



A MANIFESTATION OF DIASPORIC AND FEMINIST STRAINS IN JASMINE: A NOVEL BY BHARATI MUKHERJEE

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Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee was a versatile and well-grounded diasporic writer. Hailing from India, she managed to secure a really promising and prominent position among the mainstream American writers. The primary concern of her literary outputs is the delineation of the cultural clashes encountered by the Indian immigrants in foreign lands. She primarily takes up the protagonists of her literary creations from Indian context who strive hard to settle in the alien lands and meanwhile undergo unpleasant experiences of exile, alienation, a sense of loss, pangs of separation and dislocation, identity crisis and many more. The chief aim of the present paper is to present a story of a Punjabi girl Jasmine who had to undergo such nasty experiences in order to ensure her survival in America. It is also a story of a girl Jasmine, who undergoes subjugation and submissiveness in phallocentric and patriarchal World both in India and in America. Moreover, a primary concern of this paper is to bring forth the numerous transformations that she had during her stay in America. It is all about her journey from Jyoti to Jasmine and then to Jazzy, Jane etc.

Key words: *Diaspora, Dislocation, Transformation, Identity Crisis, Alienation, Patriarchy, Subjugation*



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Understanding of the word *Diaspora* and *Diasporic literature*

Literally speaking, diaspora is known as a huge group of people who have shifted to many foreign countries either willingly or forcefully. And Indian diaspora forms the biggest diaspora in the world. This large group of people encompasses same culture, heritage, and homeland. Etymologically speaking, this word was derived from an ancient Greek word '*Diaspeiro*' which means to 'disperse' or 'scatter about'. Therefore, the people who belong to this term disperse from their motherland to the other places across the globe. And wherever they go and live, they spread and expand their culture. Consequently, *diasporic literature* belongs to the authors who are living abroad and writing in the foreign tongue but writing about their own motherland, its culture and experiences. The works of diasporic writers are always beset with the sensibilities and strains of alienation, loss, nostalgia, search for identity, dislocation, homeland, displacement, cultural ethnicity and so. Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Shashi Deshpande, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Shashi Tharoor, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, A.K. Ramanujan, Rohinton Mistry are some of the well established and well renowned Indian diasporic writers. They have earned worldwide recognition and reputation.

About Bharati Mukherjee and Her Literary Oeuvre

Bharati Mukherjee stands as one of the most eminent and foregrounding author in Indian diaspora. She is basically



celebrated as a prolific Indian American writer who worked as a Professor emerita in the department of English at the University of California. She took birth in a well-off Bengali Hindu Brahmin family on July 27, 1940 in Calcutta. Her father Sudhir Lal Mukherjee was a prosperous businessman dealing in pharmaceutical appliances. Her mother Bina Banerjee was a housewife. She was brought up in an extended family comprising more than 30 members. Her entire family had shifted to USA when she was a child. On returning back to Calcutta she received her early education at Loreto School. She earned her BA degree from the University of Calcutta in 1959 and completed her Masters from Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda in 1961. She completed the rest of the education at the University of Florida and there she acquired her M.F.A. in 1963 and completed her PHD from the department of comparative literature in 1969.

On 19th September 1963, she got married to Clark Blaise. Her husband was a Canadian American author and a Professor of creative writing at Yoru University. He has too authored few books on short fiction along with his wife. Both of them have penned down a memoir known as *Days and Nights in Calcutta* in 1977. Bharati Mukherjee has many novels, short stories and few works of non-fiction to her credit. The novels which have been written by her comprise *The Tiger's Daughter*(1971), *Wife*(1975), *Jasmine*(1989), *The Holder of the World*(1993), *Leave It to Me*(1997), *Desirable Daughters*(2002), *The Tree Bride*(2004), *Miss New India*(2011). *Darkness*(1995), *The Middleman and Other Stories*(1988), *A Father, and The Management of Grief* are the collection of short stories which have been credited to her. A memoir that was written by Bharati Mukherjee and her husband Clark Blaise is *Days and Nights in Calcutta* (1977). Moreover, one of the commendable work of non fiction by Bharati Mukherjee and her husband is *The Sorrow and the Terror: The Haunting Legacy of the Air India Tragedy*(1987).

In addition to this, Bharati Mukherjee has been awarded with few prestigious awards as well. She received National Book Critics Circle award for her stupendous literary creation *The Middleman and Other Stories* in 1988. Then, in 2013 she was awarded with a prestigious title Doctor of Humane Letters(L.H.D.) by Whittier College California. On January 28, 2017 Bharati Mukherjee said farewell to this world at Manhattan. It was indeed a great loss to diasporic world of literature.

Jasmine: An Exploration of Identity and Feminine Assertion

“I have joined imaginative forces with an anonymous driven underclass of semi-assimilated Indians with a sentimental attachment to a distant homeland, but no desire for permanent return ... Instead of seeing my Indianess as a fragile identity to be preserved against obliteration (or, worse, a “visible” disfigurement to be hidden) I see it now as a set of fluid identities to be celebrated.”(1)

The above mentioned lines sum up the crux of this novel. Jasmine is all about a girl from Indian origin and her fierce and feisty adventures in order to survive and thrive in an alien land. Jasmine is a story of metamorphosis from bits to a single whole. Simple village girl Jyoti first transforms into Jasmine when she came into contact with her would be husband Prakash. Then she was called Jazzy, Jase, Jane and many other names while on her journey to America, New York, Iowa etc. Her entire journey in the novel revolves around her constant shifting identities and transformations. Mythili puts the whole scenario into appropriate words:

“Jasmine metamorphoses herself constantly during this journey, which starts from Jyoti the village girl in Hasnapur, to Jasmine, the city woman, to Jazzy, the undocumented immigrant, to Jase, the Manhattan Nanny, to Jane, the Iowan woman who enters the story.”(2)



She further writes:

“It is a story of dislocation and relocation, as the protagonist continually sheds her existing role to move into other roles.”(3)

The novel commences with Jasmine recalling of an incident when she came across an astrologer somehow. At that time she was only seven years old. She well retorted to a prophecy made by an astrologer about her upcoming future. According to the astrologer Jasmine have to go in exile someday and she will become a widow short after her marriage:

“Lifetimes ago, under a banyan tree in the village of Hasnapur, an astrologer cupped his ears—his satellite dish to the stars—and foretold my widowhood and exile.”(4)

She always thought that her fortune and fate could have been much better if she had taken birth but as a boy and not as a girl. This statement very clearly shows that how patriarchy had been rooted in the Indian families where daughters are considered something unfortunate and unlucky as compared to the other sex. As a reason Jasmin had to fight a lot in order to evade such discrimination and prejudices prevalent in traditional Indian societies of those times. She used to utter these words:

“If I had been a boy, my birth in a bountiful year would have marked me as lucky, a child with a special destiny to fulfill. But daughters were curses.... and dowries beggared families for generations.”(5)

In her early years of family life she was utterly surrounded by extreme phallocentric and patriarchal values. She still remembers the time she was born the family was not happy except her mother. It is only the boy children who were celebrated in Indian families during those days. The time she was about to open up a clinic, her father accused her of being insane and stupid. Even her grandmother scolded her mother for giving her daughter, Jyoti, a long rope.

“Jasmine was the unwanted fifth daughter of the family. Unable to provide for her five daughters dowries, Jasmine’s mother complained, “God’s cruel...to waste brains on a girl.”(6)

And then:

“Blame the mother. Insanity has to come from somewhere. It’s the mother who is mad.”(7)

Then came the time when she got married to a boy named Prakash Vijn. He was not a total stranger to her but rather she came into her acquaintance to Prakash through her own brother. Prakash and her brother were close friends. Prakash was not a typical Indian husband. Rather he was quite modern and liberated in his mentality and personality. Therefore, he asked Jyoti to call him by his own name instead of few odd pronouns that typical Indian wives used for their husbands. He renamed Jyoti as Jasmine. This was perhaps the time she shuffled between two identities. That was a time her crisis of identity actually began.

“To break off the past, he gave me a new name: Jasmine.”(8)

Prakash had decided that he and Jasmine would go to America for better future prospectus. But during 1980, Sikh terrorism was on the rampant. One day Prakash got killed in one of the bomb blasts caused by Sikh riots. A man named Sukhwinder was the actual culprit of her husband’s death. It seemed to Jasmine that all of their dreams had been shattered. She direly wanted to cremate herself on the death pyre of her husband. But then she collected her courage and decided to realize the dreams of her husband by her self going abroad. She started learning English by reading old newspapers. She felt a new transformation in her self. All the transformations that Jasmine underwent during the course of her life were not only due to her own personal circumstances but also due to the surrounding environment and people. She left for America alone and on reaching there she got into a trap as he was carrying forged documents with



herself. The captain of the ship, she was boarding, took advantage of a situation and violently raped her and constuprated her. She too encountered racial discrimination by that captain named Half Face. There and then she felt a new transformation in her identity. She burnt the dress of her husband and also burnt her previous identity as being meek, feeble and submissive. She transformed herself into goddess Kali being ferocious, revengeful, and powerful. She killed that captain in order to take her revenge of rape:

“She is not only raped by the man called Half-Face but also humiliated by him: He looked at me, and at the suitcase...He hefted the bag onto the bed and unsnapped the catches. Out came my sandalwood Ganpati. He propped it up against a picture on the dresser. He noticed my photo album and picked it up. Pictures of Prakash and of Pitaji, wrapped in an old sari...At the bottom, the blue suit. “Who’s this for?” he demanded. “A kid?” “It is my husband’s,” I said.

“Kind of a scrany little bastard, ain’t he?” He laughed and dropped the jacket back in the suitcase.”(9)

After this incident, Jasmine gathers courage and resolves to move on alone to her journey in America. First of all, she gets shelter in an American family owned by Lillian Gordon. That family named Jasmine as Jazzy. Thus, with her new name Jasmine embarks on the journey of transforming herself into a complete American native in order to forget her past experiences and identities. Meanwhile she comes into contact with the typical Indian family residing in America. Her encounters with that family made her sick and nostalgic about her previous typical Indian identities and she suddenly escaped from that place to settle somewhere else so that she could permanently erase those unpleasant and nasty memories. It was only Lillian Gordon who saves her from the American officials as Jasmine was carrying illegal documents with her. She gave regular instructions to Jasmine on the typical American accent and way of life so that she could not be suspected as a forged entry into America by the American government officials. Lilian Gordon also encourages Jasmine to learn a lesson from her past experiences so that she could transform her future and could live the way as she wants. Jasmine acts upon her advice and starts learning and speaking English fluently.

Lilian Gordon helps Jasmine in every possible way. She provides Jasmine with shelter, food, and clothing as well. During her stay at Lilian Gordon's residence, Jasmine realizes that how many transformations she has undergone till then. Now she is called Jazzy, a new identity. But it does not mean that her previous identities never came into her way of new ones. She used to get haunted by her previous identities but decides not to get afraid anymore. Her survival in America was only due to her own endeavors and earnest efforts and constant changes and transformations in her identity. She never thought of giving up in the way. Rather she undertakes numerous metamorphoses herself in every possible way in order to thrive in that country. Then luckily find help from Professor Vadhera who manages to provide her with a forged green card. She direly wanted to have that green card as it was the only means of her freedom in America.

“I wanted a green card more than anything else in the world that a green card was a freedom.”(10)

After few years she travels to New York. There she gets her first opportunity to work as a caregiver to Duff. Duff was an adopted daughter of Mr Taylor and Mrs. Wylie. At the house of Mr. Taylor and Mrs. Wylie she comes across a new identity of herself. Mr. Taylor starts calling her by a new name, Jase. Jasmine happily accepts this new transformation and strives hard to become what Mr Taylor and Mrs. Wylie want her to be as a typical American woman. She:

“..wanted to become the person they thought they saw: humorous, intelligent, refined, and affectionate. Not illegal,



not murderer, not widowed, raped, destitute, fearful.”(11)

She does everything to not only to learn American language but also the American culture so that she could be completely transformed into a new identity. Meanwhile she develops an affair with Mr. Taylor. She starts remaining happy and jubilant. But this happiness does not prove long lasting as one day, suddenly, she comes across Sukhwinder, the main culprit in planting bombs in the various places in Punjab during the Sikh riots and where her husband Prakash was consequently killed. All the traumatic experience revives in her memory. She tries to save the family of Mr. Taylor from the evil intentions of Sukhwinder and therefore escapes from California to Iowa in order to start a new life there. In Iowa, she manages to find a new job as a caregiver in the house of Mr. Bud. Mr. Bud has adopted Du who is a 16 years old child and a crippled one due to the horrific consequences of the world war. Bud too renames her as Jane, again a new transformation. But her life in Iowa was not a pleasant and happy experience. At the last of the story she decides to move back to Mr. Taylor as he has recently got a divorce from his wife.

Throughout the story, Jasmine remains a victim to the deep-rooted and decrepit ideals of patriarchy both Indian and Western. In India, she never enjoys freedom at her house due to the orthodox mentality of all the male and female members of a family except her mother. She never receives freedom to make her dreams come true. Even after the death of her husband, she undergoes severe oppression and becomes an object of satisfying one's carnal desires. Wherever she goes from India to California to New York to Iowa, she becomes a victim of patriarchal submissiveness and subjugation. She always tries to become what others want her to become. As Jasmine says:

“I had a husband for each of the woman I have been. Prakash for Jasmine, Taylor for Jase, Bud for Jane. Half-Face for Kali.”(12)

it becomes quite evident that how she undergoes multiple identity transformations in order to survive and thrive in a foreign land. She strives hard to assimilate herself into the foreign culture and language completely. Though sometimes she becomes nostalgic for her past memories but she determines to never let those memories come in her way of finding a new life and new purpose. She becomes Jasmine from Jyoti, then Jazzy, then Jase and then Jane. She experiences great identity crisis throughout the novel. She also experiences the pangs of cultural dislocation and displacement. She neither could become a complete Indian nor a complete American.

Conclusion

In the light of all the facts mentioned above, it becomes crystal clear that how marvelously and beautifully Bharati Mukherjee has shed light on the plight and miserable conditions of diasporic identities. This novel presents a clear-cut picture of the whole scenario of the diasporic strains and sensibilities to be found in the works of diasporic writers. Jasmine becomes an epitome of diasporic sensibilities such as exile, loss of Identity, nostalgia, transformation, and so on. Besides diasporic facets, one can easily find a sort of feminist sensibilities in the present novel under consideration. How a Punjabi girl Jasmine thrives in a phallogentric and patriarchal world is commendable. Moreover, the way Jasmine fights for her identity too deserves great appreciation and respect. Through the story of Jasmine, Bharati Mukherjee has represented the condition of how expatriates struggle hard to survive and outlive in foreign countries among people of foreign culture and foreign language. This novel also provides a whole panorama of the life of the expatriates living in foreign countries and struggling to assert their identities there. This novel also brings forth the elements of female subjugation and subservience in the presence of male-dominated societies. On the whole, Jasmine becomes a microcosm of all the diasporic world experiencing loss of Identity, culture, language, feelings of nostalgia,



disorientation, dislocation and pangs of separation.

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