RESISTANCE, TRANSFORMATION AND GENDER: A STUDY OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE’S ‘JASMINE’ AS AN INDIAN DIASPORIC NOVEL

SAMBHAI MAHADEV SIRSATH
PROJECT ASSOCIATE,
COHAB,
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
UNIVERSITY OF MUMBAI

ABSTRACT

In present era, Global market economy can be seen as a natural derivative of inter-cultural, inter-racial and multicultural relations. Diaspora is one of the most important issues in Postcolonial discourse. The problems of present Diasporas are different from the pre-historic and early periods. Diasporic literature explores the process of migration, accumulation, resistance, adaptation and transformation. It also focuses on the issues of home, belonging, nostalgia, and quest for self and cultural identity, transnational and trans-cultural situations. In this paper, my focus is on a critical analysis of Bharati Mukherjee’s ‘Jasmine’ (1989) as an Indian Diasporic novel which explores the theme of resistance, transformation and gender. Bharati Mukherjee, one of the major novelists of Indian diaspora, during her long adventurous journey has undergone lots of changes. In Jasmine, Mukherjee’s spotlight is on the complex layers cross-cultural reality, space, alienation and cultural identity. The protagonist’s journey who was born in India to America shows the various threads of her transformations from Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase and Jane. Jasmine revolts against at her every adversity.

Key words: Immigration, Identity Construction, Violence, Third World Woman, Diaspora, Gender, Resistance and Transformation.
This paper will focus on the above mentioned issues and examine the novel *Jasmine* in detail.

Diasporic literature proposes an individual’s relationship to the former home and the present one, to a culture left behind and to a culture now assimilated. They are living in the third space (Bhabha:n.p). The problems of current Diasporas are different from the Diasporas of the earlier (Indenture labours) period. There are several categories of Diasporas like Indenture labor diaspora, exile diaspora, refugee diaspora, Victim diaspora and voluntary diaspora etc. Assimilation and acculturation are key moments in postcolonial diaspora narratives that deals with multiculturalism. When, Jasmine, the heroine of Bharati Mukherjee’s eponymous novel arrives in the USA as an illegal immigrant, Jyoti, she does not carry with her a sense of nostalgia for a lost home. Mukherjee here maps an entirely new kind of diaspora sensibility-one that actively and eagerly seeks new cultural experiences and roles (Nayar: 177). Diaspora means dispersal from an original homeland, often traumatically, to two or more foreign regions; alternatively or additionally, the expansion from a homeland in search of work, in pursuit of trade or to further colonial ambitions (Cohen: 17). Bharati Mukherjee, one of the major novelists of Indian diaspora, during her long adventurous journey has undergone lots of changes. In *Jasmine*, Mukherjee’s spotlight is on the complex layers, cross-cultural reality, space, alienation and cultural identity. The protagonist’s expedition, which was born in India to America, shows the various threads of her transformations from Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase and Jane.

Bharati Mukherjee is one of the major novelists of Indian diaspora who has achieved a popular position within a comparatively short creative period. She has been recognized as a ‘voice’ of expatriate- immigrant sensibility (Nagendra Kumar: 14). The creative odyssey that started with the publication of *The Tiger's Daughter* (1972) had her exploring the complexities of her choice of the subject of expatriate experience. The fictional writings of Bharati Mukharjee have been analyzed in three well marked phases-The Phase of Expatriation, The Phase of Transition and The Phase of Immigration. Her novel *Jasmine* is a story of a strong-willed girl who crosses one obstacle after the other and never succumbs to the onslaughts of circumstances. *Jasmine*, published in 1989, reveals Mukherjee’s wish to transform her new homeland from within by utilizing an immigrant transformation that her protagonist defines as my transformation has been genetic (*Jasmine*: 222).

The immigration experience in Mukherjee’s novels often involve the Gramscian notion of “complicity” whereby colonial domination is legitimised through mutual consent of coloniser and colonised and by instilling feelings of shame and self-hatred in the psyche of the colonised. It is therefore often seen that immigrants from colonised nations are complicit in the hegemonic culture to “free” themselves from the inherent shame of being the colonial “Other” and re-
establish their identity on the foreign soil. Mukherjee’s corroboration of the immigrant experience and her rejection of cultural anamnesis thus make her complicit to the dominant culture of white America. She herself claims that Jasmine is a novel of an American immigrant who finds a new identity by “deliberately deracinating herself” (qtd. in Suchismita Banerjee: 20).

The socio-cultural treatment of women in the world varies from community to community even from region to region because the situation of women is determined by many factors some of them are invisible like traditions or conventions. Gender oppression is a universal phenomenon. The concept of universalizing oppression in the name of gender is criticised by several feminists including Judith Butler. In her seminal essay, “Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire,” Butler writes: That form of feminist theorizing has come under criticism for its effort to colonize and appropriate non-Western cultures to support highly Western notions of oppression, but because they tend as well to construct a ‘Third World’ or even an ‘Orient’ in which gender oppression is subtly explained as symptomatic of an essential, non-Western barbarism. The urgency of feminism to establish a universal status for patriarchy in order to strengthen the appearance of feminism’s own claims to be representative has occasionally motivated the shortcut to a categorical or fictive universality of the structure of domination, held to produce women’s common subjugated experience. (5) The phrases “universal status for patriarchy” and “women’s common subjugated experience” point out a homogenizing mission of feminism to create an illusory bond among women (as the repressed group) across culture, race, ethnicity, class, religion and sexuality (qtd. in Suchismita Banerjee:14).

America as a dream country which promises a brighter future is shared by Mukherjee in her novel. As Inderpal Grewal has mentioned, “even though the protagonist in Jasmine encounters many kinds of violence in the United States, the country offers her something that India cannot, which is the choice to reinvent herself” (69). And it is in this continuous effort of deconstructing and reconstructing selfhood that Jasmine encounters violence at every step of her identity construction.

Her process of transformation and resistance appear to be the result of negotiation and adaptation rather than a form of mere adaptation from the beginning of her journey. In Jasmine’s own words, this journey is described as “the war between my fate and my will”. Jasmine’s movement from traditional patriarchal Hasnapur to western existential individualism, she defines herself by negating what she does not want rather than by specifically asserting what she does yearn for. In other words, she is more likely to be passively situated in a diasporic predicament and than forced to rapidly react to that condition to survive. Jasmine does not represent sufficient independence to activate her to have a most important role in this transnational expedition. In this course of struggling with and trying to eliminate undesirable dimensions in her life, Jasmine
gradually attains a negotiable self, even though this ultimate self-emancipation may not be part of her preliminary purpose.

The story begins with Jasmine as a young girl situated in a traditional Indian society in Hasnapur and restricted by patriarchal gender customs. The protagonist, Jyoti in this phase of her life, is introduced to readers as follows: “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” (Jasmine: 3). Given the traditional Hindu belief in the realization of such astrological forecasts, Jyoti is confirmed an unwanted as well as undesirable girl, with a prediction of eventual widowhood and exile. Indian male dominated astrology seems to be a superstition which controls female behavior. Male supremacy, as represented by the astrologer, thus defines Jyoti from the very beginning of her life. Jasmine’s phrase “my widowhood and exile” suggests that, in her trajectory of transnational movement, her body in spatial mobility, gendered subjectivity and then unpredictable identity formation cannot be considered separately. Throughout the novel, Jasmine’s subjectivity in different contexts is somewhat determined by changing locales and gendered bodily norms.

In Jasmine’s initial move, from Hasnapur to Jullundhar after her marriage to Prakash, she is subject to male dominance, and this continues to be the case throughout the novel. Prakash an educated man with a liberal mind, “trash some traditions” (Jasmine: 76). After their marriage, he moves into a two-room apartment across the street from his technical college, refusing to live with his uncle and aunt (Jasmine: 76). While Prakash’s uncle criticizes his deeds as a violation of tradition, Prakash, “a modern and city man” (Jasmine: 76), considers their complaints as part of the Indian feudal ideology that should be abolished. Simply abiding by Prakash’s will, Jasmine, as his wife, also breaks the traditional code for a daughter-in-law by not moving in with her in-laws. However, she lacks agency in this assertion, and this event connotes nothing about Jasmine’s development of autonomy but Prakash’s own rebellion towards traditional parochialism.

Jasmine has a traditional Indian woman’s psyche in which she bestrides both rural and urban India, feudal conventions and modern innovations, but all because of her marriage to a liberal husband. Jasmine feels awkward about calling her husband by name, as he asks her to. In addition, regretfully, she acts like a conventional subservient wife with no sign of agency. For instance, Jasmine feels uncomfortable when she learns that her friend in Hasnapur has already had a child, while she has had none. These behaviors suggest the fact that Jasmine does not entirely share her husband’s liberal attitudes and opposition toward conservative Indian feudalism and patriarchal dominance which shows her traditional female psyche.
Jasmine soon confronts a drastic turn in her life when Prakash is killed by a bomb that is originally meant for her. This accident serves as a horrible footnote to patriarchal oppression: Sukkhi the extremist cannot endure that Jasmine is a “modern” female who violates the strict gender rules. He denigrates Jasmine and women like her as “Prostitutes! Whores!” (93), thus, following the colonial strategy of separatism, Sukkhi, a friend of Jasmine’s brother, Hari-prar, and his militant group demand a separate khalistan. They are violent fundamentalists who reject the “rational peacemaking counsel of Prakash” (69) and dominate the area through fear and aggression. They symbolise the dark and repressive forces of feudal India. They humiliate Jasmine’s former teacher for advocating enlightenment and “peaceful change towards modernity” (Dayal: 69). It is significant that Jasmine initially undertakes her journey to America as a mission to commit ritual suicide in the name of keeping to Hindu traditions, rather than as an act of self-emancipation. Although Jasmine’s sense of agency and resistance emerge early on in the novel, they retreat to dormancy in her marriage to Prakash.

Jasmine’s entry into the United States certainly means that she has left the strict gender codes in Hasnapur, and yet her increasing access to this new territory does not necessarily guarantee the end of gendered roles as defined by the dominant culture in any society. Though many critics of this novel either attack or praise Jasmine’s supposed self-empowerment with regard to cultural assimilation, her development of autonomy in her odyssey remains obscure or indefinite. An individual’s past may be difficult to leave behind. Though Jasmine seeks to distance herself from cultural expectations and tradition as if the possibility of independence and agency exist in reality, she is not able to cast away the unwritten mores inscribed by her social-cultural context at this point. Thus, her intention to commit sati ostensibly revokes the idea that her marriage to Prakash is a genuine escape from dominant tradition.

Jasmine decides to migrate to America, not to reaffirm herself, but to commit sati on the campus of the University of Florida where her husband was admitted as a student. This decision is seen as problematic by Gurleen Grewal who feels that Jasmine’s desire for committing sati in America can be misleading to a Western audience, who may think that sati was “practiced as a matter of routine and choice by contemporary Hindu widows” (188). Spivak illustrates the paradox of Sati very well in her seminal essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” where she says, “between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the ‘third world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization”
Here Spivak characterises the “shuttling” as a violent process of acculturation that defines and limits gender identity (qtd. in Suchismita Banerjee: 17).

Jasmines intention to go America was to fulfill her husband’s mission but when she landed drastic change took place in her life instead of kill herself she resisted the situation which brought transformation in her life. When she arrives in America, Half-Face rapes Jasmine in a room at the Flamingo Court hotel, an incident that disrupts her original course. This episode highlights the collective horror of a double oppression that exists for female immigrants, as the inequalities of the old world are now replaced by the abuse that can be meted out to illegal migrants. When cleaning her body after Half-Face’s attack, Jasmine is determined to end her life. But in the bathroom she sees herself in the steamed-up mirror, and views this image as “a dark shadow in the center of the glass” stopping her with “a sudden sense of mission” a mission that cannot be disrupted by her “personal dishonor”. Thus, instead of committing suicide, taking on the guise of Kali, the Hindu goddess of creation and destruction, Jasmine cuts Half-Face’s throat and he bleeds to death. Jasmine’s killing of Half-Face and burning of her wedding clothes symbolically separate her from the Indian patriarchal system and activates her quest for an actual American identity.

However, she was raped by half face but there are also good hands for immigrants, her encounter with Lillian Gordon marks a genuine moment of subsequent transformation. This event sets her on the path to becoming American, and offers a positive vision of her future.

Bharati Mukherjee portrayed Jasmine in her multiple names. She was born as Jyoti, a traditional Hindu girl in a village in India. Her liberate and modern husband rechristens her as Jasmine to wipe out her feudal past. In America, Jasmine turn out to be Jase in the Wylie household where she works as a “caregiver”, and in the end she becomes Jane to Bud Ripplemeyer who is bewitched by her oriental beauty. The change in names proposes a psychic violence in her as she symbolically murders her previous identity again and again to reconstruct a new one. Some postcolonial critics like Jennifer Drake have thus likened her “rebirths” to the revolutionary process of decolonization as described by Frantz Fanon in The Wretched of the Earth where Fanon says, “Decolonization is always a violent phenomenon... without any period of transition, there is a total, complete and absolute substitution” (17). Though this comparison is too far-fetched as there is nothing revolutionary in Jasmine’s name changing, yet the process of her deleting previous identities does suggest psychological violence, resistance and transformation in the novel.

In this way, Jasmine seems to be gifted with an accessible mobility of extravagance which is prepared by independence, freedom, and opportunity for individual actualization. Jasmine, in
her process of adapting to the new world, acts as a potential catalyst for an ongoing socio-cultural shift.

Jasmine totally changed her approach when she meets Lillian Gordon. Gordon warns Jasmine, “Let the past make you wary, by all means. But do not let it deform you” (Jasmine:131). Encouraged by her, Jasmine exactly eliminates her past by wearing western clothes and shoes, adopting an American accent and a different style of walking, accustoming herself to different food habits and becoming financially independent.

Jasmine’s subjugation is also detected in the entangled interactions between each phase of her upward mobility and her relationships with each of her male partners, all of whom seem to facilitate and implicitly characterize her provisional identity by means of a “naming” process: “I have had a husband for each of the women I have been. Prakash for Jasmine, Taylor for Jase. Bud for Jane. Half-Face for Kali” (Jasmine: 197). Each name for Jasmine appears to signal her transformation and adaptation in a foreign cultural environment. Jasmine’s transnational movement tolerates her to cross the boundaries of many spaces and gives her a fluid subjectivity, permits her to adapt to each new space she lives in. On the other hand, previously defined by her relationship to her male partners as a caregiver, Jasmine’s decision to leave with Taylor signifies a significant rupture with her earlier life. Her choice is the one between the America she has anticipated for so long and the “old-world” dutifulness where she has to be a caregiver; it in Hasnapur, Jullundhar, Professorji’s family, or Iowa with Bud. Therefore, Jasmine’s decision to leave for California with Taylor confirms that she has finally acted as an independent that is able to move of her own will.

Thus Bharati Mukherjee has explored the various tenets of Diasporic writings through Jasmine which also focuses on transformation and resistance in the female character.

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