing; but others are offensive, because an obviously able writer has attempted to pass off a slapdash job as a finished piece of work. Bharati Mukherjee’s new novel is that kind of bad book. It is carelessly written, erratic, disjointed, often ludicrously improbable, and ultimately pointless” (Klass 1975, 83–84).

³ Along the same lines, albeit less lucid than Roy: Sultana 1999. Many others lament that “Bharati Mukherjee, herself an immigrant, seems to take pride in being less of an Indian and more of a westerner” who has “set out to make a deliberate distortion of Indian womanhood” (Indira 1996a, 59).

⁴ This process, when viewed from another angle than that of postcolonial theory, would appear to be rather normal with respect to most of the production of fiction.

Given her bourgeois background, coupled with her desire to tell the stories of marginalized Asian immigrants in the United States, Mukherjee tends to uncritically reproduce the imperialist project of 'serving the Other' (turning the Other into a self, giving the Other a voice, speaking for the Other). (Ibid., 147)

Brinda Bose's objections to Mukherjee's fiction are cast from a similar mould, although relating to feminist issues. She holds that the writer's focus on the "exuberance of immigration" (Mukherjee 1992a, xv) is really just the wishful thinking of a privileged intellectual. In Bose's view, such wishful thinking is detrimental in that it glosses over a double-marginalization of ethnic women in America (see Bose 1993, 47–49).⁵ Others feel that Mukherjee "brush[es] aside the realities of class" (G. Grewal 1993, 192) and that in her fiction "becoming American demands [...] a validation of the official bourgeois authorization of America as the supreme melting pot" (S. Ray 1998, 230). As a result, for many postcolonial scholars Bharati Mukherjee's oeuvre is expressive of her "consent to [the] hegemonic structure" (Ponzanesi 2004, 50) of mainstream America,⁶ reproducing "essentialisms not far from those [she] is trying to re-write" (Mackay 2010, 126).

The ideological overtones in these critiques are obvious, whether they address issues of colonial history, nationality, gender, or class. Gail Ching-Liang Low for instance recalls the dilemma that members of her "seminar on contemporary minority women's writing in America" faced when discussing Mukherjee's fiction:

Yet it is the very aim of postcolonial theory to highlight the mechanisms underlying such a process in order to create awareness with the reader. As a writer of fiction, Bharati Mukherjee has positioned herself in opposition to postcolonial theory: "It's the postcolonial theorists from South Asia [...] who despise fiction, or art, as being reactionary. They want real life, meaning sociology, journalism; but a writer has to think of each character as an individual instead of representative of all South Asian immigrants. The theorists, in contrast, have to find a general principle" (Desai and Barnstone 1998; in Edwards 2009, 107).

- ⁵ Also critical of Mukherjee's shortcomings with respect to contemporary ("third wave") feminism, yet not convincing in terms of textual analysis: Rajan 1997. When asked by Runar Vignisson whether she is critical of feminism, Bharati Mukherjee replies: "Of rhetoric. [Of p]eople who stay locked inside rhetoric and are unable to not only act sufficiently themselves but fail to understand the enormity of action" (Vignisson 1993, n. p.). A little earlier in the same interview she stresses that her "women characters [...] are doers and they shy away from too much self-analysis, too much verbalizing about the state of being. They dislike [...] indulging in feminist rhetoric quite often, but they end up really changing their lives." Towards Desai and Barnstone she elaborates: "I don't think my mother ever thought of herself as a feminist; yet she was fighting for the best life possible for her daughters. [...] I don't know that my quarrel is with Western feminism as such but with mouthy American feminists of the early and mid-seventies. [...] It was all about talk, rhetoric, and self-examination – these were the times of consciousness-raising groups and examining yourself with mirrors – whereas my mother would have died if anyone had mentioned such things. But she was able to get things done without talking about it" (Desai and Barnstone 1998; in Edwards 2009, 103–104).
- ⁶ Cf. Jussawalla 1988, 590–592 and Davé 1993.

[...W]hen we turned to the Indian Canadian/American writer, Bharati Mukherjee, we found that we could not fit her writing into the model of post-colonial and diasporic texts that we had collectively mapped out as important. Mukherjee seemed not to be concerned with preserving cultural identities and did not want to be labeled an 'Indian' writer. She is wholeheartedly unapologetic about her celebration of cultural dislocation [...]. Instead of consolidating cultural specificities against a dominant white urban America, she positively rejects it. (Low 1993, 8–9)⁷

Faced with publications such as Low's, Susana Onega observes that "Mukherjee's ideological position contrasts with that of most postcolonial writers and has often baffled, dismayed and angered writers and critics intent on affirming the idiosyncrasies of their minority cultures by opposing the hegemonic culture" (Onega 2000, 351). Refuting the sociological angle, Onega stresses that "Mukherjee is not interested in consolidating the 'cultural specificities' of Indian culture against white Imperialism, simply because, like [the character] Hedges [in *The Holder of the World*], she finds herself 'dissatisfied with both sides'" (Onega 1999, 463).

In this context, it is essential to grasp that most of the postcolonial critics' charges are based

on the assumption that Mukherjee is writing within a realistic tradition that demands fidelity to an external historical 'truth'. Read as literary constructs, however, her narratives bear testimony to the dislocated person's need to reinvent the self and the world. Though rooted in the historical and biographical, Mukherjee's stories are visionary representations that exceed realistic frames of reference. (Chakravarty 2002, 92–93)⁸

As of yet, there is insufficient awareness that this aesthetic process is not only intentional but, in fact, advantageous to the 'post-colonial cause': "By placing the

⁷ Concerning seminar agendas such as Low's, Mukherjee has remarked in an interview: "I would never start out with an agenda that I must sit down and write a 'global novel'. [...] The fiction itself must seem urgent to me. I don't like to have the social prescription, or the political prescription, that I am then trying to flesh out" (Connell et al. 1990, 32). Five years later, she underlines this viewpoint towards Fred Bonnie: "I think minority writers are particularly prone to turning characters of fiction into representations in a political agenda. The result is that you produce novels that are useful as texts in social studies or women's studies courses, but they will never be fine literature" (Bonnie 1995; in Edwards 2009, 75). Another year later she reiterates: "I want to make it absolutely clear that I don't envision my characters as mouthpieces and I don't want them to be mouthpieces for anyone but themselves. Once you, as a writer, lose the eccentricity of character portrayal, then you're merely writing texts to be taught in college classrooms. That's a real, real danger to art. But I hope that my books make people think" (Desai and Barnstone 1998; in Edwards 2009, 115).

⁸ Cf. Dascalu 2007, who recognizes that "the fictional is given precedence over the purely factual" (ibid., 8) in Mukherjee's stories and that for this reason her writing practice "diverge[s] from the main currents of post-colonial theorizing and writing" (ibid., 125): She writes "*through* the individual and about the individual, whereas traditional post-colonial theory deals mainly in a third-person perspective, [...] looking down at the post-colonial situation and subject."