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Replaced nationality: cultural migration in the fiction of Bharati Mukherjee and Yasmine Gooneratne.

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Characteristically, colonial societies define themselves against an unchanging other who represents either a savage to be feared or a primitive to be pitied. In settler societies like Australia and Canada this attitude has led to the suppression of the native peoples and their cultures by means of violence and charity.[1] In such colonized societies as India and Ceylon, however, the European colonists succeeded only by allying themselves with an indigenous ruling class. This class, educated in both Asian and European traditions, was proud of its role as partners in government and of its joint legacy of European and Asian cultures. It later became subsumed by the nationalist movements which it generated, and earned the scorn of writers who regard the whole period of European colonialism during what they refer to as the 'Da Gama era' as an interruption to their own history. More radical critics reject not only the role played by this class in supporting colonialism but also its continuing cultural legacy of deference to imperial models that reduce to subaltern status the mass of the people even in post-colonial societies. Homi Bhabha, drawing on Edward Said, argues that the fixed nature of this stereotype prevents the subjects of colonial rule becoming actors in their own history.[2] Anjuli Gupta has shown how the acceptance of imperial standards of propriety continues

to inhibit the capacity of Indian English to express the Indian subject.[3] Writing and education in English thus become means of perpetuating colonialism through the production of a "privileged, but alienated, and semilingual" elite who are incapable of speaking for or to the powerless majority of their fellow-citizens. Yet the writing in Indian English that has succeeded in breaking from its imperial model and speaking to a world community does bring into question both imperial domination and the divided identities it has produced it. As Salman Rushdie has suggested, we are all migrants today. The novels I am discussing in this paper describe in perfectly standard forms of English the act of migration as a process which enables the subject to free herself from both colonial and native stereotypes. Through the experience of migration, return and assimilation their characters become actors both in their old cultures and the new.

Bharati Mukherjee and Yasmine Gooneratne have both written novels of people displaced from colonised societies where the characters have belonged to the majority culture to settler societies where they have been in a minority.[4] In both cases the migration has been from countries governed by British institutions, where the upper classes have rested their security on British customs that they now find under violent challenge. But while Mukherjee's characters migrate to the United States, now the metropolitan centre of Anglophone imperialism, Gooneratne's migrants go to Australia, a settler society on geographic, economic and cultural rim of the world. Yet, although the journeys described by the two authors take different directions, they face their travellers with the same problems of

reconstructing an identity within a society that lacks deep cultural roots of its own. The mutual challenge between their new identity and their home society brings into question the fixity of the barriers between them. In each case the central character learns to accept herself not by renouncing her past but by recognizing that this past is now at home where it continues to exist in a new land. The novels are not narratives of displacement, but of replacement: the replacement of the cultural context of identity. This process both emphasizes and brings into question the concept of nationality.

The Tiger's Daughter, Mukherjee's first novel, is about the attempts of Tara Banerjee, now married to David Cartwright, an American novelist, to return to her source in India in order to reconstruct her identity and her marriage. Of course, she fails to do either, and the book leaves her locked in a car in the middle of a riot in Calcutta, uncertain whether she will live but at last sure of her love for David. The most striking discovery of her return to Calcutta, however, is the realization that the movement of history in India is not with her own class, who, for all their fascination with the fashions of contemporary American culture, are shown immobilized in the moment of the British Raj. Rather, the beast that is moving in history, and has been moving since the previous century is the unnoticed populace of the poor, first in the jungle about the village, now in the streets of Calcutta itself.

The novel opens with the statement that the "Catelli-Continental Hotel on Chowringhee Avenue, Calcutta, is the navel of the universe" (p.3). This hotel, more than Tara's family home, is the geographic centre of the book. It his here that

Tara and her friends come each day to sip coffee and exchange gossip and opinion or watch the passing demonstrations and small riots. With its deferential waiters and turbanned guardian at the door it symbolizes the privilege and protection that alienates these heirs of the British from the life around them. Its balconies keep safe their "daily ritual of espresso or tea" (p.4).

Yet the hotel, symbol of unchanging calm, is also the scene of the changes that are bringing to birth a new, frightening reality. The first person to recognize this is the immaculate Joyonto Roy Chowdhury, owner of tea estates and lover of Calcutta, who suddenly recognizes that his life has been a failure, that the "real Calcutta, the thick laughter of brutal men, open dustbins, warm and dark where carcasses were sometimes discarded" (p.41), has no place for him and his kind. For himself, he is content to accept his fate, maintaining his hold on reality by composing apparently ridiculous phrases to capture the absurdity of his world. He feels no pity for the unseeing young people he observes around him, except for Tara, the "luminous girl" he determines to preserve from the looming destruction. Yet, eventually he is denied even this success.

The new power in India is represented by the owner of the hotel, the businessman and politician P.K.Tuntunwala Esq., who befriends and protects Tara on her long train journey from Bombay to Calcutta, exerts over her a strange attraction through his ugliness, power and hatred, and finally betrays her trust by raping her. Tuntunwala brings to Calcutta the ruthless capitalism that is displacing the equally remote but more idealistic and cultured power of the Bengali brahmins with whom

Tara belongs. They are symbolized by the shady and well-tended refuge her parent's house, which Tara contrasts in her mind with the dangers of her life in New York. In this house, before the lingam of the god Shiva, Tara reflects that "a Hindu was always set apart by his God" (p.52). As the novel progresses, however, this seclusion is steadily broken down by the growing restless of the poor. Tara and her friends are interrupted on their picnic and their visit to the family factory. The hotel is beset by the goondahs who scrawl their graffiti on it walls, litter its approaches with their vendors' trays, and eventually batter its defences in riot. This is foreseen in the books opening pages, which introduce us to the apparently timeless seclusion of the hotel and its doorman. As even he, however, reluctantly recognizes, "There is, of course, no escape from Calcutta . . . Family after family moves from the provinces to its brutish center, and the center quivers a little, absorbs the bodies, digests them, and waits." (p.4) This waiting constitutes the action of Mukherjee's novel.

Even before the main action, however, the novel challenges these apparently unchanging if threatened rituals of Brahmin Bengal by going back to 1879 and Tara's greatgrandfather in his village. The occasion is auspicious, the wedding of his daughters, but it is undercut by omens of change and destruction--first, in the steady rain that forces Hari Lal back to the shelter of his canopy and opens cracks and holes in the soil. then in Hari Lal's own knowledge of the savagery beyond his canopies, then in the weeping of the little girls who are to be married, and finally in his premonition of his own death. The scene ends with a vision of "shadows of suicide or exile, of

Bengali soil sectioned and ceded, of workers rising against their bosses." It is to this later world that Tara returns, and against it that her family and friends build illusions of stability.

The risings against the order of the masters form the context of Tara's return to her family. Although she is quickly caught up in the lives of her family, relatives and schoolfriends, she is no longer able completely to share their attitudes. This is partly because, as the only one who has married for love rather than by arrangement, she is set apart from the marriage intrigues that preoccupy her companions. She has returned to India to find her cultural roots, but discovers that she no longer belongs to its life. She has ceased to be a Hindu, safely set apart from the troubles of the world, and instead finds herself set apart from her friends by her choice of a husband from a new country.Yet this apartness enables her to see more clearly than her companions, who are secluded within a situation to which they remain oblivious. When, at the end, Tara proclaims her love for her American husband at the same time as she faces death at the hands of an Indian mob, she is declaring her faith in the identity she has chosen, indebted to both America and India, but standing beyond both in its freedom.

In her second novel, Wife, Mukherjee traces the other part of the story of migration, the journey away. The heroine, with the coyly intercultural name of Dimple Dasgupta, enters an arranged marriage that does not quite meet the hopes of either family. She however becomes the envy of her friends when her husband is able to obtain immigration papers for America. With him she moves to New York, only to find herself entrapped in the emigrant

community as surely as she had been trapped within her husband's family in Calcutta. Gradually she frees herself, eventually through adultery with a black man, so crossing two cultural boundaries at once. This gives her the strength to see her husband for what he has become, a creature of other people's codes and expectations, and to free herself from him by stabbing him seven times through the temple with a kitchen knife. The author does not tell us whether this killing is fact or a fantasy induced by Dimple's watching of TV, the closest she comes to involvement with American culture. Whichever, it is a decisive break with her source culture, a symbol of her determination to construct her identity from the world at hand rather than from the cultural fragments she has brought with her.

By contrast with Mukherjee's intense novels, Yasmine Gooneratne's A Change of Skies is a leisurely and witty narrative that moves not only between two countries but also between two centuries. Its title links it with the theme of Henry Handel Richardson's The Fortunes of Richard Mahony[5] , expressed in the repeated phrase from Horace, Qui trans mare currunt, coela non anima mutant: "those who rush across the seas change their skies, not their spirits". Similarly, the epigraphs to the various sections, from writers ranging from the eighteenth century Martin Wintergerst of Memmingen, who wrote of travels in Ceylon, through Swift and Johnson to a food writer in the twentieth century Punch, place the work within a European tradition of writing about other worlds as strange and bizarre. Yet one epigraph from the contemporary Caribbean writer Wilson Harris, who declares that "We must laugh at one another, or die", both extends this tradition to include the colonial subject thus modifying the

strange to the universal.

Yet within this universal the migrants, Bharat and Navaranjini, who become Jean and Barry in the new land, remain part of the specific culture from which they come. This, like Richard Mahony's, was a culture of books and learning, symbolized by Bharat's grandfather Edward, the first of the family to come to Australia, who might have written the journal of his travels in Greek or Latin instead of English (p.158). But Bharat bears his name, meaning India, in honour of Edward's scholarship in Indian languages. His family tradition is thus from the beginning a hybrid--Ceylonese, Indian and European. Further, he and his wife come respectively from the Tamil Hindu and Sinhalese traditions of Ceylon. In introducing her account of why they chose to come to Australia, Navaranjini tells us a story from the Mahabharata:

> When the hero Arjuna, with his four brothers and Draupadi, their Queen, left their royal kingdom, they passed the thirteenth year of their exile in the court of King Virata, so skilfully disguised that no-one knew them.
>
> Barry and I have now lived in Australia, adopting as our model the mighty Arjuna, master of disguise, but people still ask us where we come from. (p.154)

The Indian legend makes migration and exile the universal condition, but the Australian question resurrects origin as identity. By using disguise, hiding behind their new names, Barry and Jean are, like Arjuna, able to find the freedom to move in the new country without denying the old. This is the freedom that Mahony, in the classic novel of cultural exile in Australia, failed to find. His migration to Australia destroyed his ability

to return to England but left him an exile in his new land. Bharat and Navaranjini, in contrast, create for themselves an identity that transcends cultures without denying them. Instead of declining into exile, their spirits grow in the new country, until eventually they give away their privilege as members of a slightly removed university circle and enter directly into the life of a community that includes both old Australians and recent migrants. Bharat teaches English to newcomers, and Navaranjini introduces old Australians to Ceylonese food. The book closes with their Australian-born daughter Edwina going overseas in her turn to seek her identity.

Yet the novel is not simply about the uniting of different cultural traditions in a new country. The alternating narratives of Bharat and Navaranjini are interspersed with extracts from the diary of Bharat's grandfather Edward, the Ceylonese grandee who passed himself off as a coolie to travel to Australia in the nineteenth century, the same century as Richard Mahony. Unlike Mahony, Edward's education gives him the strength to endure the overt racism of the time and the skill to record his observations. This strength comes from his confidence that he is a citizen of the Empire and an heir of a colonial tradition that reaches beyond the British to their Dutch and Portuguese predecessors and back to the native kingdoms. Whereas Mahony's scientific education renders him able only comprehend only the inferiority of his companions, Edward's gives him a detachment that enables him to build his identity from both past and present circumstance. Through Edward, as through Bharat and Navaranjini, Gooneratne demonstrates the capacity of education to universalize as well as to alienate.

The issue of education becomes explicit in the account of Bharat and Navaranjini at the Southern Cross University to which he has been appointed. Their Sri Lankan friends have been most concerned at their plans to move to Australia, which they see as culturally sterile. Yet when they arrive at Southern Cross they find that the Australian academics have exactly the same attitudes to colonial culture as the Sri Lankans. Both groups look back to England as the source of all standards. Bharat mortally insults one of his colleagues, and convinces her that he is himself ignorant of proper standards, when he asks her whether she teaches Australian literature (pp.134-35). Navaranjini even more successfully challenges colonial complacency when she enunciates her newly-acquired Australian vocabulary to put down Professor Blackstone, who is responsible for destroying Bharat's identity by persuading him to change his name, and who takes the opportunity of a staff party to make a pass at Navaranjini. In putting him down, however, she reveals her own racist assumptions. The language that seemed to divide thus becomes, despite themselves, a means of uniting them in a common predicament.

This comic episode is however a reminder of the background of racism and racial violence against which the novel is set. Grandfather Edward encounters a stoning party when he is first landed in Australia. Similarly, as they drive to their home in Sydney Navaranjini and Bharat notice daubed slogans urging 'Asians Out' (pp.69, 71-3) At the same time, letters from relatives in Sri Lank remind them of the rising tide of violence there. When they eventually go home for a visit they find the country they had known riven by death and destruction. Inherited

traditions, rather than bringing unity, are destroying each other and even the possibility of common humanity. The librarian who has acted as custodian of Edward's legacy is himself shot dead while on a visit to his wife and family. Yet even their expatriate Sri Lankan friends miss the significance of this in their obsession with the alleged deviant and treacherous behaviour of another of their friends who is also shot. The abstractions of race, politics and status destroy the potential transcendence of shared cultures.

The shifting cultural and individual identities in these three novels bring into question the idea of a fixed colonial or post-colonial identity. Rather, they suggest that attempts to deny either our origins or our freedom to build them into a new reality lead to division and destruction. While acknowledging the continuing violence of postcolonial societies, both settler and indigenous, they thus offer a source of hope for a future united by its differences. It is more reassuring than the visions of inevitable wars between international cultural blocs of nations which art being foretold by some commentators.[6] However, the optimistic view will prevail only be recognizing, as do these novelists, that difference is itself a basis for the universals of humanity.

AFTERWORD

Discussion after the delivery of this and two other papers on Mukherjee persuaded me that I have been two sanguine about the ability of the central characters in Wife and Tiger's Daughter top incorporate their Indian legacy in their new American

identities. Rather, in Robert Ross's words, they "get rid of all that rubbish" in order to embrace the American ideal of the individual's freedom to be whatever she wants. Positively, this contributes to the diversity of America, but negatively it leads to a nihilistic conclusion in which the only things that matter are those still to come. This nihilism would have to be qualified, in Tiger's Daughter, by Tara's acceptance of her love for David, yet this love is a given in the novel rather than something that is demonstrated. This reading makes greater the contrast between the abandonment of the past in these novels and the way Gooneratne's characters actively remake it within the new.

NOTES

[1] For examples of this logic, see essays in Journal of Australian Studies, special issue, December 1992.

[2] Homi Bhabha, 'The other question: difference, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism', in Francis Barker et al. (eds.), Literature, Politics and Theory: papers from the Essex Conference 1976-84, London and New York: Methuen, 1986, pp.148-172.

[3] Anjuli Gupta, 'English Writing in India: fear of experimentation, fear of appropriation: death of creativity?' in Geoffrey V.Davis and Hena Maes-Jelinek (eds.), Crisis and Creativity in the New Literatures in English, Amsterdam/Atlanta GA, 1990, p.151-67.

[4] Bharati Mukherjee, The Tiger's Daughter. Markham, Ontario: Penguin Canada, 1987 [1971].

---- Wife. Markham, Ontario: Penguin Canada, 1987. [1975]

Jasmine Gooneratne. Under Strange Skies. Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin Australia, 1991.

[5] Henry Handel Richardson, The Fortunes of Richard Mahony. London: Heinemann, 1930.

[6] See Owen Harries, The Australian, 3 April 93, and rejoinder by Greg Sheridan, The Australian, 7 April 93.