

NEGOTIATING THE THIRD SPACE: AN INSIGHT INTO BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S

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Abstract: Diasporic writers while dealing with problems faced by their characters in an alien land are compelled to create a third space in their lives. The people of diaspora who are usually settlers, migrants, transported convicts slaves or indentured labourers have a persistent feeling of nostalgia, rootlessness, alienation and cultural insecurity. Caught between two value-worlds and two different streams of cultures the diasporas longing for the homeland is counterbalanced by the pull of the adopted land. The narration of all the novels of Bharathi Mukherjee is caught between two worlds, Calcutta, her home and the united states of America, her exile *Jasmine* is no exception. An attempt is made in this paper to study the struggles undergone by Jasmine, the protagonist of the novel to assimilate and accommodate herself to the new culture and finally throw herself into the American way of living.

Keywords: diaspora, alienation, rootlessness, exile assimilate, accommodate.

Diasporic writers while dealing with the problems faced by their protagonists and other characters in an alien land are compelled to create a third space in their lives. According to Homi Bhabha “the intervention of the third space challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary past kept alive in the national tradition of the people”. (156). Bharati Mukherjee, a prominent writer of the Indian Diaspora too creates a third space for her characters. An attempt is made in this paper to study how Jasmine the protagonist of the novel *Jasmine* tries to overcome the problems faced by her in America and makes all possible attempts to adopt or accommodate herself in the new space.

In order to study the third space, a knowledge of the term ‘Diaspora’ becomes essential. Though the term has varied definitions and connotations associated with it, its origin is from ancient Greek implying “scattering or sowing of seeds”. At present the term is broadly used as the synonym of “expatriates”, “emigrants” or “exiles” who leave their homeland and settle in other countries in pursuit of better prospects. These people have a persistent feeling of nostalgia, rootlessness, alienation and cultural insecurity. The people of diaspora are usually settlers, migrants, transported convicts, slaves or labourers. In short, it is a Janus-like journey looking backward in their attempt to move forward. It is not merely a travel across the physical boundaries. The concerned person’s imagination, culture and sociology also travel with him and this causes a sort of perpetual conflict. As Jayadeep Sarangi has rightly pointed out, “Caught between two value-worlds and two different streams of cultures the diaspora’s nostalgic longing for the centrifugal ‘home land’ is counterbalanced by indomitable pull of the adopted land” (1).

Bharati Mukherjee’s novels deal with the mental plight of people constantly trying to reconstruct their present from a past that always haunts them. The narration of all her novels is caught between two worlds, Calcutta, her home and the United States of America, her exile. Her novels *Jasmine*, *Desirable Daughters* and *The Tree Bride* establish her position as an Indo-American. Though she places her firm stance at the threshold of America she tries to strike a balance between India and America, by effectively excavating the Indian myths and giving them right interpretations.

Jasmine stands out as the best among her other novels in expounding the concept of ‘American identity’ in a succinct manner. The novel attempts to find a remedy for all the diasporic issues detailed in her other novels. It may not be an exaggeration to say that with *Jasmine* starts the second diasporic phase of Mukherjee. This is made clear in her interview with Ameena Mere where she openly declares her position. “I transformed myself from being an expatriate to realizing I’m an immigrant, whether I like it or not. And that I do like it. My roots are here. There is no going back” (Web). The various actions in the novel reveal this. The subaltern terms that normally cloud the reader of a diaspora novel gradually fade away. The novel also traces the growth and evolution of an Indian expatriate in America into a citizen of the nation. Jasmine undergoes a lot of struggles in her initial stages. Gradually, she overcomes all the hurdles with firm determination. Moreover the choices made by her at various stages of her stay in the States deserves appreciation. No doubt, as an existential character, she throws herself into the American way of living.

A close reading of *Jasmine* reveals that Jasmine’s struggle for existence is entangled with her diasporic conflicts. From the time she moves out of her village, Hasnapur in Punjab she has to face a lot of hardships. Unlike the existential heroes of Saul Bellow, who always make the wrong choice, she makes the right choice and moves forward with firm determination. She stands in direct contrast to the protagonists Tara of *Tiger’s Daughter* and Dimple of *Wife*. Whereas these two ladies are totally dislocated both in India and America, Jasmine survives and adapts herself to a new way of life. Ultimately she makes an outcry like her author, who defiantly announces to her American readers, “I am one of you”. It is evident that her process of transformation and resistance appear to be the result of negotiation and adaptation and not mere adaptation from the beginning of her journey.

Mukherjee uses the stream of consciousness technique to explain the growth of her protagonist. Jasmine becomes a mouthpiece of Mukherjee. She narrates the story as a twenty four year old pregnant widow, living in Iowa with her crippled lover Bud Ripplemayer. She also relates biographical events that span the distance between her Punjabi birth and American adult life.

Throughout the course of the novel her identity, along with her name changes from Jyothi, to Jasmine, to Jazzy and to Jane. The narrative shuffles between the past and the present, between India of her early life and America of her present one. The past is Jyothi's childhood in Hasnapur and her marriage to Prakash who gave her the name Jasmine. The present is her life as Jane in Iowa, where she is a live-in-companion to Bud Ripplemeyer a small town banker. She leaves India for the United States after the murder of her husband. Her setting off for America is the beginning of her quest which is full of displacement and transformation away from her homeland. The journey which she calls her "Odyssey" (Jasmine; 91) is an illegal one and she enters her dreamland only through the back door.

The first thing, I saw were the two cones of nuclear plant, and smoke spreading from them in complicated but seemingly purposeful patterns, edges lit by the rising sun, like a grey, intricate map of an unexplored island continent, against the pale unscratched blue of the sky. I waded through Eden's waste: plastic bottles, floating oranges, boards, sodden boxes, white and green plastic sacks tied shut but picked open by birds and pulled apart by crabs (Jasmine 95)

Jasmine's American dream collapses at this very first sight. The worst is yet to happen at the motel where she has to stop for her night on this alien land. She is not only raped by the man called Half Face, but also humiliated by him.

He looked at me, and at the suitcase.....

He hefted the bag on to the bed and unsnapped the catches. Out came my sandalwood Ganapati. He propped it up against a picture on the dresser. He noticed my photo album and picked it up. Pictures of Prakash and of Pitaji, wrapped in an old sari.... at the bottom, the blue suit.

"Who is this for? He demanded. "A kid?"

"It is my husband's" I said.

"Kind of a scrawny little bastard, ain't he?"

He laughed and dropped the jacket back in the suitcase (101).

Jasmine's first experience is significant in that she experiences another death and this leads her in her quest for life. She kills Half Face and imitates a sati ritual before leaving the motel. "Instead of killing herself and passively conforming to an identity politics that would define her solely as a victim, she decides to kill her attacker" (Jasmine 106). The bloody ritual is followed by a purification ceremony of her body in the first American shower she sees in her life and leaves the place.

"I took out a blue-jean jacket bought for me in Delhi by my brothers.... I buttoned up the jacket and sat by the fire. With the first streaks of dawn, my first full American day, I walked out the front drive of the motel to the highway and began my journey, travelling light (107-108)

During her stay in America, Jasmine feels that she is being marginalized. The description of an officer on TV about the illegal refugees. "The border's like Swiss cheese and all the mice are squirming through the holes" (23) annoys her. She makes a decision to get Americanized as quickly as possible. Lillian Gordon, a kind Quaker lady helps her in this regard. She gives Jasmine shelter, calls her Jazzy and teaches her how to talk, walk and dress like an American. After a while, she leaves for Manhattan. There she serves as a caregiver to Duff, the adopted daughter of Taylor and Wylie Hayes. Taylor gives her a new name "Jase". In due course she becomes more Americanized in her dressing style and her proficiency in English. Though she has changed her way of life, she still cherishes Indian values. She understands the "liquidity" and "transitoriness" of human relationship in America when Wylie decides to leave Taylor for economist Staurt in search of real happiness. Jasmine finds herself rooted in the American culture.

Binary oppositions like the conflict between male and female relationships eastern and western world cultures and the effects of the past and the need to adapt to the present for a better future help her in her quest. She has a positive attitude and she gets changed only because she desired the change herself. She admits "Jyoti was now a sati-goddess: She had burned herself in a trash-can-funeral pyre behind a boarded-up motel in Florida". Jasmine lived for the future, for Wijn and Wife. (156). This forces her to run from New York to Iowa.

In Iowa, Jasmine recalls her past experiences in America. She cannot understand the reality of American society where nothing lasts. "We arrive so eager to learn, to participate, only to find the monuments are plastic, agreements are annulled. Nothing is forever, nothing is so terrible, or so wonderful, that it won't disintegrate" (163). Through these words Mukherjee exposes the inner reality of American life. Jasmine's voice reflects the dilemma of an uprooted creature trying hard for belongingness in a place where relationships are plastic rather than lasting. Again she is reminded of the words of the astrologer in her native village. "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. I was only seven then, fast and venturesome, scabrous -armed from leaves and thorns" (3). Moreover, Jasmine's psyche is shaped by the stories which her mother had recited to her of "the holiest sages", the "third eye" they develop in the middle of their foreheads to peer "out into invisible worlds"(5).

Jasmine's experiences in America and Iowa make her understand that she can obtain emancipation only through suffering. In Iowa, mother Ripplemeyer helps her in getting a job in her son's bank as a letter girl. Bud the banker is very much fascinated by Jasmine and within a period of six month he is able to win her heart. Within a year she settles in a live- in-relationship with him though he is a middle aged divorcee. In due course Du, a Vietnamese boy from the refugee camp joins them. Jasmine is full of sympathy for him as he too is an immigrant like herself. She is worried that American violence does not spare even the benevolent Bud who is also married. She plays the role of a wife to Bud without marriage and mother to Du. Jasmine who murdered Half Face for raping her, now willingly chooses not only to live with him but also carries his child in her womb.

Being an existential heroine, Jasmine has to choose at various stages of her life. She has to choose between Taylor and Bud at a time when Du leaves for Los Angeles to join his sister. Jasmine who is now Jane is disappointed by the action of Du for she had started identifying herself with him. She cannot reject her earlier employer Taylor's proposal to her to accompany him and Duff to California. Ultimately, she decides to leave Bud, justifying her act. "I am not choosing between men, I am caught between the

promise of America and old world dutifulness” (*Jasmine* 140). She leaves the “old value dutifulness” and decides to live for herself in California with the fond hope that the promise of America is eagerly awaiting her there. Though she cannot change her past she is aware of the nothingness that is created between her past Indian self and her present American self for “Man first of all is the being who hurls himself towards a future and who is conscious of imagining himself as being in the future” (Satre 345).

Through exploring the journey of Jasmine and her identification, Bharati Mukherjee has highly succeeded in bringing out the impact of language, form imperialism and post colonialism on the life of people. She also portrays cross-cultural transition through Jasmine’s odyssey from Punjab to California via Florida, New York and Iowa. Mukherjee with her personal experiences as a diaspora successfully creates a third space for Jasmine who begins her life in exile, moves on to expatriation, then to assimilation and to cultural hybridity.

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