

CULTURAL ANGST IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S *JASMINE*

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Diasporic Literature involves an idea of homeland, a place from where the displacement occurs due to economic compulsions. Basically, it is true to say that Diaspora is a minority community living in exile. The term “Diaspora” is derived from Greek which means “to disperse” and so the word suggests scattered seeds and by extension to dispersed community.

The ideas of diaspora and diasporan culture have become significant in the context of global migration. These ideas are grounded in the assertion of a unity conceived of as something fundamental which can override geographical separation. The “fundamental something” is precisely the promise of a future homeland and a restored geographical unity. The unity of scattered people can assert themselves on the basis of shared experiences of history and culture. These circumstances of unities are developed in the face of the agony of racism or religious prejudices. But many of these are also manipulated by ruling groups within diaspora populations for the purpose of control of diaspora community.

The term diaspora is used to control and delimit people; it includes such notions which are employed by the elites within diaspora themselves. But Paul Gilroy emphasizes the contributions of diaspora to the orientation and constitution of the modern world. Gilroy observes: “what was initially felt to be a curse of enforced exile-gets repossessed as a privileged standpoint from which certain useful and critical perceptions about the modern world become more likely” (iii). The essential characteristics of diaspora help to evolve some perspective about the emerging multicultural societies on the one hand, and the underlying unity of cultural communities all over the world on the other.

In Diasporic literature, expatriate writing is always inter-related between the aspects of two cultures and two countries. It constructs a new identity that negotiates boundaries and relates to different temporal and spatial metaphors. Culture travels along with individuals who feel nostalgia or experience of amnesia. The writers abroad live on the margins of two societies.

Homi K Bhabha defines culture in terms of “double inscription.” It means that the theoretic-historical constitution is related to the origin or the event that he calls “pedagogical,” and the disruptive “scraps,” patches and rags of daily life, that are “performative” (297). Bhabha means that culture is at once pedagogic and performative. In actuality the term “culture” is employed implicitly or explicitly connected to the idea of nature. The notion of culture identifies broadly with those patterns of human knowledge and it refers to the customary belief, or social groups. The notion of culture is applied to social practices in terms of race, belief and class. The

word culture signifies a “total way of life” of a people encompassing language, dress, food habits, music, housing styles, religion, family structures and values. Culture also indicates certain things like works of art, musical productions and so on by helping us to enrich how we lead our lives. It is a part of fully recursive set of relations. In academic field cultural studies are grounded in critical theory which combines political economy, sociology, cultural anthropology and so on.

In diasporic context cultural study helps to the process of emigration and settlement and identity formation in host societies. In diasporic fiction, it is a collaborative frame work which brings transformation by global movement of people, languages, objects, beliefs, ideas and so on. The phenomenon of intercultural contact is common to all migrants. The overflow of migration affected both demographic profiles of societies and cultural contours. It is true to say that all the countries of our world become plural or multicultural societies and assume a cosmopolitan character. The change of material culture occurs due to the advances in science and technology and thus culture re- interprets them with new definition.

People’s movement and spread of different ideas of material culture highlight the change which is regarded as the characteristic of all societies. A society is a powerful insulatory mechanism which maintains its purity. The breaking of barriers during the era of colonization affected the colonizer culture. Migrants carry two tags: one representing the country of their origin and the other as the country of their migration. The Indians in different lands share the feature of “Indianness” which distinguishes them from others.

As an immigrant fiction Bharati Mukherjee’s novel Jasmine has abundant features of cultural perspective. The novel focuses on the themes of migration and settlement. The travel from India to United States, series of self-transformations, violent disruptions all are Americanized Jasmine. Through the movement from East to West and last destination from Middle West she realizes unfettered American self-hood. All these changes that came into her life are due to the influence of multiculturalism and here the crucial theme is individual will Vs fate. The individual skill stands for her possibilities of self-creation and Americanization and the fate implies her own tradition, ethnicity, immigration and so on.

The novel draws Jasmine’s spectacular journey from Hasnapur an Indian village to Northern California along with various characters. In this novel Jasmine moves Westward from the Eastcoast of United States only to escape from her past and to reinvent new opportunities of life. Jasmine as Jyoti tells the story of a poor girl who lived near Hasnapur village. Her life was always restricted under the strict rules of gender and poverty and the poverty stricken Jyoti marries Prakash who takes her to a nearby village Jullandhar. But before he realises his dream to study at American University he is killed in a terrorist attack. As a widow Jasmine decides to commit sati by jumping into the funeral pyre of her husband. She wants to do it not in India but at Florida University campus where Prakash had intended to join. So with all fake travel documents she lands illegally in Florida. But fate plays a cruel role upon her as she is brutally raped by an American namely Half Face. This violence changes the nature of protagonist and provokes an extraordinary transformation in her life and she stabs Half-Face to death by becoming Kali, the Hindu goddess of revenge. Later she becomes Jazzy under the hands of Lillian Gosdon, but when the marriage of Taylor and Wyle, an American couple in Manhattan, collapses she predictably becomes Taylor’s wife as Jase. Although she had only a middle school education she gets a teaching post in her native language at Columbia University. But on seeing her husband’s killer at park, Jasmine flees to Iowa for her own safety. Later, after getting job in a

bank Jasmine becomes the wife (consort) of a banker as Jane. At the end of the novel Taylor urges her to go with him to California to start a new life. She accepts the invitation and runs away with Taylor.

Jyoti, who was born to impoverished parents in Hasnapur, is now the heroine of the novel Jasmine. She arrives in America without money and passport. She both physically and mentally moves from “illegal immigrant” to stable American resident. During the whole period she gets “widowhood” and “exile” for Jyoti and America guarantees Jase/Jane the conjugal bliss with a Midwestern banker. From the beginning, Jyoti rebels against her cultural inscriptions. When she was only seven, she was stunned when an astrologer foretells her future. That seer foretells her future, pronouncing “my widowhood and exile... I was nothing, a speck in the solar system... I was helpless, doomed” (1). In response she whispers: “I don’t believe you,” and claiming that a wound on her forehead is her “third eye” she proclaims herself a “sage,” rewriting her position from passive object to empowered seer. Then swimming in the river, she happens across “what I don’t want to become,” a dog’s old, waterlogged carcass” (3). After the death of her husband Prakash, she follows unpleasant underground routes to the new world by landing Florida. Thus she is totally transformed passing through different cultures as preordained of her fate. Later she leaps into an intellectual, cosmopolitan life by loving Taylor and becoming a nanny to Duff. The life with Bud distinguishes her from other migrants who remain hyphenated and contrasts “genetic” assumptions of American identity. At last she leaves Bud to join Taylor. Here she dismisses one form of responsibility (i.e. with Bud and family) and moves away from her pattern of conformity to dominant, male inscriptions of her. She thinks to herself, “I am not choosing between men. I am caught between the promise of America (choosing Taylor/California) and old-world dutifulness (Bud/Iowa)” (214). In each and every stage Jasmine struggles to secure her own place in the new world and the cultural changes of her life leads Jasmine in different multilayered world of hope. Her past is always with her while she says “Watch me reposition the stars, I whisper to astrologer who floats cross-legged above my kitchen stove... I cry into Taylor’s shoulder, cry through all the lies I’ve given birth to, cry for my dead.” (214)

This novel Jasmine is the Americanization of a village girl who has the capacity to live the many lives of reincarnation. The fiction has an integral link with Jasmine’s assimilation of American culture. As all other immigrant writers Bharati Mukherjee has placed the changing cultural landscape of the nation. A diasporic text starts from a position of arrival, provisional and deferred, hybridity and problems of otherness. Migrants produce a self with multiple and partial identification. Mukherjee’s writings focus on multiple dislocations of personal biography, and cultural identity. Her narratives bring changes, transformations as well as new possibilities. In this novel Jasmine the protagonist asserts: “I changed because I wanted to. To bunker oneself inside nostalgia, to sheathe the heart in a bullet-proof vest, was to be a coward.” (185)

The transformation of Jyoti starts when Prakash wants her to become a modern city woman. Here begins Jyoti’s cultural change and Mukherjee depicts the complexity of identity formation. The renaming of Jyoti to Jasmine is a sign of her initial migration away from traditional India. Jasmine has a separate identity but Jyoti and Jasmine are two separate selves. The death of her husband Prakash, her emigration to America, her meeting with Half-Face and his disrespectful treatment all lead jasmine towards her own destiny. Jasmine’s staving on Half-Face to death for his ill-treatment expresses her thirst to start a new life in America and to

separate the naive identity of her past. Jasmine created a new identity only from her destruction, her existing self and cultural changes. Through Lillian she gladly accepted the so called American culture and life by becoming Jazz and she tried to be separated from her past. While living with Hayes, Jasmine tried to empower herself to another. American cultural and these cultural changes bring Jasmine in a different world to create more dominant identity. She has changed her name Jyoti to Jasmine, Jasmine to Jazz, Jazz to Jase and at last Jase to Jane. Jasmine is recognized with her racial difference yet the typical American she always wanted to be. At the end we can realize that Jasmine cannot remain stable anywhere in her life because disruption and change are the means of her survival. Her surrounding environments and cultural changes lead her in a multiplicity of consciousness.

Different names assume the multiple situations in her journey towards self- actualization. In the novel Jasmine Mukherjee takes a peasant woman from Punjab to Florida, to New York, to Iowa, and at the end of the novel this peasant woman is about to set off for California. Her movements brought her mind closer to her dream of being an American and of belonging to the New world by accepting for herself with new names Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase and Jane. She feels the tension whenever trying to accommodate these changes: “Jyothi Jasmine: I shuttled between identities,” she says, and “... I felt suspended between worlds”. (70)

Mukherjee’s works are recognized as the fine portrayal of her different diasporic experiences. The same novel Jasmine recaptures the experiences of immigrants. Her fiction is the repetition of diasporic predicament, it is wrought under different angles of experience both same or not and terrifying. Her characters are the representatives of human caprice who are caught in a moment of self-preservation and glimpse the horror of difference. So we can see Mukherjee as a psychoanalyst of culture and the champion of voiceless. Her narratives particularly the Tiger’s Daughter, or Wife or The Middleman are balanced between interiority/ exteriority, self/society and anarchy/culture. So her fictions are the pure ironic commentaries of contemporary culture and society.

Mukherjee has developed her stories from different cultural perspectives. Her protagonists always lack personal as well as cultural identity and become the victims by racism, sexism and other social oppressions. Mukherjee’s fiction shifts between home and exile, migration and mutation, self invention and predestination. The aspects of immigrant experiences, her politics and perspectives changed continuously throughout of her life. The changes of her attitudes gave a new shape in her narrativeness. Her earlier works focus on the themes like displacement and alienation, nostalgic feeling towards homelands and a vain attempt to forge new homes and identities. Truly, she is an expatriate caught between two cultures and a conquering immigrant of United States. She rejects the “aloofness of expatriation” and joyously embraces the exuberance of immigration . Jasmine under goes different situations that bring violence with them. These violences are both the physical and mental violences that force her to be reborn as a different person. The violent moments come with the changes of culture and life of the protagonist of the novel which reflect psychological pain.

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