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Displacement, Alienation and Search For The Self In *Jasmine And Leave It To Me*

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Introduction:

The history of human race is a saga of migrations. Human beings have migrated from one part of the globe to another since time immemorial. The hope for better economic prospects and living, an escape from calamitous situations and the desire for full actualization of potentialities have been the most potent driving forces behind such movements. The one particular thing that characterizes the 20th century from the earlier periods is the massiveness of these migrations. What is most specific about the era is that the people of diverse races and clans, ethnicity and environment have shifted their habitats out of their own choices. The reasons may vary, but unprecedented mass migrations have been the marked characteristic of the times. "These mass migrations" emphasizes Prof. Harish Narang, "have brought disparate cultures into contact – that is qualitatively different from the kind of contact obtained under the paradigm of colonialism. Although the new binary of the developed/ undeveloped may be similar, in many ways, to the master/ servant relationship under colonialism, what has made a major difference is the direction of the migration. This time it is the Mountain that is visiting the Mohammed. It is the servant who has gone and settled down in the master's backyard."¹ The whole spectacle, however, is not so simple to be taken account of. This entire 'inside yet outside' scenario is full of diverse complexities. If, as various critics pose it, post-colonialism and post-modernism are about changing world, this changing world is brought about by migration and immigrant experience which is integral to it. Therefore, "a great deal of critical interest as well as skepticism surrounds the discourse of diaspora and its representation in literature alongwith its associated formulations such as dislocation and relocation, complicity and resistance, the affirmation of cultural identity and acquiescence to the new transplanted one."²

"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 Fludemik point out, "nobody has the same dream entirely; and nobody's diaspora therefore looks wholly like their neighbours."³ 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."⁴

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."

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, to 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."⁵ 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."⁶

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."⁷

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 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 Shiva."⁸

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."⁹

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.

Leave It To Me opens with a prologue, where the story of Goddess Devi is told. The setting is Devigaon in the state of Rajasthan in India. The village is named after Devi's adventurous crusade against and final destruction of the buffalo demon Mahisha, who was causing bloodshed on the Earth and the Heaven. The prologue is introductory and provides a template for reading the novel. The Cosmic Spirit reveals itself in surprising forms to the devotees and kills demons and re-establishes the kingdom of heaven. The Cosmic Spirit makes, unmakes and remakes the world they live in.

Bharati Mukherjee focused on the lives of the immigrants and the process of life and death again and again to face the adversities in the way of their lives. They undergo the process of making, unmaking and remaking of their lives. These tales are strange and mysterious in the new culture. Debby was also regarded and felt exotic and strange. She wanted to explore her self identity and roots like Jasmine. Debby died and Devi was born in her exploration. She is saved from death by Sister Madeleine, one of the Gray Nuns, Missionaries of Charity. In a sworn testimony by Sister Madeleine, she had the name Baby clear Water Iris-daughter. Then she is renamed as Faustine after the Typhoon by the missionaries. She is then adopted as a toddler by Munfred and Serena DiMartino of Schenectady, New York.

Immigrants' psyche plays significant role in the process of assimilation in the alien land. Physically the immigrants are absorbed in the new land but the cultural absorption is related with the psyche of the immigrants and so swapping of the culture is difficult in the process of assimilation. Debby realizes her mugged identity and feels her present identity is a lie, "Debby DiMartino is a lie" (LM.10). She thinks of herself as just a "garbage sack thrown out on the hippie trail", (LM.10) a person "on loan to the DiMartinos" (LM.17). Sensing that she has an exotic past and a destiny too big for Schenectady, Debby decides to go in search of her biological parents. To search for her true identity, Debby jettisons with scorn the ready-made life she inhabits as a fun-loving college girl from Schenectady. Desperate to find out more about the impulses behind her lethal behaviour, which she believes must lie in her past, Debby starts for a new journey. "When you inherit nothing, you are entitled to everything," is the conclusion she comes to as she sets out for California to investigate her origins. On the way there, Debby has an epiphany, and changes her name - Devi - from the bumper sticker of a blonde who cuts in on her without knowing the Hindu origins of the name. She becomes Devi Dec - a name reminiscent of the Indian goddess, "the eight-armed, flame-bright, lion-riding dispenser of Divine Justice." Her path becomes a manifestation of the Hindu deity's fierce and destructive nature. Along with her old identity, Debby sheds her old conventions, becoming a "Tenderloin prowler, all allure and strength and zero innocence" (LM.66-7). Mukherjee weaves together Hindu and Greek mythology to explore Devi's complex drive to

search her own identity. Her journey charts the battlegrounds between reality versus fantasy, and Eastern versus Western cultures. The novel is "a meditation on the Indian concept of karma and the Greek idea of destiny."¹⁰ Debby is a multiracial orphan. She finds herself caught between cultures and selves, suffering from dislocations both superficial and profound. In her quest of identity, she has to sort through her various racial, cultural, social heritages. Bharati Mukherjee remarks: "I think of Debby as the difficult sister of Jasmine."¹¹

Conclusion:

Thus, Mukherjee has created characters committed to fluidity and to the re-invention of their identity. They are able, in various ways, to break free of the imprisoning influence of family, nation, class, race, even gender. Carmen Wickramagamage summarizes this perspective thus: "She sees in immigration the opportunity for new narratives of self that signify not only the extent of one's release from the constricting aspects of one's primary and social and cultural inscriptions, but also one's ability to alter and to be altered by the new cultural landscape on which one hopes to find or construct one's niche."¹²

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