

**THE THEME OF DIASPORA IN BHARATHI MUKHERJEE'S *JASMINE*
AND *DESIRABLE DAUGHTERS***

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Abstract

The word Diaspora was originally coined from Greek term Diaspora which means dispersion or scattering. Jewish people after the Babylonian captivity of 586 B.C returned from exile to Jerusalem, Jewish communities continued to exist throughout much of the ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern world, including Babylon, Egypt, Syria, Greece, and Rome. "Diaspora" referred to the people of that dispersion. The term was eventually extended in this century to refer to other peoples who are dispersed to regions outside their original homeland. Some of the most prominent Indian writers in English belong to the Diaspora. V.S.Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri and Shashi Tharoor are Diaspora writers. Even Vikram Seth and Rohinton Mistry became creative after they began to live abroad. Bharati Mukherjee in her novels attempt to bridge the gulf between "home" and "exile". Nostalgia, directness towards the culture you are absorbing, restitching and the divided settler evolving into a permanent alien getting transformed into a perfect immigrant are the elements of consciousness. In the present paper an attempt has been made to investigate or recognize the elements of diasporic consciousness in Bharati Mukherjee novels. The paper will discuss and analyse the theme of Diaspora on two of Bharati Mukherjee novels *Jasmine* and *Desirable daughters*.

Keywords: Diaspora, transnationalism, hybridity, assimilation, identity crisis

In the presented paper I have focused on the theme of Diaspora of the protagonist, Jyoti and Tara. The protagonist of Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* undergoes, as an illegal immigrant to America and her regeneration after many transformations with disintegration. Her most remarkable works reflect not only her pride in her Indian heritage, but also her celebration of embracing America. Her writing has gained significant recognition because she depicts the immigrant experiences, particularly that of the South Asian Diaspora in North America. In her writings she voices her own experiences to show the changing shape of American society. She describes herself as unhyphenated American and not the hyphenated Indian American title:

"I maintain that I am an American writer of Indian origin, not because I'm ashamed of my past, not because I'm betraying or distorting my past, but because my whole adult life has been lived here, and I write about the

people who are immigrants going through the process of making a home here” (Carb, *The Massachusetts Review* 29.4: 645)

Published in 1989, the novel *Jasmine* replicates Mukherjee’s celebratory tone of violent shining of identity through radical negotiations in the dominant culture. The story of an illiterate Punjabi girl who comes to America to self-Jasmine weaves immolates herself in the name of her dead husband. She is raped the day she lands in the United States and finds herself totally ostracized in an all with good-- white neighborhood. However, through her chanced encounters intentioned people in America, she completely transforms herself from an ignorant, helpless immigrant to a confident working woman, an unwed mother, a reckless lover, and in the end, “greedy with wants and reckless from hope” (*Jasmine* 214). She denies the material comforts of her domestic life and succumbs to the mysterious calling of adventure by eloping with her former lover.

In *Jasmine*, journey is a metaphor that advocates the evermoving, regenerating process of life itself. In India, as *Jyoti*, *Jasmine* is seen against the backdrop of the rigid and patriarchal Indian society. In America, herselfawareness is reflected in the relationships with Bud, Taylor, and Du. However, her first husband *Prakash* initiates her transformation from traditional *Jyoti* to self assured emancipated American women, *Jane*. *Jasmine* was born in a rural village, *Hasnapur*. She tells the story as a twenty year old pregnant widow, living in Iowa with her crippled lover, *Bud Ripplemeyer*. *Jasmine* juxtaposes in her memory each of her identities four yeas *Jyoti*, *Jasmine*, *Kali*, *Jazzy*, *Jase* and *Jane*, implying thatshe evokes and revises her past in articulating her identities.

The author depicts this transformation and regeneration as a positive and optimistic journey. *Jasmine* creates a new world consisting of new ideas and values, constantly unmasking her past. She tries to establish a new cultural identity by integrating new desires, skills and habits. This regeneration is defined more significantly in the changes in her attitude. *Jyoti*, the protagonist of *Jasmine* being “the fifth daughter, seventh of nine children” (39) is literally strangled to death by her grandmother is a survivor and fighter from the beginning.

Jasmine survives the infanticide only to become a rebellious child who stands apart from other traditional women in words and actions. From the very beginning *Bharati Mukherjee* has delineated *Jyoti* as a rebel against blind beliefs and superstitions. Breaking from the usual tradition she chooses *Prakash Vijn*, an educated, intelligent young man, who renames and reshapes her *Jasmine*. The renaming is to continue every time she becomes a new woman. He supports her and nurtures her spirits instead of suppressing them.

Jasmine appears to be jubilant sharing the ambition of her husband, intent to go to America, a land of her dreams and opportunities. But the fate snatches her husband from her when she had just started h er life, leaving her shattered and heartbroken at the age of seventeen. *Prakash* is killed in a bomb blast on the eve of their departure to America. Grief stricken after his death, *Jasmine* hears his voice exhorting her from every corner of her room: “There is no dying, there is only an ascending or a descending, a moving on to other Planes. Don’t crawl back to *Hasnapur* and feudalism. That *Jyoti* is dead”. (86) So, instead of succumbing to fate and leading a life of widowhood she decides to set off for America, of course with the help of her brothers. “*Prakash* had taken *Jyoti* and created *Jasmine*, and *Jasmine* would complete the mission of *Prakash*” (63).

Mukherjee here sets her free from the claustrophobic and culturally absurd native place. She sets off for America with forged documents. Thus begins her journey of transformation with disintegration and regeneration in the alien land. As an attractive young girl, who arrives

alone and unescorted on alien shores, Jasmine come across a series of shattering incidents during the adventurous journey. She meets HalfFace, the captain of the trawler in which she crosses over to Florida. Half Face in a motFace had “lost an eye and ear and most of his cheek in a paddy field in Vietnam.”(104). She is brutally raped by Half el. She disintegrates and becomes heartbroken at this incident and decides to commit suicide but at another moment American outlook redeems her and is enlivened with the spirit to survive through eliminating the American evil and is mad to emerge like Indian goddess Kali to slit the throat of her rapist as a symbol of complete eradication of evil of consumerist culture.

Jasmine’s full transformation, from the victim into a vengeful Goddess, seems to be reinforced by imagining herself as the reincarnation of Kali. Her Indian identity leaves her at this point; the desire to fulfill a mission which had seen her through the difficult passages to America is abandoned. The body becomes a mere shell, soon to be discarded and what she discards is her Indian psyche and is reborn in America as Jase and Jane. She is reborn several times.

Hence Jasmine’s transformation of identity occurs not only through construction, but also by the destruction of her existing self. Lillian Gordan, the first among Jasmine’s many rescuers, introduces Jasmine to the first concept of American life. Lillian bestows upon her the nick name ‘Jazzy’, a symbol of her entrance into and acceptance of American culture which she welcomes gladly. While staying with Lillian; she begins her process of assimilation by learning how to become American. Then, Jasmine lodges with Prakash’s Professor, Mr. Vadhera. But she feels uncomfortable in Professorji’s house which they have converted into a Punjabi ghetto. She wants to get away from the traditional ‘Indianness’ and

Jasmine moves to Manhattan, New York to join a glamorous and emancipated couple, Taylor and Wylie Hayes and their adopted daughter Duff as a Caregiver. Jasmine is renamed as Jase by Taylor and starts her transformations into sophisticated American women. Jasmine transforms but this time the change is not from a reaction, but rather from her very own yearning for personal change. In becoming Jase, Jasmine gets increasingly comfortable with her sexuality which she always tried to repress earlier, more so, after her traumatic experience. Though Jasmine creates a new identity for every new situation, her former identities are never completely erased.

Desirable Daughters is a tale of immigrants and the attitude of three sisters and their ways of negotiating the multiple dislocations in three different perspectives. The three sisters, who are the daughters of Motilal Bhattacharjee and the great-grand daughters of Jaikrishna Gangooly, belong to a traditional Bengali Brahmin family. They part ways taking their own course of voyage towards their destiny. They are a blend of traditional and modern outlook. Padma and Parvati have their own trajectories of choices; the former an immigrant of ethnic origin, New Jersey, and the latter married to her own choice and settled in the posh locality of Bombay with an entourage of servants to cater her.

Tara, the narrator of the novel, takes the readers deep into the intricacies of the New World and seems to float rootless with time. The fluidity of her identity testifies not only her own but also the fluidity of the immigrants. She values her traditional upbringing but takes pride in moving forward in life. Her image of her family values forms a wall of security around her that camouflage the fragile vulnerable self.

Tara as a young wife stays for ten years with Bish Chatterjee, but his almost sinister preoccupation with his profession leaves her yearning for companionship and care, the couple eventually separate. Next, she finds solace in Andy’s arms, her live-in partner, but again, when

Andy leaves her she feels threatened and comes back to Bish. Her rhapsodized soul takes dip as she is confronted with the realities of terrorism. New revelations unfurl as her son declares that he is a gay, tearing apart her cocoon and, the final blow is her house being bombed and Bish Chatterjee is crippled and dependent on her. Finally, Tara Bhattacharjee returns home to find solace at her father's house. She further probes into her family tree to unveil the life of 'Tree Bride' her ancestor. The retrospective journey is in fact a return to the roots seeking Eastern solution to the weeds developed in the Western World.

In *Desirable Daughters*, Mukherjee fuses near and far, traditional and modern which transform and recreate the meaning of cultural space. In the novel Tara attempts to reconfigure her meaning as a trans-national and trans-cultural subject and attempts to center the narrative upon her individual experiences as a diasporic shuttle. She is a frustrated woman dwindling menacingly in the alternative models of survival between territories, migrations and mediations.

Tara, like Mukherjee's diasporic characters struggles hard to occupy the translational space, after multiple dislocations and ruptures. Most of her fictions stems from the same dichotomy of growing up in two cultures as it is woven in Tara's trajectory from one location to another. Tara experiences the recurrence of this dichotomy and constitutes the epicenter of the most important demographic dislocations of the modern times. It now represents an important compelling force in world culture. Salman Rushdie points out: '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 villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands Indians of the mind.'

The protagonists of her first two novels *Tara* and *Jasmine* are completely dislocated both in India and in America, whereas *Jasmine* survives and reinstates herself to a new life. Finally she makes an outcry like her author, who defiantly announces to her American readers, "I am one of you" and in this assertion she has declared herself as an American in the immigrant tradition. The exuberance of immigration, which comes with the acquisition of Americanness and the immigrant Indianness as a sort of fluid identities to be celebrated, does not come easily. In *Jasmine*, the protagonist's struggle symbolizes the restless search of a rootless person irked by a depressing sense of isolation all around. Her journey through life leads *Jasmine* through many transformations in various locations. In her 'Land of Opportunity', *Jasmine* is thrown from one state of insecurity to another and she lets go all her hold on things which she would have held dear in India. She realizes that she has become a drifter moving in a world of uncertainties:

"I feel at times like emphasizes e a stone hurtling through diaphanous mist, unable to grab hold, unable to slow myself, yet unwilling to abandon the ride I'm on. Down and down I go, where I'll stop, God only knows (139).

Mukherjee's women are perennially in a quest for freedom in all aspects of their lives. In *Desirable Daughters*, there is a celebration of an evolving identity, an identity that changes constantly when cultural connections are lost, resulting in creation of multiple selves. The efforts of maintaining both identities – partly Indian, partly American – make her the hybrid of new culture that again poses the question of her real identity. Thus, throughout the novel, Bharati Mukherjee depicts the identity crisis of its protagonists who is longing for her new self. The three women characters portrayed in the *Desirable Daughters* are individualistic, react, to different circumstances in dissimilar ways, and yet there is a gradual process of self-

actualization in them that helps them to realize their dreams and overcome the sense of isolation and disillusionment.

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