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25. Disruption, Transformation and Assimilation in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

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"Diaspora" – the term, has gained prominence and debate in the recent past. Generally, it is used to defining a variety of ethnic groups who form communities because of an earlier migration to a foreign place, where they have established separate communities. It is perhaps problematic, as many recent theorists have noted, to attempt to draw a concise definition of diaspora, for as Monika Fludernik point out, "nobody has the same dream entirely; and nobody's diaspora therefore looks wholly like their neighbours."¹ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin define 'diaspora' as the voluntary or forcible movement of peoples from their homelands into new regions. Robert Cohen describes diasporas as the communities of people living together in one country who acknowledge that the old country – a nation often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore-always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions. The diasporic experience is, thus an organic fusion of multifarious intersections, crossings, of boundaries and creations of new horizons. The complexity of this experience is brought out by Rushdie in the following manner: "It may be that writers in my position, exile or emigrants or expatriate, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge – which gives rise to profound uncertainties - that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind."²

In her article "Immigrant Writing: Give us your Maximalists" in *The New York Times* Book Review, Bharati Mukherjee demands to know who speaks for "the New Americans" from non-traditional immigrant countries. This question is pertinent in the context of the mainstream American fiction which does not deal with the lives of the minority Americans who have considerably altered the cultural landscape of America in recent times. She laments that these people in spite of their "sophistication and struggle and hunger to belong" have not found a place

in the American fiction.³ Hence the ordeals and struggles of these immigrants in America form the literary agenda of Mukherjee.

Bharati Mukherjee's novels reflect the two different sets of experiences: of an expatriate as well as an immigrant. The different periods of her literary profession can be assembled as – the period of alienation; the period of evolution; and the period of assimilation. She has gone through a series of transformations in her own identity, reflected in her works: her early attempts to reveal her identity on the basis of both her Indian background and Indian cultural heritage, her subsequent bitter response to the unbearable memory of the racism she faced in Canada, and her eventual determination to devote herself to the “exuberance of immigration.”

Her novels deal with the issues emanating from the gap between expatriation and assimilation. Initially, she imagined a model in V.S. Naipaul and tried to explore “state-of-the-art expatriation.” Like him, she used “a mordant and self-protective irony”⁴ in describing her characters’ pain, because irony promised both detachment from and superiority over those well-bred post-colonials much like myself, adrift in the new world wondering if they would ever belong.⁵ After her bitter experiences in Canada, her immigration to the states has brought about a radical shift in her attitude. For her it was a movement away from a sense of loneliness, a common characteristic of all exiles, to “the exuberance of immigration”⁶ She looks upon her Indianness as a fragile identity to be preserved against obliteration,⁷ which she sees now as “a set of fluid identities to be celebrated.” To her explanation is not only a great temptation but also, “the enemy” of the ex-colonial: “Lacking a country, avoiding all messiness of rebirth as an immigrant eventually harms even the finest sensibility. The work becomes the country, the author tyrannizes his creation with a Czarist arbitrariness.”⁸ But being an immigrant is “very déclassé.” On passing through the final stage of naturalization she found that experience to be “roughly religious” like “the experience of Eliot, Waugh and Greene on being received into the Church.”⁹ Therefore the immigrant are many time born and the assimilation is a spiritual rebirth, a recurring theme of Mukherjee’s fiction.

Bharati Mukherjee’s novels demonstrate a development from an abiding preoccupation with the problems of immigration and the accompanying loss of identity in her earlier work,¹⁰ an exuberant vision of the possibilities of ethnic transformation and re-incarnation.

By the time Mukherjee writes *Jasmine*, she is ready to celebrate: “I’m one of you now.”¹¹ Forgetting her Canadian experience as an expatriate, she is now ready to welcome the freedom

and liberty of America. Unlike Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee insists that the immigrants should come out of their cocoons of defense into the openness of discussion. And it is this intention that *Jasmine* is filled with the diasporal dreams and desires with new colour and aspiration.

Jasmine is a novel of emigration and assimilation, both on physical and psychological levels. In this novel, Bharati Mukherjee fictionalizes the process of Americanization by tracing a young Indian woman's experiences of trauma and triumph in her attempt to forge a new identity of herself.

Primarily an immigrant narrative, *Jasmine* explores the process of Americanization and brings out the conflict between assimilation and cultural preservation. It is a poignant story of survival, compromises, losses, and adjustments involved in the process of acculturation to American life. As *Jasmine* says in the novel, "There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself. We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams" (J.29). Thematically, *Jasmine* is central to Mukherjee's mission as a writer. As she has stated,

"My material is the rapid and dramatic transformation of the United States since the early 1970s. . . . My duty is to give voice to continents, but also to redefine the nature of American and what makes an American."¹⁰

Like *Jasmine*, Mukherjee believes in personal striving:

"Like *Jasmine*, I want to reposition the stars. At the same time, I am aware of a larger design. My way of solving this is to say that every single moment has a purpose. I want to discover that purpose."¹¹

It is the willingness of *Jasmine* and *Others* of Mukherjee's ethnic characters to murder their past selves that enables them to actively advance into unknown but promising futures. The futures they propel themselves toward are not guaranteed to be successful. But they do have the potential for personal, material and spiritual success.

It is to *Jasmine*'s credit that she is able to not merely strike roots easily, but also uproot herself with equal ease and move on without any remorse. This is because she has inculcated Mrs. Gordon's advice: ". . . let the past make you wary, by all means. But do not let it deform you" (J.131). In her desire for assimilation into mainstream America, *Jasmine* immolates her Jyoti - *Jasmine* self to burn her Hindu past. To accomplish her genetic transformation, she

conceives a child by a white American from the heartland and feels potent in her pregnancy, as if she is "cocooning a cosmos." As Samir Dayal says,

"...She (Jasmine) is a conscientious protectress; in her pregnancy by Bud, she is creative. Jasmine is a destroyer but, like Kali, she is also ultimately a preserver, and an agent of the life-force. For Kali is an aspect of the Indian trinity – Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva."¹²

Bud thinks that Jane brought him back from the world of death. Like Lazarus, who was brought by Jesus Christ from the world of death to the earthly world. She appeared like 'Jesus' to rejuvenate the barren Baden as well as Bud. Gurleen Grewal remarks:

"As the female Brahma, she is her own creator, pregnant with new life; as caregiver, she matches Vishnu, the preserver; as Siva's counterpart, Kali, she has killed the demon Half-Face, her rapist."¹³

To sum up, Bharati Mukherjee's magnum opus *Jasmine* divulges that the protagonist, Jasmine is a survivor, fighter and a trend setter. Jasmine is a shrewd contestant in the dominant culture. The potential of fluidity which Bharati Mukherjee attributes to American culture is embodied with the protagonist's metamorphosis from Jyoti to Jasmine, Jasmine to Jazzy, Jazzy to Jase and finally to Jane. This identity transformations is marked by changes in behaviour and personality. Through her various transformations, Jasmine sets herself to be a best example for the girls in rustic areas in overcoming various stumbling blocks despite difficulties. The transformation of Jasmine is full of violence with disintegration which brings tremendous changes in her in all respects such as psychologically, emotionally and physically. Jasmine's arduous voyage to America shows her stubborn will to survive and her determination to re-create her destiny. She goes through several rebirths to become all American. Her adaptability and readiness to reinvent herself aid her assimilation into American society. Jasmine becomes truly Americanized, not just in peripheral, social or cultural conventions but in a primal "intensity of spirit". She finds peace neither in India, nor America, but in the American dream.

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