

**DESH AND VIDESH: BE/LONGINGNESS IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S
JASMINE AND JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE NAMESAKE***

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Abstract

One of the most significant offshoot of globalization is the mass migration of people from the indigenous land to a land alien to them but blooming with new opportunities. This mass migration leads to establishment of diasporic communities in a foreign land. These communities though move to encash their talent and explore new avenues but emotionally remain attached with their native language, culture, food and traditions. This rupture from their 'home' affects them both emotionally and psychologically with a constant urge in them to keep the touch intact. Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri both wrote about such characters who undergo a series of experiences both in India and abroad; lose contact with their 'home' and subsequently lose identity.

Keywords: Diaspora, immigrant psyche, dilemma, belonging, longing

In a postcolonial world vibrating with the new explorations, fantastic opportunities and great avenues for people across the globe, what we see is the migration/emigration of people. The various terms that have often been used in literature for these migrations are dislocation, emigration, expulsion, dispersion and most commonly used is diaspora. Thus diaspora is the movement of indigenous people or a population of common people to a place other than the homeland. It can be voluntary or forced and usually the movement is to a place far from the original home. World history is replete with the instances about mass dispersion such as the expulsion of Jews from Europe, the African Trans-Atlantic slave trade, the century long exile of the Messenia's under Spartan rule. The term Diaspora carries with it a sense of displacement with a desire in the people to return to their homeland.

Much of the literature available on the Indian Diaspora pertains to Indian migration, their socioeconomic and cultural experiences, experiences of adaptation, assimilation in the new culture with the feeling of longing for past experiences. Commenting upon the reasons for displacement in the Indian context, Kingsley Davis remarks, "...pressure to emigrate has always been great enough to provide a stream of emigrants much larger than the actual given

opportunities"(1968). And Tinker puts it, " there is a combination of push and pull: the push of inadequate opportunity in South Asia and the pull of the better prospects in the West."(1977:10) Indian history provides umpteen examples of mobility of people that undoubtedly was motivated by varied interests yet facilitated the cultural exchanges with the rest of the world. In the same context, Bhabha remarks in his *Location of Culture*: "The transnational dimension of cultural transformation -- migration, diaspora, displacement, relocation – makes the process of cultural translation a complex form of signification. The natural(ized), unifying discourse of nation, peoples, or authentic folk tradition, those embedded myths of cultures particularity, cannot be readily referenced. The great, though unsettling, advantage of this position is that it makes you increasingly aware of the construction of culture and the invention of tradition" (1994: 247).The Indian classical texts describe about long journeys that saints and monks undertook for the spread of knowledge, peace and love. The spread of Hindus and Buddhists across geographical boundaries of India during the early medieval period saw the emergence of Hindu and Buddhist kingdom in several places. During the colonial period, most of the Indians were taken to other countries as indentured labourers to develop rail networks, to work for plantation and other menial work assigned to them.

Residing in the distant lands, diasporic Indians undoubtedly have succeeded spectacularly in their fields but longed to maintain their emotional and cultural links with the country. Thus the literature about immigrants is a bye product of cultural displacement and its traumatic effect on the displaced ones. The displaced ones develop an 'immigrant psyche' which shows particular stresses that are symptomatic of mental aberrations. Security, peace and rootedness of an individual are replaced by feelings of anxiety, pain and fear in a sordid and exiled place.

Bharati Mukherjee, currently working as a professor in the department of English at the University of California, Berkeley, presents a deep insight into the Indian culture and immigrant experience through her works. The Indian-born American writer Bharati Mukherjee is one of the prominent novelists of Indian Diaspora. She has created a fair place for herself in the literary circle abroad by her contribution to Indian English writing. Her commendable work places her in the class of great diasporic writers like Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth and Jhumpa Lahiri. Diasporic writers that have gained immense popularity in the last decade raise questions regarding the definitions of 'home' and 'nation'. As Pramod K. Nayar opines:

Much of diasporic writing explores the theme of an original home. This original home as now lost– due– to their exile–is constantly worked into the imagination and myth of the displaced individual/community. (191).

The ailment of the human psyche is Bharati's forte. She emphatically displays the damaging effects of the severance of the natural roots and the dislocation of geography, climate, race, custom which leads to nostalgia and psychosis. . Pulled apart by two cultures, caught between exile and home coming, rendered homeless both at home and abroad, the individuals get often doomed to a pallid, savourless and rootless existence. Ortega Y Gasset profoundly defines the modern man's predicament:

'... the other man also has his here but this here of the Other is not mine. Our 'heres' are mutually exclusive, they are not interpenetrable, they are different, with the result that the perspective in which the world appears to him is always different from mine. Hence our worlds do not adequately coincide. For the present I am in mine and he is in his. And this is a fresh reason for radical solitude. Not only am I outside of his; we are mutually

two outsiders (fuera) and hence radically strangers(forasteros).’ (1957: 75)

The story of *Jasmine* is the story of dislocation, nostalgia, longing for original home and re-establishing connections with its past through reminiscences. The novel opens with an astrologer’s prediction about Jyoti’s widowhood and exile. “ 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”(1). Undeterred by the prophesy, she continues her life and gets married to Prakash Vijn. Prakash wants her to become a modern city woman and as he aids her in her transformation from ‘Jyoti’ to ‘Jasmine’. She perceives herself as the woman he envisions her to be, propels herself forth and eventually becomes the person that Prakash desires to create. “He wanted to break down the Jyoti as I’d been in Hasnapur and make me a new kind of city woman. To break off the past, he gave me a new name; Jasmine... Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttled between identities” (77). Jasmine’s renaming is a sign of her initial cleavage from her native hometown, her culture and moreover her roots.

Jasmine’s life takes a tragic turn when her husband Prakash is murdered and to fulfil his dreams, she migrates to America. Upon her arrival in Florida, she meets Half-Face, the Captain of the ship who rapes her voraciously. Her initial encounter with an alien land is intimidating. She gives a vent to her suppressed anger and violently stabs Half-Face to death. “No one to call to, no one to disturb us. Just me and the man who had raped me, the man I had murdered”(119). Jasmine’s destruction of native identity, separate from India marks the inception of her new and avant-garde life. As Mandaville points out :

“The estrangement of a community in diaspora – its separation from the ‘natural’ setting of the homeland – often leads to a particularly intense search for and negotiation of identity: gone are many traditional anchor points of culture; conventional hierarchies of authority can fragment. In short, the condition of diaspora is one in which the multiplicity of identity and community is a key dynamic” (172).

Jasmine then meets Dr Mary Webb, with no husband and a big balance listed on her bank accounts, a sociology teacher who arranges a conference with scholars where Jasmine admits the effect of nostalgia and reminiscences in one’s life. At the meeting, Jasmine admits to having flashbacks of previous lives sporadically.

Jasmine is further renamed here, again losing hold on her identity and is called as ‘Jazzy’ by Lilian. Once the bond is snapped from her native village Hasnapur , she constantly suffers from the lack of the feeling of belongingness to one place and proceeds with her migratory plans and moves to New York City. With Taylor, his wife Wylie and their daughter Duff, she creates yet another identity upon a new perception of herself. But though Jasmine creates a new identity for every new situation, her former identities are never completely erased. Jasmine becomes aware of her racial identity because Taylor and his friends understand that she was from South Asia and accept her ethnic identity. “Taylor's friends in New York used to look at me and say, "You're Iranian, right?" If I said no, then, "Pakistani, Afghan, or Punjabi?" They were strikingly accurate about most things, and always out to improve themselves. Even though I was just an au pair, professors would ask if I could help them with Sanskrit or Arabic, Devanagari or Gurmukhi script. I can read Urdu, not Arabic. I can't read Sanskrit. They had things they wanted me to translate, paintings they wanted me to decipher”(33). Despite Taylor’s friends curiosity towards Jasmine, she is accepted and endeavour is made by everyone to assimilate her in the new culture. In becoming ‘Jase’, Jasmine gets increasingly comfortable with

her sexuality, falls in love with married Taylor and then escapes the scene on unexpected appearance of Sukhwinder, the killer of Prakash.

In Baden she meets Bud Ripplemeyer, an American banker who instantly falls in love with her. They eventually marry and Bud renames Jasmine 'Jane', yet another sign of her rupture from her identity and ethnicity.

The end of the novel finds Jasmine moving to California with Taylor, uncertain of what the future will bring but nevertheless confident in her decision to leave. The shifting of her identity from 'Jyoti' to 'Jasmine' to 'Jane' to 'Jase' is suggestive of the destruction of one personality and an emergence of a new one. This sense of movement further reinforces the notion that her identity is forever-evolving, she cannot remain in a static life by belonging to one culture and identity. Jasmine remarkably mentions this sense of impermanence when she describes about her diasporic experience: "We are refugees and mercenaries and guest workers; you see us sleeping in airport lounges.....taking out for the hundredth time an aerogram promising.. a passport, a visa, a laissez-passer. We are the outcasts and deportees.. landing at the end of tarmacs.....roughly handled and taken to waiting rooms.... We are dressed in shreds of national costumes, out of season, the wilted plumage of intercontinental vagabondage. We ask only one thing: to be allowed to land; to pass through, to continue.. For us, there is only a slate and someone who remembers to write in chalk, DELAYED, or TO BE ANNOUNCED, or OUT OF SERVICE...What country? What continent? We pass through wars, through plagues...The zigzag route is straightest." (100-101).

Jasmine is therefore the most congruent exploration of Bharati into the dilemma of belonging and longing. Bharati's depiction of Jasmine throughout the novel traversing different alien nations is superb. She highlights Jasmine's alienation from her culture due to her constantly shifting identities. She longs for the safe confine of her original home in India. Temporarily Jasmine does acquire a foreign identity but it is fake. Her past: "is fully alive like a seed in the soil, awaiting the season of warmth and growth to bring it to germination"(Guha,1998,156).

The other work which I shall be deliberating upon is the famous and much read novel by Jhumpa Lahiri. Lahiri is an Indian-American author of Bengali origin, also recognised as the first Asian to win the prestigious Pulitzer prize for her debut story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* in 2000. Lahiri's *The Namesake*, named the 'New York Magazine Book of the Year', is a tale of characters uprooted from their native homes and their struggle to feel secured in a new culture. The very first chapter of the novel starts with the description of Ashima, a simple housewife feeling homeless in a foreign land:

"But nothing feels normal to Ashima. For the past eighteen months, ever since she's arrived in Cambridge, nothing has felt normal at all. It's not so much pain, which she knows, somehow, she will survive. It's the consequences: motherhood in a foreign land.....That it was happening so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved, had made it miraculous still. But she is terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare"(6).

Ashima suffers due to migration, feeling discomforted and stifled in the new atmosphere, disintegrated from her homeland. Lahiri intermittently makes mention of Ashima feeling disoriented in the new place and longing for her native home.

“ For Ashima, migrating to the suburbs feels more drastic, more distressing than the move from Calcutta to Cambridge had been. For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize , is a sort of lifelong pregnancy—a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner, Ashima believes, is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect”(49-50).

Not only Ashima is perplexed but Gogol also is disconnected from his native roots. He is referred as “ American – born confused deshi”(118) who neither feels at home in his native land nor at the ‘new’ home. “ But Gogol never thinks of India as desh. He thinks of it as Americans do, as India”(118). The novel delineates the predicament of today’s youth who remain disconnected with their native land, its customs, its traditions, its cultural richness and its varied people .

Gogol in the novel is a representative of today’s youth who attempts to snap his old ties and tries to lead a life without accepting his roots. He does not interact any of his colleagues belonging to his native land with a fear of his disclosure of his true identity. “ There are lots of ABCDs. He has no idea there are this many on campus. He has no ABCD friends at college. He avoids them, for they remind him too much of the way his parents choose to live, befriending people not so much because they like them, but because of a past they happen to share.”(118-119).

Lahiri’s novel delineates the psychological crisis resulting from the forfeiture of identity and roots. Gogol born and brought up in America does not feel any association with India, his country despite his frequent visits to his land on vacations. “ For a few days in Agra, which is as foreign to Ashima and Ashoke as it is to Gogol and Sonia, they are tourists, staying at a hotel with a swimming pool, sipping bottled water, eating in restaurants with forks and spoons, paying by credit card” (84).

The immigrants usually are discombobulated and alienated not only from the main society but also from themselves. Gogol too feels perplexed in the migrated land :

“ And in that case Nikhil will live on , publicly celebrated , unlike Gogol, Purposely hidden, Legally diminished, now all but lost”(290).

Jhumpa Lahiri presents forcefully the feeling of longing and desolation among the individuals in both the lands: their migrated land and their native land. “ Ashima feels lonely suddenly, horribly, permanently alone, and briefly, turned away from the mirror , she sobs for her husband. She feels overwhelmed by the thought of the move she is about to make , to the city that was once home and is now in its own way foreign. She feels both impatience and indifference for all the days she must live....”(278-279).

Through the character of Ashima the novelist highlights the estrangement of individuals, who are rendered homeless with not able to find their roots and identity.“ True to the meaning of her name, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere”(276).

Thus both Bharati and Lahiri vociferously projects the rupture of social association of the individuals with their native land and due to migration with their new ‘exile’ home. The

individuals suffer psychologically due to forfeit of social relationships and with no place to fall back upon.

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