Approaching 'Home' in Bharati Mukherjee's *Darkness*

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ABSTRACT

The object of this study is to explore the relationship between 'home' and the decline of ethnic identity in the female characters of Bharati Mukherjee's collection of short stories *Darkness* (1985). This paper argues that while it is generally accepted that diaspora entails a questioning of a sense of belonging (Kennedy, 2014: 12), for Bharati Mukherjee, "the price that the immigrant willingly pays, and that the exile avoids, is the trauma of self-transformation" ("Two ways to belong in America", 1996). This article seeks to contextualize the Indian diaspora in its roots and routes, proving an inextricable link with gendering of the concept of 'home' in Bhattacharjee (1996). The introduction is underpinned by a theoretical framework on diaspora namely South Asian female migrants in the United States, and an analysis of the Indian concept of nation, from which the literary assessment departs.

KEYWORDS: Bharati Mukherjee; Diaspora; 'Home'; *Darkness*; Feminization of migration.

1. INTRODUCTION

Research on postcolonial studies has a long tradition of addressing the question of diaspora, cultural identity, and the discourse of fixed origins. Despite the fact that the topic of diaspora has long been the subject of study, the inclusion of women and acknowledgement of their presence has only come in recent years, bringing a re-examination of the phenomenon. Further theorization on the feminization of migration has enabled better comprehension of the phenomenon of diaspora (Knott and McLoughlin, 2010: 118). This has led to a surge of interest in diaspora and gender, which stems from Avtar Brah's concept: the "feminization of immigration" (1996: 179)[1] and further debate on the position that women occupy in diaspora.

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This paper closely follows the configuration of diasporic subjects, namely Hindu female migrants, who are leaders in this "intersectionality of diaspora, border, and dis/location […] where multiple locations are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed" (Brah: 1996: 196). This state of mind results from forced migration since the decision to move to another country is still a male prerogative. Noting that the diasporic subject moves in two spaces, this paper attempts to position female characters who feel trapped within the concept of 'home'. This must be understood as a triadic term: as a domestic space, as "an extended ethnic community separate and distinct from other ethnic communities" (Bhattacharjee, 1996: 313), and in close relation to their homelands with the particular emotional baggage of nationalist and colonialist influence.

For this study, it was of interest to provide a conceptual contextualization of the terminology of diaspora in contraposition to that of transnationalism, with the onus on theory, in close relation to gender approximation and the latest tendencies in gender diasporic studies. Several authors have approached Bharati Mukherjee's work about her gender immigrant narratives and the imminent rupture of the traditional state of hybridity (Drake, 1999; González and Oliva, 2015; Deshmane, 2010). Nevertheless, these studies mostly revolve around her personal and literary style, considering that she moves towards "idealizing the 'real' to create a personal and literary migrant cosmos" (González and Oliva, 2015: 72). This framework provided the impetus for further research on Bharati Mukherjee's literature related to diasporic studies.

The topic of diaspora owes its importance to the shift towards a "global society" (McGrew, 1992: 64), where mobility has weakened the pre-defined borders of the nation-state. Indeed, Khachig Tölölyan vindicates that "what has emerged in the past two decades, under the impact of new transnational, global forces, is the view that nation-states may not always be the most effective or legitimate units of collective organizations" (Tölölyan, 1991: 4). That said, modern scholars in the field of ethnography err on the side of definitions of culture as multi-locale (Hall, 1990), a thought reinforced by anthropologists, who "also take into account the wider context [of positionality, as being] reconstructed through multiple sites of social and linguistic interaction" (Daswani, 2013: 32). In the light of this, Robin Cohen further qualifies the phenomenon of globalization in that "there are some counter-tendencies, such as nationalism, ethnicity, religious fundamentalism, racism, sexism and other forms of social exclusivism" (Cohen, 1997: 165) curtailing the development of this trend.

Even though the world is becoming smaller due to globalization, it is far from being homogenous as "the world in fact is embedded in difference - racial, ethnic, gender and sexual (among other axes of difference)" (Parreñas and Siu, 2007: 19). Therefore, "transnational migrant circuits" (Rouse, 1991: 14) are being created, which are "the kinds

of complex cultural formations that current anthropology and intercultural studies describe and theorize" (Clifford, 1994: 303). This idea is certainly very relevant considering that it is not possible to understand the term 'diaspora' as an isolated concept, but in its Foucauldian sense, hence it spans "fields of social relations, subjectivity and identity" (Brah, 1996: 180).

All the same, even though nations remain robust vectors of administrative, political, and cultural features, new times imply new perspectives, for which "nations are urged to reconsider and transcend old concepts of boundaries and frontiers so that they can become just one site in a new transnational culture" (Raghuram et al., 2008: 2). This transnational culture is also "characterized by a deep distrust of the boundaries of the nation" (Ashcroft, 2013: 10). The increasing mobility of authors and the proliferation of South Asian diasporic writing have "put the traditional idea of the nation as an imagined community into question" (2013: 9). Therefore, Sushma Tandon explains the impossibility of bringing this imagined and idealized place truthfully to life for the reason that, "to return to one's neighbourhood is never completely possible because that old commingling never really existed, the intricacies of caste, of being Hindu or Sikh, of being a legal or illegal alien prevent any ideal reconstruction of an idealized old world″ (Tandon, 2004: 71).

As Bill Ashcroft explains in his article "Beyond the Nation: The Mobility of Indian Literature" (2013: 5-26), with the purpose of understanding how the idea of India is being written, it is necessary to be cognizant of its origins and its literary imaginings "undergirded by a utopianism that goes hand in hand, ironically, with a deep anti-nationalist scepticism" (2013: 7). He delineates three stages in India's literary development: the first, from the onset of the nineteenth century until Independence was a time of nationalist fervour. Secondly, there followed a period of alternative modernity until Indira Gandhi's time, which was marked by a feeling of rupture or rebellion (7). This stage is best exemplified by Salman Rushdie's most representative novel, *Midnight's Children* (1981). The final stage, shifting from expatriate to immigrant and questioning a national identity, is best explained in Nalini Iyer's article "American/Indian: Metaphors of the Self in Bharati Mukherjee's 'The Holder of the World'". This article details how this moving across countries, "indicates moving from one country to another in order to settle and accept a different 'national' identity" (Iyer, 1996: 31).

The triadic connotation of the term 'home' in the lives of female characters is approached in Bharati Mukherjee's collection of short stories, *Darkness* (1985). The term is of utmost importance in diaspora studies in that it establishes a point of origin for displaced people, a sense of belonging. Particularly for women, 'home' explores attachment to an ethnic community and the perpetual reproduction of values in diaspora.

The literary analysis below attempts to provide perspective on the extent of this author's writing style and its shift in the portrayal of female characters, who move beyond a traditional depiction of womanhood.

2. BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S SOCIO-LITERARY CONTEXT

Bharati Mukherjee's first foray into short stories occurred in the 1980s, even though she subsequently shifted back and forth into novels, as in the case of *Jasmine* (1989). Before this novel, she had written *Darkness* (1985), a collection of short stories in which her literature shifts away from expatriate rhetoric, as she mentions "the aloofness of expatriation" (1985: 3) to become settled and enjoy the "exuberance of immigration" (3). In her remarks in the introduction to *Darkness* (1985), Mukherjee describes herself, affirming, "I see myself as an American writer in the tradition of other American writers whose parents passed through Ellis Island" (Mukherjee, 1985: 3).

Three main lines can be drawn in her writing, as Nagendra Kumar suggests in her book *The Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee: a Cultural Perspective* (2001). These consist of a phase of expatriation, a phase of transition and a phase of immigration. The first is the time when she arrived in the United States from India to study at the University of Iowa, a stage when her writing developed a "deep and persistent undercurrent of nostalgia almost sensual in character for the sights, smells, tastes [...]" (Kakar, 1978: 13) for her native country. This was followed by a period of misery and marginalization during her stay in Canada. She reflected on this thought in an interview with Alison B. Carb, when she stated, "...there was a lot of bigotry against Canadian citizens of Indian origin, especially in Toronto, and it upset me terribly when I encountered this or saw other people experiencing it..." (Carb, 2009: 29). Finally, the last stage came from the moment she moved back to the United States. Overall, she experiences various fluid identities that diverge from expatriate and immigrant to that of an assimilated citizen. This state of mind evolves over four decades and is reflected in her literature, beginning with *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971) and ending with *The Tree Bride*, published in 2004. Between these two works, she published several others, two of which were short story collections: *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988) and *Darkness* (1985).

As previously mentioned, her literature differs from the traditional depiction of women as helpless or trapped. This is particularly significant on the grounds that she places herself in a marginalized state which is akin to that of the characters she portrays. For example, in the book *Conversations with Bharati Mukherjee*, she answers positively to the fact that she, indeed, relates to them, "...but if the question is, do my characters speak to me, then the answer is: yes. I hear them speak. My head is bursting with stories"

(Connell et al., 2009: 38). Nevertheless, on marrying Clark Blaise, the Canadian writer she met at the Iowa Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa, her Indian entourage and family considered her as an outcast. Indeed, she claims that "...in the United States, however, I see myself in those same outcasts; [...] I see myself in the shady accountant who's trying to marry off his loose-living daughter; in professors, domestics, high school students, illegal busboys in ethnic restaurants" (Mukherjee, 1985: 3). She writes in the postmodernist tradition, exploring the feminine through fiction. Her contemporaries are numerous, to name a few, we could cite Anita Desai, Gita Hariharan or Ruth Prawer Jhabvala. Nevertheless, Mukherjee's writing evolved without losing its main essence, which relied on the experiences of immigrants; as she explains, it focuses on "...exposing Americans to the energetic voices of new settlers in this country..." (Carb, 2009: 31) who are renovating the socio-cultural context of the United States. Nonetheless, Bharati Mukherjee "...has deliberately avoided the immigrant writer's temptation to fall into the trap of glorifying his native country and to belittle and degrade the adopted country..." (Sarangi, 2010: 201). This is the reason why her written works are sometimes ignored, based on the certainty that they go beyond the established, as she pointed out in an interview with Alison Carb, when she stated "...my stories are discomforting because they challenge accepted codes of behaviour in this country and show the changes taking place here" (Carb, 2009: 27).

Nonetheless, Bharati Mukherjee's primary aim is women's experiences on the grounds of adaptability, as she admits, "...perhaps, it's because as a Bengali woman I was brought up to be adaptable" (Hancock, 2009: 15). In her interview with Geoff Hancock, she explained this wide range of fluid identities, exemplifying the concept when she affirmed, "...my characters grow and change with the change of citizenships" (Hancock, 2009: 12): a reflection of her own life. Her characters are Asian citizens, even though she focuses mainly on Indian professionals who came to the United States to work in liberal professions since "her immigrant characters are settlers" (Drake, 1999: 61), even though they chiefly strive for assimilation as citizens of the New World, despite their Indianness.

Placing further emphasis on the concept of a "diaspora consciousness" regarding Asian literature by female authors, in his book *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (1993) Rey Chow clarifies that there is what he calls an "intellectualization of diaspora consciousness" (1993: 22). It is by implying a fierce critique of Asian literature that it adapts to suit the tastes of the West; a thought also put forward by Stephen Owen (1990: 31). This might result from a new paradigm of South-Asian women of the diaspora in the United States and from how the new diasporic culture makes women more western-like. In "Blurring Borders/Blurring Bodies: Diaspora and Womanhood", Monbinder Kaur develops the previous assumption, "the new diasporic culture, in comparison with the western values of independence and individuality, was

seen as denying women a new identity. As a result, the creative output of diasporic writers, especially women, can be seen as an effort to document their struggle to re-define their identity and shifting roles in the new land in relation to the old″ (Kaur, 2015: 74).

In the specific case of Bharati Mukherjee, she speaks from her experience as an expatriate and later assimilated citizen, and posits against the traditional depiction of femininity by providing female characters with outstanding features, which include independence and the ability to move beyond struggle and the quest for a 'home' (either imagined or real). Cristina Emanuela Dascalu sees this as a breakthrough pushed forward by new values in female diasporic authors. In her book entitled *Imaginary Homelands of Writers in Exile: Salman Rushdie, Bharati Mukherjee and V.S. Naipaul* (2007), she explores the fact that "Mukherjee seems to posit the power of femininity to transgress [boundaries]. Rather, there is something about the structural possibilities of femininity – perhaps femininity's marginality within cultural systems – that make it particularly suited to being open to the play of difference and to being part of the ethics of exile″ (2007: 86).

3. GENDERING DIASPORAS: THE CONCEPT OF 'HOME'

In *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (1997), Robin Cohen notes that, if we analyze the etymological root of the term 'diaspora', there might be both feminine and masculine diasporas, though they are usually depicted as patriarchal. In the debate to understand this concept, Robin Cohen juxtaposes two different views. While Stefan Helmrich (1992) explores the relation of this term with the Judaeo-Christian and Islamic cosmology of male sperm by the scattering or dissemination of seed, the anthropologist Liisa Malkki (1992) differs. According to her, its etymology may have a greater connection with arboreal metaphors, such as 'roots' and 'soils', thus leaving aside its masculine tradition-related meaning (Cohen, 1997: 177). The study of diasporas has influenced the development of gender studies, but further theorization on the feminization of migration has enhanced better comprehension of the phenomenon of diaspora (Knott and McLoughlin, 2010: 118).

Before delving into a more complex image of Indian women in diaspora, it is paramount to understand that, as previously explained, women living abroad as expatriates are mere shadows in a socio-cultural context. It is within this context that family values are embraced and thus reproduced. In her article "The Habit of Ex-Nomination: Nation, Woman, and the Indian Immigrant Bourgeoisie" (1992) Anannya Bhattacharjee explains that the ideal of Indian femininity is still reproduced in communities abroad, hence "…the image of Indian womanhood and her role in the family [is] based on models of Indian womanhood from the distant glorious pasts" (1992: 30).

In more profound observation, Partha Chatterjee voiced the national construct of the Indian woman as a stereotype embracing qualities of self-sacrifice and devotion (1989: 630).

This concept of women in diaspora serves to help ascertain that women have played a more significant role in diaspora than the one previously assigned to them, in which, until recently, they were deemed no more than wives (Clifford, 1994: 313). According to James Clifford's article "Diaspora" (1994), women's experiences are particularly revealing in the sense that they continue "maintaining connections with homelands, with kinship networks, and with religious and cultural traditions [which] may renew patriarchal structures" (1994: 313). Otherwise said, women enable openness in the diasporic experience due to the fact that their status in a new country allows them to look beyond their traditional role in the household. It might enable the possibility of independence; hence, their sources of income can entail a much more important control (314). Therefore, Ruben Gowricharn comments that, during immigration, the gender relations are reshaped, which is crucial for women's agency (Gowricharn, 2020: 10).

In *Exploring Gender in the Literature of the Indian Diaspora* (2015), Sandhya Rao Mehta investigates women's role in transnational connections. So, while it is suggested that although the decision to move to another country relies on men, the imperative of preserving memories from a past home and restoring them in a new context, so as to retain a homeland culture, is still a mostly feminine activity (2015: 1). Nadje Al-Ali equally wonders whether, in diaspora, women can challenge tradition or if, on the contrary, they continue to reproduce and even reinforce gender ideologies and relations previously existent (Al-Ali, 2010: 119), which is contextualized according to the socio-cultural environment of the target country. Sandhya Rao Mehta also compares the place of women during the Independence Movement with diaspora by pointing out that "...the diaspora too accords such homemaking roles to the immigrant woman, who, thus defined, begins to enact them using multiple strategies of food, dress and forms of labour" (Mehta, 2015: 6). Thus, if women continue to be associated with the household, they too persist as authorities in traditional values and cultures (2015: 6). To conclude, she states that gender is essential in the reproduction of cultural, ethnic or national identities abroad (6). In fact, a key aspect in the construction of ethnic and national communities abroad is the tight vigilance over women's sexuality and the control over their bodies (Al-Ali, 2010: 120). Therefore, Nira Yuval-Davis and Flora Anthias's book entitled *Woman-Nation-State* (1989) provides us with an essential perspective on female diaspora. The authors identify five ways in which women participate in ethnic and national processes in diaspora, which we list as follows (Yuval-Davis and Anthias, 1989: 7):

(a) "as biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectivities;

(b) as reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic/national groups;

(c) as participating centrally in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and as transmitters of culture;

(d) as signifiers of ethnic/national differences – as a focus and symbol in ideological discourses used in the construction, reproduction and transformation of ethnic/national categories;

(e) as participants in national, economic, political and military struggles".

Before embarking on a more profound analysis, 'home' is an ambiguous term in the context of Indian diaspora insofar as it evokes several connotations for diasporic writers. For instance, as Roger Kennedy explains, a home is a concept that not only describes the dwelling but deepens into someone's mind. Thereby, ″if exiled, we may be able to carry the sense of home with us, yet there is often a poignant yearning for the original home″ (2014: 12).

In her article, "The Conundrum of 'Home' in the Literature of the Indian Diaspora: An Interpretive Analysis" (2015: 77-90), Chandrima Karmakar resolves that the term 'home' is no more than a journey enabling people to find their roots in order to deal with existential and identity issues. Therefore, the existing literature on the Indian diaspora is in its majority a quest to locate a 'home' despite the abstractness of the term, by using the memory lane (Karkamar, 2015: 80).

Not only do novelists wonder about this term, but it is equally approached in the field of sociology. Indeed, the sociologist Avtar Brah explains in his book *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (1996), that the term 'home' has a qualitative connotation in the sense that, "…the 'referent' of 'home' … [is] …'home' in the form of a simultaneously floating and rooted signifier. It is an invocation of narratives of 'the nation'. In racialized or nationalist discourses this signifier can become the basis of claims…that a group settled 'in' a place is not necessarily 'of' it" (1996: 3).

This is what Nicole Constable calls "at home but not at home" (1999: 203). In the configuration of gender in the diaspora, the meaning of the term 'home' is critical in Anannya Bhattacharjee's chapter "The Public/Private Mirage: Mapping Homes and Undomesticating Violence Work in the South Asian Immigrant Community" (Bhattacharjee, 1996: 308-332). As she disentangles it, the term denotes a multiplicity of meanings for people whose lives have been affected by migration (308). Thus, there are three different levels of 'home': as a domestic sphere, as an extensive ethnic community different from other groups (313) and as concerning their nations of origin, with a particular emphasis on nationalist and colonialist influence (314). The extension of the

term 'home' is relevant on the basis that the Hindu family functions as a whole and relies on a larger social group. It is, by no means, an isolated entity (Parekh, 1994: 607).

Esha Niyogi De concludes the piece "Re-domesticating Hindu Femininity: Legible Pasts in the Bengali Diaspora" by discussing two possible teleological readings of women's behaviour. Firstly, teleological border-crossing and secondly, anti-teleological crossing. In the former, the relationship between the woman and the patriarchal entourage is isomorphic, whilst in the latter relations grow tense and need intervention (De, 2008: 334). Besides, this teleological reading situates women as pure and symbolic, who are there to establish a mere boundary between the "...(patriarchal) people's national spirit and tranquil home" (2008: 333). In Indian literature, this manifests as the establishment of clear boundaries, or in other words, "...one way in which bourgeois Indians have crossed national borders in these consecutive global eras is by learning to reclaim homogenous territories that are defined in binary terms against otherness" (333).

By this means, as already mentioned, women are the keepers of tradition and culture, bearing in mind that they remain more attached to the former culture since a set of cultural values already known are shaped to be preserved in the new one (Clifford, 1994: 314). In addition, as Anannya Bhattacharjee explains in her article "The Habit of Ex-Nomination: Nation, Woman, and the Indian Immigrant Bourgeoisie" (1992: 19-44), for the immigrant woman, "the home still remains a place to affirm one's Indian-ness and the Indian woman is expected to be responsible for maintaining this Indian home in diaspora by remaining true to her Indian womanhood" (1992: 32). With regard to the Indian family in diaspora, Pyong Gap Min ventures that the immigrant Indian family is set to preserve the pureness of traditional values aside from American immoral principles that are prevalent past the household (2002: 98).

From this, we can draw several general conclusions. Firstly, Bharati Mukherjee's own life of struggles has had an impact on her literature. Her characters are mainly seen from a feminist perspective as they reject what is traditionally applied to their gender. Secondly, she successfully attempts to break from these paradigms that claim binary oppositions to enable women to grasp their future, independently from family actors or ethnic communities. Finally, approaching the term 'home' in Anannya Bhattacharjee's articles provides a better understanding of its implications for the South Asian community and is more relevant to women caught within it.

4. 'HOME' IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S *DARKNESS*

Darkness (1985) is a short story collection that portrays characters and stories as varied as possible. In particular, by outlining a sense of nostalgia, Bharati Mukherjee hides "a temporary antidote for alienation and displacement" (Tandon, 2004: 68). "*Darkness* [the collection of short-stories] raises questions about human dignity, about the true value of diversity, about the tension between assimilation and preservation of cultures, about the sanctity of citizenship and about the idea of true arrival" (2004: 72). Notwithstanding, what is common to all of the stories is the sense of overcoming difficulties and striving to survive, primarily by tearing apart the expectations of Indian womanhood, femininity and the need for a family.

In "Angela", the female protagonist finds herself lured into marriage with an Indian psychiatrist, who emphasizes the importance of her personality and the need for a woman that embodies traditional womanhood, "...preferably a younger woman who's both affectionate and needy" (Mukherjee, 1985: 8). In Bharati Mukherjee's literature, she embodies the figure of the fighter because, "...in spite of all the temptations of 'domesticity' offered by the suitor, Angela is determined to resist and chalk out her own career" (Tandon, 2004: 70). In this particular case, the term 'home' is approached in its first connotation, the domestic space, in that Angela feels safe at home because she was rescued from an orphanage in Bangladesh, so she is tempted to jump into a safety net. Nevertheless, by wondering which decision it is better to take, she wavers between marriage and a job. Correspondingly, this reading supports the point previously made by Pyon Gap Min: that women in diaspora are confronted with either keeping their traditions or embracing a more American-like culture (2002: 98). Angela equally encounters this experience, but after finishing high school, the doctor, who represents a strict Indian culture, makes her wonder whether she will be selfish enough to make her parents spend more money on her rather than be more independent. The following quote illustrates how she ponders the benefits of getting married and exploring the advantages it entails. According to Angela, "he [the doctor] offers me intimacy, fellowship. He tempts with domesticity. Phantom duplexes, babies tucked tight into cribs, dogs running playfully off with the barbecued steak. What am I to do? Only a doctor could love this body (Mukherjee, 1985: 19).

Nevertheless, despite this fact, "she is always hopeful of her better future" (Kumar, 2001: 70), as shown in the following quote, where she plans to move ahead with her life despite traditional temptations: "Tomorrow when I visit Delia, I'll stop by the Personnel Department. They know me, my family. I'll work well with handicapped children. With burn-center children. I'll not waste my life" (Mukherjee, 1985: 19).

Being in the United States often entails adaptability for female characters, whose state of mind defies morals regarding behaviour or actions. For example, in the story, "The Lady from Lucknow" (1985: 23-34), the protagonist is an Indian woman, married at the age of seventeen who, on account of her husband's constant changes of location in his job, feels "...at home everywhere because she is never at home anywhere" (Mukherjee, 1985: 25). Indeed, for diasporic subjects, "...home is what diasporic subjects yearn to locate but from which they are continuously displaced by the dual process of migration and marginal inclusion" (Parreñas and Siu, 2007: 16).

Bharati Mukherjee's stories boast an impressive degree of adaptability because, as Sushma Tandon indicates in her book, *Bharati Mukherjee's fiction: a perspective* (2004), that "…it is often noted that women in Bharati Mukherjee's novels are more generous and more open to the new cultures than men. They are more enterprising and willing to take risks to discover themselves and to break out the prisons of sexual discrimination they find themselves in as women" (2004: 73).

As an introduction to the stories that follow, we should note that, "In Mukherjee's *Darkness*, many women immigrants are wives who accompany their husbands overseas and have no central say in whatever happens" (Kumar, 2001: 70). However, as we will later see, these characters grow as their stories unfold and they metamorphose into new beings, far from what is morally appropriate for South Asians in diaspora. In "The Lady from Lucknow", Nafeesa Hafeezm, unable to find herself at 'home', starts along a treacherous path to being able to embrace a culture and blend in, for which she begins an extra-marital relationship with an older American immunologist. In her thesis, Sharmani Patricia Gabriel explains that, especially in this story, there are "...the 'not quites', those caught in an uncompleted journey between the homes they have left and the new home in which they hope to arrive" (Gabriel, 1999: 62). From this short story, we ascertain that, as Mitali R. Pati proposes in "Love and the Indian Immigrant in Bharati Mukherjee's short fiction" (Pati, 1993), "Mukherjee's fiction reveals how these historically underprivileged South Asian women discard their traditional sexual passivity in the new country and fashion new selves that are romantic, sensitive and sensual" (Pati, 1993: 205). The female protagonist's unavailability to feel at home relates significantly to Stuart Hall's definition of a diasporic person, when he stated that this is "to know [one's homeland and place of residence] intimately, but [neither be] wholly of either place" (Hall, 1996: 40).

The moment they are surprised in bed by the professor's wife, it becomes clear that Nafeesa is not taken seriously, when the wife describes her "merely as an exotic capable of provoking only a passing interest in her husband evincing enough confidence and courage in controlling her home and her husband" (Tandon, 2004: 72). Notwithstanding, Nafeesa is interesting on the grounds that, despite feeling uneasy as

regards her location, she takes a step beyond proving that her origin does not curtail her actions by rebelling, even against her lover. When he rushes her into getting dressed moments before being caught, she affirms, "I am submissive by training. To survive, the Asian wife will usually do as she is told. But this time I stayed in bed" (Mukherjee, 1985: 32). In fact, "Mukherjee's South Asian immigrants both fashion and seek new selves and a fresh 'truth' as their Indian paradigms of love, desire and romance are deconstructed by their American experiences. [Hence,] for the diasporic Indian, love symbolizes the anarchy of the self" (Pati, 1993: 198).

Defying the borders of 'home' as a domestic space is embedded in customary behaviours of womanhood and wifehood in the story "The Visitors" (Mukherjee, 1985: 161-176). The protagonist, Vinita, is an upper-caste Indian woman who has recently married an Indian expatriate and moved to the United States. "Bharati Mukherjee presents Vinita in 'Visitors' as an imported bride from Calcutta who is beginning to confront her secret desire for passion" (Tandon, 2004: 92). Nevertheless, a deeper analysis of the text enables us to see that Vinita is confined to a traditional space, the safeness of the known. Conducive to adaptation, when the male visitor comes, despite being adaptable, she comes to wonder if she is required to fulfil the expectations of the three visitors, which are embedded in the traditional Indian codes of social decorum. Hence, "...each visitor wants a different dimension for the bride; that she be traditional, that she be the embodiment of lost India, even unrestrained American woman" (Tandon, 2004: 93). In conclusion, "...both ["The Lady from Lucknow" and "The Visitors"] try to break the taboos of their traditional cultures and ultimately end up in a mess" (Kumar, 2001: 72).

'Home' is also depicted as "...an extended ethnic community separate and distinct from other ethnic communities" (Bhattacharjee, 1996: 313). In *Darkness* (1985), there are relevant references to ethnicity that highlight racial bigotry in three stories: "The World According to HSU", "Tamurlane" and "Isolated Incidents", which Sushma Tandon considers as Mukherjee's "bitter attacks mounted and elaborated" (Tandon, 2004: 85). It is important to understand that ethnicity and racial bigotry in Bharati Mukherjee's stories reflect deep ethnic relations and how she views Canadian society as composed of compartmentalized ethnic groups, in stark contrast to the "American Melting Pot" concept of a tolerant, multicultural country. Hence, in "The World According to HSU", racial bigotry is pictured from the female character's perspective. She does not always stress the first person, but sometimes even employs the third person to detach herself from the trauma suffered in Canada. "In Toronto, she was not Canadian, not even Indian. She was something called, after the imported idiom of London, a Paki. And for Pakis, Toronto was hell" (Mukherjee, 1985: 41). She continues the argument by outlining more examples:

'I'm worrying about Toronto'. A week before their flight, a Bengali woman was beaten and nearly blinded on the street. And the week before that an eight-year-old Punjabi boy was struck by a car announcing on its bumper: KEEP CANADA GREEN, PAINT A PAKI […] An Indian professor's wife was jumped at a red light, right in her car. They threw her groceries on the street. They said Pakis shouldn't drive big cars (Mukherjee, 1985: 47)[2.]

Bharati Mukherjee stresses that for Indian women, the experience of not belonging in a country such as Canada, primarily due to racial bigotry, makes the female character in "The World According to HSU" more comfortable on the island than moving to Toronto. As it is narrated, "...she poured herself another glass, feeling for the moment at home in that collection of Indians and Europeans babbling in English and remembering dialects. No matter where she lived, she would never feel so at home again" (1985: 56).

In this case, the depiction of 'home' as an ethnic community is neglected in favour of a more open and diverse community, a mere reflection of the author's insistence that she is unwilling to be portrayed as South Asian American, considering the negative contextualization that this term evokes. Mitali R. Pati reviews this quest for adaptability in her thought that, "the adaptability of Mukherjee's women is traceable to their conditioning within the strongly patriarchal society of their origins. The women's adaptability contrasts sharply with the men's lack of assimilation and self-division as their masculine codes are undermined in the challenges Hindu and Islamic patriarchy encounter in the North America of the seventies and eighties" (Pati, 1993: 205).Bharati Mukherjee enmeshes her literature in diaspora and, as Sushma Tandon notes, "…by virtue of her own identification with the Indian diaspora, Bharati Mukherjee probes deeply into the inner conflicts of well-educated sensitive adults, whose traditional codes of, and passion for, material desire collapse amid their inadequate comprehension of the American paradigms of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" (Tandon, 2004: 77).

This clash of cultures is what Sudha Pandya sees as a "...subtle depiction of the interaction, adjustment and sometimes conflict between two cultures and often between two generations of immigrants" (Pandya, 1990: 68).

The last connotation of the term 'home' delineates the relationship between the homeland and the United States, making Bharati Mukherjee's female characters either feel they are in a state of in-betweenness (generally the moment when they encounter traditional structures) or willing to move beyond and assimilate. Thus, in "The World According to HSU", the female character seems trapped between a double identity, "...the truth was, she knew, that even on this island she could not escape the consequences of being half – the dominant half – Indian" (Mukherjee, 1985: 43). The extension of 'home'

as the connection with the homeland is equally visible in the father's expectations of the daughter in the chapter "A Father". Even though the daughter had managed to go through university, the father focuses mainly on her manners, "...she wasn't womanly or tender the way that unmarried girls had been in wistful days of his adolescence" (63). Indeed, according to her father's standards, the daughter's accomplishments did not amount to authentic femininity. This is a clear case where 'home' appears as a different context depending on the real connection with the homeland, which applies chiefly to male characters in Bharati Mukherjee's literature.

Bharati Mukherjee deeply relates the yearning for 'home', in this case as a transnational connectivity and an unrealistic and often imagined homeland in the story entitled "Nostalgia". In this passage, it is relevant to see how much a psychiatrist, who has done well in life, is desperately trying to find meaning by recalling his roots. Finding an Indian woman that he portrays as a goddess, he feels that his origins are coming back to him, for which he highlights that "...the Indian food, an Indian woman in bed, made him nostalgic. […] He wished he had married an Indian woman. One his father had selected" (Mukherjee, 1985: 111). This story is germane to the article's purpose, as there seems to be a conflict regarding what 'home' is. At the same time, "Dr. Patel knows he is breaking the rules, but he is obsessed with Padma's beauty and hungry for his Indianness" (Tandon, 2004: 82). To sum up, "'Nostalgia' is about the perverse price of nostalgia in a New World. She [Bharati Mukherjee – the author] never embellishes the past, nor does she pretend that her characters are purely the victims of another culture or another society" (Tandon, 2004: 83).

It may be argued that Bharati Mukherjee's female characters abandon the hybrid or a state of in-betweenness and assert themselves by imitating American culture. This gesture enables them to move from the traditional depiction of the South Asian community abroad, which tends to reproduce the same traditions and roles, eventually making them more resilient, adaptable and willing to embrace a diasporic culture.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper approaches theories regarding diaspora and transnationalism alongside the study of gender in the North American socio-cultural context to understand the embodiment of the term 'home' as a threefold reading. It uncovers three meanings, which are later symbolized in the female characters of the short story collection *Darkness* (1985) written by Bharati Mukherjee, reflecting on the characters' means to adapt to a foreign country and the reaffirmation of their abandonment of their communities and their embracement of an alternative sense of identity. Not surprisingly, diaspora entails

exposure to an alien environment for female characters who, despite living in a stifling social context, fight for their ability to move beyond the established rather than remaining as harbingers of a culture. The argument of this paper is that awareness of the limits of what is socially acceptable, the norm of Indian womanhood, is transformed into a constant renegotiation by Bharati Mukherjee's female characters.

Using terms like diaspora, we tested the hypothesis that Bharati Mukherjee departs from the writing canon of South Asian American authors, thus avoiding being labelled as such, which unequivocally has an impact on the depiction of her characters as settlers rather than heralds of culture. Simply put, the canon highlights "...the significance of […] the pain of displacement, both physical and socio-psychological, and a feeling of temporariness" (Karmakar, 2015: 86). Conversely, Mukherjee, "rejects homesickness […] she clearly marks a difference from the Indian diaspora" (González and Oliva, 2015: 72). Bharati Mukherjee best explained this idea in an interview with Ameena Meer, when she affirmed: "I totally consider myself an American writer, and that has been my big battle: to get to realize that my roots as a writer are no longer, if they ever were, among Indian writers, but that I am writing about the territory about the feelings, of a new kind of pioneer here in America" (Meer & Mukherjee, 1989: 3).

Findings suggest that ethnicity is highly relevant to the curtailment of Indian females in communities abroad, which is why it is paramount to understand the definition and extension of 'home' because it consists of more than the traditional space argued by several authors; it embraces a much broader context. Nevertheless, we can conclude that Bharati Mukherjee's collection engenders subjectivities that account for sweeping changes in the female identity and, consequently, of their diaspora consciousness. Finally, this article has attempted to provide some details about the intellectualization of diaspora, in which Bharati Mukherjee is a pioneer in a trend that is becoming increasingly widespread.

NOTES

[1] In her book *Women, Gender and Labour Migration: Historical and Global Perspectives* (2001) Pamela Sharpe puts forward the idea that from the mid 80's, more attention has been paid to female migration. She equally indicates that the shift is mainly toward seeing women as "autonomous agents" (2001: 2), instead of belonging to a wider structure.

[2] The capital letters seen in the quote are reproduced from Bharati Mukherjee's *Darkness* (1985) in the passage "The World According to HSU" (47).

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