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The Celebration of Diaspora in Bharti Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

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Abstract

The present abstract aims to discuss the consciousness of diasporic belonging and the celebration of diaspora in Bharti Mukherjee's *Jasmine*. The word 'Diaspora' has been taken from a Greek word meaning "to disperse". Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffins define Diaspora as "the voluntary or forcible movement of people and their homelands into new regions" The earlier diasporas of the neo-colonial and post colonial world were often a product of forced immigration, of people running away from religious and other political or social persecution. But

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several Indians who migrated to America and other countries in the 1970s and afterwards went in search of better life, greatest promises of prosperity and material success.

Keywords: Celebration, identity, diaspora, assimilation

Bharti Mukherjee is not only the most commercially successful of the women writers of the Indian diaspora, but she is also the most controversial narrator of Indian cultural identity in the multicultural context. Mukherjee distances herself from her Indian origin because she wants to be defined as an American writer who expands the border of American canon. This shift of positionality within the literary world was made by Mukherjee when she decided to move from Canada, where she was racially assaulted for being “dark-skinned”, to the United States. Here she came to terms with her uprootedness and underwent the transition from the “aloofness of expatriation” to the “exuberance of migration” (Mukherjee, *Darkness*, 1977.p.3)

Diaspora writings are records of the experience of the diaspora communities living in varied socio-cultural settings. Safran in his paper “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return” contends “Diaspora consciousness is an intellectualization of an existential condition, a sad condition that is ameliorated by an imaginary homeland to which one hopes one will some day return.”(Safran, 1991:16) Settlement in alien lands makes them experience unsettlement and dislocation. There is a break with old identity. They feel alienated in the adopted land as they suffer non-acceptance by the host society and face racial discrimination.

Bharti Mukherjee published a novel entitled *Jasmine* in 1989. A postcolonial writer, Mukherjee depicts the characters that undergo personal changes in their movements from culture

to culture. The eponymous first-person narrator has a life of constant migration from one situation to another, embodying different selves in each situation. These mutations of identity are accompanied by a series of name changes that can be seen as experiences of Difference within the Self. The young girl Jyoti of Hasnapur, becomes Mrs. Jasmine Vijn in Jullundhar then she moves to Florida and is called Jazzy by an American benefactress Lillian Gordon, she reverts to her initial name Jyoti the Punjabi ghetto in Flushing, is renamed Jase or Jassy by her employers in New York, Taylor and Wylie Hayes and their adopted daughter Duff, is transformed into Jane Ripplemeyer as Bud Ripplemeyer's partner in Baden, Iowa, before becoming Jase again to Taylor and Duff Hayes at the end of the novel. These dizzying identity and role changes enable her to explore ever new facets of herself as she adapts to the changes in her life.

She finds the life lived by Indians in the queen ghetto intolerable and moves to work for Taylor Hayes, a Columbian Physicist and Wylie Hayden, an editor in a publishing firm and their adopted daughter, Duff. In the two years, Jasmine is with them, Hayeses separate and Taylor falls in love with her. During this span, Jasmine emerges completely on her own and starts embodying the spirit of America because "what America offers her...is the hope that things will turn alright."(1990 interview-25) Mukherjee distances herself from her Indian origin because she wants to be defined as an American writer who expands the border of the American canon. This shift of positionality within the literary world was made by Mukherjee when she decided to move from Canada, where she was racially assaulted for being "dark-skinned", to the United States. Here she came to terms with her up rootedness and underwent the transition from the "aloofness of expatriation" to the "exuberance of migration" (Mukherjee, *Darkness*, 1977.p.3)

.In presenting a woman capable of birthing more than one self during during the course of her life time, Mukherjee invests her novel with the unique form of Hindu bildungsroman, where

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the body is merely the shell for inner being's journey toward a more enlightened and powerful subjectivity. Mukherjee shapes her heroine as a "fighter and adapter" who is perpetually in the process of remaking herself and her destiny.

Jasmine is the ideal culmination of Mukherjee's characters, which experiences such an exuberance of immigration through a process of assimilation with the culture of America. In *Jasmine* Mukherjee typifies the 'Diaspora of longing' through an evolutionary unfolding of the protagonist, from a victim to a voyager who proudly says "we murder who were so we can rebirth ourselves in the image of our dreams."(*Jasmine*, 25) It is the willingness of Jasmine to reinvent her own self by going beyond transcending her origin.

The narrator, heroine of *Jasmine* (1989) is a woman from a village called Hasnapur in Punjab. Bharti Mukherjee has carved out the assimilation of Third World immigrants into the American melting pot, which is itself enriched by those she describes as new pioneers, a survivor with courage. Using flash backs and cross cuts, the novel forges ahead weaving the story of the heroine's from the early days in Hasnapur to her extraordinary adventures in the United States. The novel depicts her growing up in a semi-feudal, rural and patriarchal society. A poor girl but a bright student, Jyoti is educated against the protests by her traditional father and eventually marries a modern Indian husband, Prakash, whose dream is emigration to the U.S. to study and open an electronic business, a career which will include Jyoti, now renamed Jasmine by her husband. Soon Prakash is killed by a bomb, planted by Sikh terrorists. Jasmine vows to complete Prakash's dream and goes to the intended school in Florida. However, she is raped by the sea Captain who has smuggled her and the other illegal immigrants to America. She manages to

murder him and abandons her and the other illegal immigrants to America. She is befriended by an American woman, Lillian who helps her to travel to Flushing, New York, so that she can find a home with Prakash's mentor, Prof. Devinder Vadhera and his family. Here Jasmine is renamed Jazzy. She wasn't able to adjust here, though the family of Professor was kind to her. That was ironical for her to think of the fact how she has changed. This has become something difficult to cope up with the duality of existence. She felt in that apartment of artificially maintained Indianess, she wanted to distance herself from everything Indian, everything Jyoti-like." She utters these words to Professor ji.

I told him I wanted a green card more than anything else in this

world, that a green card was a freedom.

(Ibid: 153)

She finds the life lived by Indians in the queen ghetto intolerable and moves to work for Taylor Hayes, a Columbian Physicist and Wylie Hayden, an editor in a publishing firm and their adopted daughter, Duff. In the two years, Jasmine is with them, Hayeses separate and Taylor falls in love with her. During this span, Jasmine emerges completely on her own and starts embodying the spirit of America because "what America offers her...is the hope that things will turn alright."(1990 interview-25)

The exuberance of Immigration which comes with the acquisition of Americanness and the immigrant Indianess as a sort of fluid identities to be celebrated does not come easily, for it is difficult to divorce yourself completely from ones own past, nor is it easy to overcome the "aloofness of expatriation" or sever oneself from the roots and tradition of the culture that one comes from. No doubt the liberated Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase and Jane, who make a lifetime for every name, look like a possibility for every exuberant immigrant. But in this flurry of change and

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action is the conflict and confusion of the whole cross cultural business, as Gayatri Spivak puts, the trauma of getting used to the idea that one is not going to be completely at home in either place- or trying to bury that idea in a heap of excitement in being and becoming 'American' as Jasmine does.

Jasmine's decision to leave her homeland coincides with her desire to escape the confines of her cultural identity. This desire, articulated in the dramatic recollection of the opening chapter, is a subtext that continually spurs the narrative's critique of the patriarchal underpinnings of Hindu culture and its social fabric. The little girl's refusal to accept the astrologer's prophecy about her widowhood in the future translates into the adult narrator's unwillingness to imprison her within traditional, predetermined codes of femininity. Comparing her husband to Professor Higgins, the benevolent patriarch of *Pygmalion*, the narrator recollects the early days of her marriage when Prakash, in an attempt to make her a "new kind of city woman," changes her name to Jasmine. Although "shuttling between identities," the narrator is eager to transcend the name/identity of her child self in the hope of escaping the doomed prophecy lurking in her future. To leave a country of her birth would mean new beginnings, "new fates, and new stars." But before the seventeen-year-old bride can embark on a new life with her husband, he is killed in a terrorist bombing.

Pygmalion wasn't the play I'd seen or read then, but I realize

now how much of Professor Higgins was there in my husband.

He wanted to break down the Jyoti I'd been in Hasnapur and

wanted to make me a new kind of city woman. To break of the

past he gave me new name: Jasmine. (Ibid: 77)

Directly or indirectly, historical conflicts (sparked by religious intolerance) within India determine the problematic constitution of Jasmine's shifting individuality. Her illegal migrant life in America is an extension of an existence that began in the shadow of political refuge and later, with her husband's death, almost ended in her widowed status. Within the enclosures of the Hindu culture, a widow must atone the death of her husband for the rest of her life. Jasmine's widowhood cancels her right to material fulfillment. It entails a life of isolation in the "widow's dark hut," on the margins of Hasnapur society. For Jasmine to live the life of a widow is worse than death.

Once her husband's killer appears in New York, she flees to Iowa where she marries Bud, a rural banker and becomes Jane. A shot fired by a client, who has gone paralyzed Bud and out of sympathy for him, she decides to have her child as well as adopt a teenage Vietnamese refugee called Du with him. The novel closes with the appearance of Taylor and Duff and as Taylor asks her to join them to resettle in California, Jasmine gets a feeling of hope. She has to make a decision because she wants to come out of the morass, her life has become in Baden. The pregnant Jasmine agrees to go with them. Thus the unifying theme is the protagonist's adaptation to circumstances, and her transformation from passive acceptance of fate in the past to modern cross-cultural conquest of her future.

Like Hawthorne's Huck Finn, Jasmine heads toward a new territory- California. Jasmine like Du is created by Mukherjee to adopt to change, and to mediate the contradictory spaces of the post modern world. It is her ability to do so which rightly establishes her as

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“Americanized”. Jasmine has the precise ability to recombine, reappropriate and readjust to cultural traditions whenever required, in pursuit of exploring a promising and utopian future. She abounds with the spirit of assimilation and has absolutely no hesitation to establish linkage with a technologized America. Jasmine's adaptability is best expressed in the lines:

They tell me I have no accent, but I don't sound Iowian, either.

I am like those voices on the telephone, very clear and soothing.

May be Northern California, they say. Du says they are computer

generated.

(Ibid: 13)

She loves to be merged with the mainstream of the country and absorb its neo nationalism, immerse herself completely in the culture of the new world.

Named Jyoti at birth, she is transformed in each of her new locations, moving from Punjab to Florida to New York to Iowa and finally to California. For each metamorphosis she acquires a new name-Jasmine, Jazzy, Jase, Jane and finally succeeds as a transformed, liberated and self-directed woman. With each new identity, we see her playing an increasing role and gaining more self-confidence. In the evolution of Jasmine we also notice an increasing sexual freedom. Till the time she was in India sexuality had a minor role in her life but as she grows away from home and India, experiences of sexuality become more flexible and open.

The personality of Jasmine may be read as a pattern of growth towards an identity – formation which she dislocates herself from her family and her own country to locate her identity

in the new world. The new world is the world of the individual, democracy, freedom, romance and infinite opportunities. Jasmine leaves the crippled Bud in search of a vision and adapts herself to the new world of dreams and discovery.

Given a world where violence and bloodshed, exploitation and persecution are constants, Jasmine's plurality of selves is her only strategy for survival. Knowing only too well that there are "no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself," Jasmine vies her multiple selves with a detachment that has been forged in pain. But beneath this carefully maintained distance is the terrible agony of a woman who cannot free herself from the collective memory of her haunting past:

Jyoti of Hasnapur was not Jasmine, Duff's day mummy and
Taylor and Wyllie's au pair in Manhattan; that Jasmine isn't
this Jane Ripplemeyer... And which of us is the undetected
murderer of a half- faced monster, which of us has held a dying
husband and which of us was raped and raped in boats and cars
and motel rooms? (Ibid: 127)

Having lived through "hideous times," Jasmine, in her arduous journey of survival, has accomplished the rare mission of transcending the boundaries of a unitary self and identifying with all the nameless victims of gender, culture, class, and imperialism. The narrative ends on a note of optimism where Jasmine, "cocooning a cosmos" in her pregnant belly, and about to reposition her stars again, is already to plunge into another life and another journey of transformation.

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Jasmine's difficult "odyssey" to America and her initial experiences in alien society parallel the emergence of a new selfhood despite the vulnerability of her youth and material circumstances. Her brutal rape at the hands of Half-Face, a man who represents the worst of America in his racist and inhuman treatment of the Asians, and sudden awakening of Jasmine's "sense of mission." Refusing to "balance her defilement with her death, "a traditional ending for most rape victims in orthodox Indian society, Jasmine infused with destructive energy of the goddess Kali, murders the man who symbolizes the "underworld of evil" and begins a new "journey travelling light" is a climatic moment in the text which signals the sudden awakening of Jasmine's "sense of mission."

From Jyoti the village girl in Hasnapur, to Jasmine the city woman, to Jazzy the undocumented immigrant who Lillian Gordon teaches to learn and walk American, to Jase the sophisticated Manhattan Nanny who falls in love with Taylor, to Jane the Iowian woman who marries the banker Bud Ripplemayer and centers the story, the "J" represents element of continuity within transformation. This is the "J" the aspect which will affect American society, all the men and people around her, that will cause their irreversible transformation. America has transformed Jasmine and she has transformed America too:

Then there is nothing I can do. Time will tell if I am a Toronado, a rubblemaker,
arising from nowhere and disappearing into cloud. I am out of the door and in
the pothole and rutted driveway, scrambling ahead of Taylor, greedy with wants
and reckless from hope. (Ibid: 241)

These closing lines release the tension, which runs like a red thread throughout the novel, between Jasmine's predicted fate and her desire to escape and transform it. Juggling with both her destiny and her attempt at self-determination, she challenges the astrologer's premonition that reappears frequently as leitmotiv in the novel. On the first page her future will be read as a widow and exile, but on the last page Jasmine says,

Watch me reposition the stars, I whisper to the astrologer who floats

Cross-legged above my kitchen stove. (Ibid: 240)

In the portrayal of her immigrant heroine, Mukherjee reinforces the images of the Third World woman who is constrained by her gender and by the "backward culture" and economy of the Third World. She is ignorant, traditional and domestic and in short, a victim awaiting rescue. Mukherjee unconsciously recreates a split between an idea of feminism applied to Third World migrant subjects in a western society. She therefore reproduces the objectification mentioned by Mohanty by portraying Jasmine's singularity (with the inborn requisites to become a successfully developed emancipated subject in the West) as compared other anonymous village women, backward and doomed to oblivion. As Koshy writes,

The celebration of Jasmine's singularity is dependent on flattening out

the subjectivities of other nonwhite women whom she encounters and

identifies with, but from whom she is carefully distinguished.

But slowly Jasmine becomes "special" and "exotic" only for Americans who see her as different from other radicalized women. As Lillian Gordon tells her "Jazzy you don't strike me as a picker

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or domestic.....You're different from these others" (p: 134) Once Jasmine is set apart from a monolithic alterity, she is distinguished from other migrant workers.

Mukherjee operates the transformation of Jasmine's identity according to two main master discourses, the first relative to colonial oppression (against which technology, the mastering of English, and migration are used), and the second relative to patriarchal oppression (which is answered by becoming multiple selves, seductive and transformative). Jasmine uses the various tools provided by her male partners, adapts her identity to the role she is expected to fulfill, then destroys the master's house, moves on, and proceeds with her self realization by acquiring new master's tools:

I have had husband for each of the women I have been. Prakash for Jasmine,

Taylor for Jase, Bud for Jane, half-face for Kali. (P: 197)

Jasmine's power is apparent in her restlessness to keep changing shapes and houses. The master discourse cannot trap her in any definite and finite location or self. In this transmigratory mythology, the self that is fluid and accumulative can be killed and endlessly reincarnated, and this strategy defies both the patriarchal and colonial logic.

However, Mukherjee is not transformative in her gendered and ethicized representation because she uses clichés and stereotypes to create a postmodern text for the West and an improbable mythological tale of an escaping princess from India: she presents rampant individualism with an exotic tinge. What Mukherjee lacks is thinking through difference according to which "neither the totalitarian effacement of difference nor the delirious celebration

of all limitless and ever-proliferating ‘in-difference’ take place (Pfeil, 1994:225). With its celebration of postmodern geography and free floating identity, the novel *Jasmine* plays with the subject who is non-position, everywhere and nowhere at the same time, consuming differences and creating mobile identities.

Despite the declaration of discontent, Mukherjee’s postcolonial assimilatory manifesto is a text where the emphasis on pleasure and agency (jouissance) challenges the images of fragmentation and victimization that are usually projected on those who are perceived as the other by the hegemonic subject. It is for this that Mukherjee’s book must be praised. Despite its pitfalls and limits of essentialism, the novel shows the road to America is open. This exuberance of immigration makes the text worthwhile despite its controversial aspect.

To conclude, we find that Jasmine’s journey is one of continuous longing where new images and new names are demarcated milestones of such progression. This work is a true celebration of Diaspora in many ways.

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