

DIASPORIC CONSCIOUSNESS IN BHARTI MUKHERJEE'S JASMINE AND THE HOLDER OF THE WORLD

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Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee, an Indian American writer has acquired a strong place among the diasporic writers through her writings. Her writings cover a vast canvas of diaspora issues such as dislocation, fragmentation, nostalgia for home, marginalization, racial hatred, cultural and gender hatred, racial conflicts, identity crisis, generation differences, transformation of subjectivities, emergence of new patterns of life with cross-cultural interaction and disintegration of family units etc. All her works reveal beautifully woven narratives in which her protagonist makes them bold and assertive to face any kind of situation in the new land. The present paper is an attempt to delve deep into the issue of migration and to present the pain, problems and trauma faced by the immigrants and will present the elements of diasporic consciousness in Bharati Mukherjee's work Jasmine and The Holder of the World.

Keywords

Migration, Trauma, Immigrants, Diasporic Consciousness, Transformation

Diasporic Indian English fiction is a significant type delineating the encounters and attitudes of Indian diaspora from a different perspective to the entire world. Social and cultural experiences of the Indian Diaspora have been expressed successfully by novelists like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Anurag Mathur etc. Diasporic female Indian writers such as Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Anita Desai, Meera Syal, Anjana Appachana, Kiran Desai, Bharti Kirchner, Sujata Massey, Indira Ganesan and Shauna Singh Baldwin. etc successfully portrayed the universal experience of immigration and their writings cover all parts of the world who struggle because of nostalgia, rootlessness, adaptation, and loss of identity.

Bharati Mukherjee (1940-2017) has acquired a strong place among the diasporic women writers. Her major concern is immigrants and their struggle for survival in new socio-political situations. She understands that the process of assimilation and acculturation is so complex on the social and psychological levels that the individual has to go through a constant struggle as she herself was displaced two times. This struggle and diasporic consciousness is visible in her writings. The term Consciousness is derived from Latin word 'sciare' which means 'to know'. Consciousness means a state of awareness and perception. The definition of the term consciousness is given in Webster's Dictionary as "the quality or state of being aware especially of something within oneself" and as "the state of being aware of some object, state or fact" (Merriam Webster). Mukherjee's journey of life reflects her theme of diasporic consciousness. Bharati Mukherjee was born into a wealthy Hindu-Bengali family of Calcutta. She is the second of the three daughters of Sudhir Lal Mukherjee and Bina Chatterjee. In 1947, her family moved to England, where her father worked as a chemist for four years, then the family moved back to India. After doing her M.A. in English from the University of Baroda, she moved to the United States to attend the Iowa Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa where she earned her M.F.A. and Ph.D in English and Comparative literature. In 1968, she immigrated to Canada with her husband Blaise, and became a naturalized citizen in 1972. She was a professor at McGill University in Montreal. In 1980, she settled in the United States and began teaching at the university level. She became a U.S. citizen in 1989, she was professor emeritus in the Department of English at the University of California, Berkeley, until her death in 2017. Bharati Mukherjee admits of being subjected to racial discrimination in Canada. In the book, *The Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee*, Nagendra Kumar describes Mukherjee's experience as 'a

psychological expatriate' in Canada (18). Her essay *Invisible Woman* is a blistering reflection on her stay in Canada. Mukherjee felt great relief in America and merged much more easily with the life and people around. She felt that America had a more positive attitude towards Indian immigrants as compared to Canada.

Mukherjee's short stories and novels bring unique insight and profundity to the immigration, expatriation, and assimilation of South Asians, especially South Asian women, in North America. As a migrated author she is conscious about their socio-cultural conditions which the characters have to face through different social, cultural, political, and psychological problems and tried to investigate the sociocultural relations of immigrants in the host country and have claimed new possibilities for the social amalgamation and cultural creolization. She is also associated with the issues of assimilation and socialization of immigrants and focus search for identity in their works. Her works reflect two topics the settlers experience and the sentiment of estrangement as an exile and the psyche of ladies in Indian culture who has the overburdening desire to adjust to cultural standards and convention. Her early writings gave a pessimistic account of rootlessness and depict the immigrant characters as "lost souls, put upon and pathetic adrift in the new world, wondering if they would ever belong" (Darkness XII-XIV), whereas her later writings celebrate "the exuberance of immigration" (Darkness XV).

The novel *Jasmine* stems from Mukherjee's short story *Jasmine* originally published in "The *Middleman and Other Stories*" in 1988. She changes the viewpoint of the narrative (third person point of view) into story of first person, allowing for a more personal and revealing speaking voice. *Jasmine* the chief protagonist undergoes transformation from a passive village girl bound to fate and tradition to a modern woman who shapes her identity and life through migration; the one who tries to balance between two cultures and negotiates them and emerges as a hybrid; that is, she tries to balance between identities, re-invents herself, survives and is empowered.

Jasmine(1989) is a story of a girl who lived in hasnapur, a village of Jullundar district Punjab, India where she was born as the unwanted fifth daughter of the poor displaced Hindu family and named Jyoti. When she was seven, an astrologer predicted that she was doomed to widowhood and exile. She was determined to fight her destiny and started learning English to empower herself. When she was 14 her parents marries her to PrakashVijh, an engineering student, a modern city man who has no faith in traditional role of Indian wife. She gradually molds herself to the new woman entrapped by traditions. Prakash implants American dream in her mind and both plans to go to America. But unfortunately Prakash falls victim to a sikh extremist bomb and dies. She decides to emigrate to U.S to fulfill her husband's dream. She somehow made arrangement of her journey, but on her arrival in Florida, she was brutally raped by monstrous skipper-she symbolically turns into Goddess Kali to slaughter her assailant. Later with the help of a lady named Lillian Gordon, she reinvents herself into American identity-Jazzy in t-shirt, tight cords and running shoes. After her initiation into American way of life, she moves on to New York and lives temporarily with the family of late husband's Professor, DevenderVadhra. To distance herself further from everything Indian, she seeks help from Lillian's daughter's Kate, to secure a job for caretaker for Duff, the adoptive daughter of Columbia University couple-Taylor and Wylie Hayes. She falls in love with Taylor and he gives a new identity 'Jase' for" a women who lives for today'. Here also her happiness ends, when she happens to spot her husband's killer in new York park. She then flees to Iowa and reincarnated as Jane, in relationship with a 54 year Bud Ripplemayer, an invalid banker. Both adopted Du The in, a Vietnamese refugee boy, who constantly reminds his own past. Bud is shot and crippled by a farmer. In the end, Jane returned to her former companion, Taylor. *Jasmine* justifies her act saying: "I am not choosing between men. I am caught between the promise of American and the old world

of dutifulness.”(240)

Jasmine in this whole journey has learnt to survive in change and adaptability. The protagonist is ever keen to demolish her past except for occasional memories of Prakash, her slain husband. Mukherjee’s Jasmine deals with a young Indian widow’s successful attempt to reshape her destiny and her happiness in an alien land. From the rural Indian culture, the protagonist Jasmine goes to America where she encounters several difficulties and courageously overcomes them. She has the spirit of true immigrant. *The New York Times Book Review* called Jasmine "One of the most suggestive novels we have about what it is to become American." Jasmine grows very confident in her powers to shape a new identity. Gordan played a major role in the life of Jyoti, even later in her life Jyoti remembers Gordan with gratefulness, “...she saved my life, after others had tried to end it. She represented to me the best in the American experience and the American character” (Jasmine 137). Jasmine does not know where her journey leads to. She is uncertain about her own existence. “I feel at times like a stone hurtling through diaphanous mist, unable to grab hold, unable to slow myself, yet unwilling to abandon the ride I’m on. Down and down I go, where I’ll stop, God only knows. (Jasmine 139)

Jasmine replicates Mukherjee’s celebratory tone of violent refashioning of identity through radical negotiations in the dominant culture. She constantly changes herself during her life 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 and finally sets to move to California. Throughout the novel, she strives to put herself in the American society and finally becomes able to settle there, adapts the American way of life and asserts her identity. Though she tries to restrain the past to make her identity coherent, and establish the ‘self’ more assertively. Through the successful mobilization of marginalized character, JyotiVindh the novel embodies the spirit of inserting oneself in the third world that is America and delineates the possibilities of the permeability of the boundary between self and other, inside and outside.(D’souza 2004:189)

Jasmine is an outcast in battle from the ancient world of India and ancient social values. Her sense and sensibilities are effectively locked in with the world exterior her, taking off no time to reflect on the issues, whether life is significant, or why one ought to think of East, West, North or South when one can be a solitary self as culture and history would shape one. But in making such a character, in endeavoring to re-locate the character in a wanted but outsider environment, Mukherjee does not test the internal awareness of the hero nor does she portray the more profound battle the Americans experience in relating to each other. Jasmine takes the bird-view of the American life and does not touch the more profound layers of values there.

Jasmine even the other characters in Jasmine are all exiles, expatriates, wanderers and people on the move, casting off old lives and searching for better lives to fulfil their dreams. A feeling of separation, relocation and rootlessness may be an overwhelming cost they must pay for the unbounded flexibility and conceivable outcomes that America offers but they have decided to change themselves for survival in this new world. Everybody in Jasmine shows up to be reeling from the speed of changes overwhelming them. America fascinates Jasmine so she conceives child of White American from heartland and feels potent. Du feels hypernated Vietnamese American camouflage himself from expectations of others. He keeps his language and ethnic heritage alive by secretly keeping in touch with Vietnamese community. For DavenderVadhera, who was once a scientist in India, now working as an importer of human hair in flushing, New York, feels America is

killing him and gives him stress and cultural isolation but he undergoes a name change and made up his mind to stay there.

Mukherjee wants to visualize different aspects of cultural dislocation and relocation from a different dimension that is from the external perspective. How an outsider reacts towards dislocation, alienation and the efforts made for relocation. Her work *The Holder of The World* is a beautiful blending of Eastern and Western Culture. It is a beautifully written story about Hannah Easton, a woman born in Massachusetts who travels to India and becomes involved with a few Indian lovers and eventually a king gives her a diamond known as the Emperor's Tear. The story is told through the defective searching for the diamond. Mukherjee's focus continues to be on immigrant women and their freedom from relationships to become individuals and she also uses the female characters to explore and spatiotemporal connection between cultures. The novel is foregrounded in the last decade of the seventeenth century India when the country was undergoing a transition of power from the Mughals to the English. A twentieth century writer, Beigh Masters is the narrator of the story, a 32 years old woman asset hunter by profession. She is appointed by a client to track down a diamond called The Emperor's Tear. In course of her search story, she came to know story of Hannah Easton's life and became more interested in her story rather than her search for diamond. She Says:

It isn't the gem that interest me. It isn't the inscription and the provinces. Anything having to do with Mughal India gets my attention. Anything about Salem bibi, precious as pearl feeds me. (The Holder of the World 5)

The Story is about Hannah Easton, a Seventeenth century Puriton woman, who was born in Brookfield, Massachusetts, to Edward and Rebecca Easton in the year 1670. After the death of her father, the mother elopes with her Nipmuck lover. Hannah grows up in a conservative Puriton family as an adopted daughter of Robert and Susannah Fitch. Hannah attains fame all around the city by her embroidering works. She marries Gabriel Legge, an East Indian Company employee and comes to India. Here she spends time with her Indian maid Bhagmati and comes to know from her about native people and tradition of the subcontinent. After death of Gabriel in the sea, Hannah involves in a love affair with Raja Jadav Singh. The difference in the feelings can be noticed in these lines: "With Jadav Singh she finally accepted the inappropriateness it was in India-how fatal-to cling, as White towns tenaciously did, to Europe's Rules. She was no longer the women she'd been in Salem or London." (234) But her happy life comes to end when Raja is arrested in a fight with Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. She pleads to the Emperor to spare the Raja but Raja was killed and she returned to Salem. Her strong decision of giving birth to an illegitimate child shows her authority of men and women. She restarts her life as a mother and named her daughter Pearl without caring the people of the Puriton society.

Hannah's, like Jasmine's journey signifies her constant renaming suggest that one's identity is constituted by the narrative that one constructs and the actual experiences one undergoes. — Hannah Easton to Hannah Fitch to Hannah Legge to Salem Bibi to Mukta. Jasmine focuses on the difficulty of writing about Indian immigration to the United States within the cultural and narratorial confines of the realist narrative, and Hannah immigration is western to eastern world. It also creates an alternative narrative form that allows for the voicing of immigrant experience. *The Holder of the World* reverses the racial identity of the familiar protagonist in the Mukherjee canon and explores the experience of migration by examining how race constitutes the discourse of migration. Mukherjee's blurring of her protagonist's racial identity through Hannah's breaking of racial boundaries and Beigh's ability to become Bhagmati and participate in her experience through the computer program indicate her desire to examine critically the immigrant experience by

altering racial identities, albeit temporarily, in her narrative. Hannah adopts Indian clothing and manners and her maid Bhagmati Anglicized. Hannah's daughter Black pearl, daughters of Jadav Singh signifies merging of Culture.

Though both the novels deal with the same recurring theme of search for identity yet they differ in their approach towards their subject-matter. The article in *The New York Times* reveals "In many of her novels and stories, a young woman — shaped, as she was, by a patriarchal culture — strikes out for the unknown, sometimes by choice and sometimes not. In the existential crisis that ensues, a new self emerges — or a series of selves, with multiple answers to the question "Who am I?" (web) Mukherjee believes that there is no sense in holding the past as it leads to nowhere. In *Darkness* (1985) she asserts:

***If you have to wonder, if you keep looking for signs, if you wait-surrendering
little bits of a reluctant self every year, clutching the souvenirs of an ever-
retreating past -you 'll never belong, anywhere.(2)***

Both the protagonist moves to the diasporic space, uses their potential and tries to transform themselves as the new Women. Focusing on the ethnicity, gender and migrancy in Mukherjee's work Bose comments:

...They struggle to manage the tensions inherent in their conditions...such adaptation-and the immense psychological transformation which it requires-is possible only when the characters unanchor themselves from their nostalgic immobility and begin to engage risk and adventure. (Nelson, 2017:5)

Both the novels reflect the feelings of rootlessness, search for identity in an alien land, the problems of the conflict between eastern and western traditions and the final absorption of an immigrant to her host country in a transformed way by reflecting the journey of protagonists with sufficient courage and strong willpower.

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