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The conflictual components in Bharati Mukherjee's migrant aesthetics and postcolonial subject formation: A study of *Jasmine*

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Abstract

Mukherjee's women characters are not free from the memory of silent repression of the native tradition or the same 'split screen' of self. An important change of perspective occurs when they land in an alien hub. They suffer displacement, both physical and psychological and the ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses creates confusion and chaos when instantly infused by the splinters of another location of culture. Jasmine does not lack intellectual, emotional and psychological depth but initially it seems that she is more on superficial aping of the Western behavior pattern than self-assertion of any meaning. Before she undergoes mutation after several dislocations, she suffers from some erratic panting for space, the identity of which was not known to her. In the portrayal of the transformation of a docile Indian wife into an aggressive Indo-American woman there is clear suggestion of a diasporic predicament-the relocation of culture.

Keywords: displacement, location, dislocations, space, identity repression, split screen, alien hub, diasporic predicament relocation of culture

1. Introduction

Mukherjee's women characters are not free from the memory of silent repression of the native tradition or the same 'split screen' of self. An important change of perspective occurs when they land in an alien hub. They suffer displacement, both physical and psychological and the ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses creates confusion and chaos when instantly infused by the splinters of another location of culture. Jasmine does not lack intellectual, emotional and psychological depth but initially it seems that she is more on superficial aping of the Western behavior pattern than self-assertion of any meaning. Before she undergoes mutation after several dislocations, she suffers from some erratic panting for space, the identity of which was not known to her. In the portrayal of the transformation of a docile Indian wife into an aggressive Indo-American woman there is clear suggestion of a diasporic predicament-the relocation of culture.

She endeavored to submerge deep into the chaotic psyche of those immigrants who have been surviving in the conflict of traditional Indian values; intrinsic in their personality. She also indicates their fascinating allurements for Western mode of living that they have chosen out of their professional compulsions or for their urge to attain a greater freedom in moderate, liberal and dynamic society of America, disciplined and disseminated at the same time. She has ordered her novels within the frame of the didactics of immigrants and the aesthetics of dislocation. The thematic centers of Bharati Mukherjee's fiction are more or less aimed at this ambivalence. Her focus remains on the predicament of migrant entities, colliding self with the other, and the possibilities for absorption and rejection in the New World. To quote Bhabha:

The discriminatory effects of the discourse of cultural colonialism, for instance, do not simply or singly refer to a 'person', or a dialectical power struggle between self and other, or a discrimination between mother culture and alien cultures. Produced through the strategy of disavowal, the *reference* of discrimination is always to a process of splitting as the condition of subjection: a discrimination between the mother culture and its bastards, the self and its doubles, where the trace of what is disavowed is not repressed but repeated as something *different*—a mutation, a hybrid ^[1].

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The transformation of the feudal wife Jyoti into the modern, English speaking Jasmine, unavoidably involves an aggressive initiation in Prakash's blood. And perhaps the climactic flash of Jasmine's essential *femininity* occurs on the occasion of her actual violent rape by the 'Half Face':

For the first time in my life, I understood what evil was about. It was about not being human [...] It was a very simple, very clear perception, a moment of understanding that I have heard comes at the moment of death [2].

Jyoti would like to marry an English knowing man, for to have English as a language was to have 'more than you had been given at birth it was to want the world.' [3] Living on the edge, on the margins, as it were, Jasmine plunges into the safe and unsafe expanses with almost a hazy assurance.

Here one can see a surge for emancipation, a desire to break the lock and boundaries. Here is a feminine soul not cowed down by tradition and superstition, prefers day light natural darkness and natural cloud to cheat fate. In killing the Half Face she experiences an epistemic violence that is also a life-affirming transformation. Although she is deeply ambivalent, she recapitulates the Eastern figuration of self as nothing. In the process of rapid exfoliation the negativity is coupled powerfully and culminates with the positive image of a destroyer. During her tenure as Duff's and Budd's care giver she is creative. Jasmine is a destroyer but, like Kali, she is also ultimately a preserver, and an agent of the life-force [4].

Jyoti also comes to realize early in her life that she was 'a survivor, a fighter and adapter [5].' She knows that her mother's desperate bid to strangle her as an infant failed. It is not that her mother did not want a life for her; rather she was afraid that as the fifth daughter of their impoverished family Jyoti was ordained to be dowry-less bride and she therefore wanted to spare her the humiliation. Jyoti's grandmother, disturbed that the teenage Jyoti wants to study and not marry, tells her that 'Individual effort counts for nothing [6],' but Jyoti would not be coaxed into abandoning her dreams of getting a better life through education. She believes that her aim was to break the shackles of tradition and rise above her surroundings. Jasmine rejects despair and cynicism and believes that 'she can move on and make a life for herself [7].'

Jasmine thus, intuitively understands the association between aggression and the annihilation of identity in an alien country. She feels marginalized and there is a postcolonial dread of subjugation in her every movement. From an essentially feudal structure as a subaltern, she emerges into a new whole. She wants to cheat stars; the astrologer's predictions Mukherjee's revelation of cultural heterogeneity as an American norm is not the only basis of a countercultural assault on a repressively centered cultural structure; it also advocates fusionism and assimilation as a new compulsive necessity for trans-cultural survival norms. Mukherjee's migrant aesthetics is based on the conflictual components of the ever-changing dynamics of 'unhousement' and 're-housement.' In an interview given Geoff Hancock, she says: 'I write about what obsesses me, the re-housement of individuals and of whole people[...] Unhousement is the breaking away from the culture into which one was born, and in which one's place in society was assured. Rehousement is the re-rooting of oneself in a new culture. This requires transformation of the self [8].'

In Mukherjee's immigrant stories and novels she has a statement on diasporic postmodern condition and the same transformation of the 'self' makes fully visible the way a

new multicultural America can mirror a multicultural globe. She envisions an American situation that is centric to a free play of ethnic centers, a kind of 'transnational and translational sense of hybridity' [9] and a sharp emergence from resident alien to resilient assimilation in a new syncretism of global climate. Mukherjee's preferred fictional setting is New York, a syncretic and linguistic jumble, a heterogeneously multicultural milieu, a completely decentered structure of circulating differences. In such a city, unhinged cultural heterogeneity, splitting and creative syncretism are the earnest norms, not *Anglocentrism* or even ethnic politics. Bhabha comments: 'We find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. For there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the 'beyond' an exploratory, restless movement [10].'

To glance regressively at the past, involves the extensive use of memories of the old country, the point or place of origin and 'homes.' For, the migratory human lot facing diasporic dislocation and splitting involves an amount of uncertainty in a new location. Such new location may not be necessarily coterminous with the imagination of a new home in other location. Home or the old country is thus a simple submerged version of a memory –strong but non- negotiable in daily terms, a sort of a mythic structure preserved in thoughts. To quote Brah: 'Home is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of origin [11].'

This suggests that home or point of origin is less a reality than an idealization of how it really is. Such a home is reconstructed out of memories what Salman Rushdie described as reflections made 'in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost [12].' Rushdie explodes the myth of home and speaks of 'imaginary homelands,' and offers us the narratives of split presence of all 'metaphysical being(s) [13].' In such condition of splitting and fragmentation the domination of home reduces, and furnishes a postcolonial perspective on the acquisitive designs of global codes. In such condition of cultural intersection and interaction splitting is inevitable and necessary:

Splitting constitutes an intricate strategy of defence and differentiation in the colonial discourse. [...] Splitting is then a form of enunciatory, intellectual uncertainty and anxiety that stems from the fact that disavowal is not merely a principle of negation or elision; it is a strategy for articulating contradictory and coeval statements of belief [4].

Every narrative in diasporic writing is both an individual story and explicitly a cultural narrative dealing with the same *polyglossic communities* where 'self' represents the voice of such community. Diasporic literature is therefore autobiographical too. Writers mapping the diasporic experience in their fiction or poetry are often diasporic in their real lives.

Jasmine goes through a whole process of deracination, displacement and transformation; she wishes to settle down, a desire not in contrary to her continuous flaking of skin and continuous transformation. She is both complicit and resistant to the hegemonic notion of immigrant identity. Jasmine's self-propelled mission is thus inflected with some existential angst, she is at the periphery and in a situation from where she attempts to re-direct. Her translational

transformation is a result of continual negotiations between her past and her future; her indefinite projected future self can never fully escape her past inscriptions. For Jasmine, history has the perpetual sway on the present and the future. History also has certain impositions creating fissures and ruptures and, as a result, the self becomes plural and conflicting. Her survival depends amid ambiguities out of rootlessness and upon a strategy of negotiated journey of self-discovery and transformation. According to Alam the character of Jasmine has been fashioned to show Mukherjee's belief in the 'necessity of inventing and re-inventing one's self by going beyond what is given and by transcending one's origin^[5].'

In Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, such sense of homelessness and rootlessness is hard-edged steadily with each occurrence in the New World. The writer directs her protagonist from the *origin* and *location* of her birth to the land of her exile. There is no sequential development of her journey; there is no easy changeover of identity, nor any tame acceptance of the time. Instead, Mukherjee's diasporic women characters struggle hard to occupy and absorb the translational space, they find in the location of their choice. Most of her fictions stress the dichotomy of growing up in two cultures. In the practice of an exodus and migration there is an unspoken ambiguity; the sufferings of dislocation are tinged with the hope of arrival and the opening of new locations.

The novel replicates Mukherjee's emancipator recasting of identity through racial negotiations in the dominant culture. Jasmine undergoes a series of turbulence in search of a home. Jyoti is educated over the protests of her traditional father, and in time marries a modern Indian husband, Prakash. Jyoti is re-named Jasmine by her husband. She undergoes major identity shifts, from feudal Hasnapur to urban Jullundhar. She shifts from her traditional cultural desire to have children early, a wish that is thwarted by Prakash's contempt: 'We aren't going to spawn! We aren't ignorant peasants^[6]!' She develops an inner trauma out of the displacement: 'Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttled between identities,' she says, and '[...] I felt suspended between worlds^[7].' There is a horrible turnaround of the events; a turbulence of situation destroys her dream. Prakash is killed, by a bomb meant for Jasmine and hidden in a portable radio by Sikh terrorists. Jasmine vows to complete Prakash's dream, to go to his intended school in Tampa, Florida and sacrifice herself on the campus. She manages to sneak into America using forged passport papers. Her husband Prakash Vijn is her key mover encouraging her to identify herself as a victim of a feudal power structure, so as to unfetter herself from it. Jasmine's more or less conscious resistance against this feudal structure is homologous with the struggle of postcolonial subject formation. As the simple village girl Jyoti may have harbored the illusion of fixed identity, but as a woman she learns to resist a hardened stereotype of the feudal Indian wife challenges the West's mechanism to territorialize her, to render familiar her strangeness.

The novel in one sense depicts the psychobiography of a woman which specifically traces the development of a 'female protagonist through various experiences and crises, into maturity and, more importantly, her self-identity and place in the world'^[8]. Jasmine's gradual process of metamorphoses (Jyoti-Jasmine-Jazzy-Jase and Jane) is propelled by recurrent lashes at her very structure of identity. As an Indian woman, Jasmine has to reinvent herself, even if it means relinquishing her past completely. It is however, the

blending of the American and Hindu imagination-the two disparate imaginations-that helps visualize Mukherjee's unique craft defining the immigrant reality. It is difficult to know the immigrant reality of Jasmine because the fluidity of herself emerging from one experience to another erases the edges, if not the nucleus of her identity. The rapidity and the incomprehensible compulsion of altering relationships in America trim down Jyoti to a mere woman struggling to go on with life falling into fragments.

There she is raped by her smuggler, after which she kills him and relieves herself from her earlier plans. Thus the first shock of the location outside her home is not cultural but physical. She arrives in America and that very moment she is compelled to commit murder for self-defence. The purity about the body is gone and she learns that body is just a covering which can be done away with when tainted and polluted- 'My body was merely the shell, soon to be discarded. Then I could be reborn debts and sins all paid for^[9].' Abandoning the past like a baggage she feels relieved and reborn: '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^[10].'

She is befriended by an American woman, Lillian, who helps her learn American ways she calls her 'Jazzy.' Mrs. Gordon supports and helps her to recuperate and transforms her totally. Within a week Jasmine sheds off her traditional shyness and dresses up on a jazzy T-shirt, skin-tight cords and snickers. With the change in clothes comes the change in the culture, so much so that the native traits of her persona begin to wane. With this change she moves from being a 'visible minority to being just another immigrant^[11].' This is another point of her dislocation before she plunges in to the continuity of translation and negotiation. Jasmine survives in the margin; she lives in a state of contested present where the pastness of the past is obliterated and the future leads to a febrile and phantasmic fusionism. Jasmine's realization of such hybridized self and the predicament of a marginal puts her to a state of inertia where she stays suspended. To quote Bhabha: 'It is the emergence of the interstices-the overlap and displacement of domains of difference -that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest or cultural value are negotiated^[12].'

She moves to New York, gets attached to Prakash's old professor Devinder Vadhera and feels desperately that she has moved back to Hasnapur. She gets a green card and an au pair position in Manhattan. This allows her to complete her Americanization and gradually she gets used to the mainstream American practices by becoming an integral part of an American family and also by learning how to consume, which she does happily. But she finds here the life lived by Indians astringent, and prefers to work under Taylor Hayes, a Columbian Physicist, and Wylie Hayes, an editor in publishing firms, and their adopted daughter Duff. In the two years Jasmine is with them, the Hayeses separate and Taylor falls in love with her. As the Hayeses treated her as a part of their family, she feels that she had landed and was getting rooted^[13].

Even when the Hayeses separate, and Jasmine is reminded of the essential fluidity of America^[14], she is able to take the breakup of the family in stride, although she concedes that the hardest lesson of all she had to learn about America was that in this country 'nothing last^[15].' The hegemonies that exist at home provide her with a useful perspective on the predatory effects of global governance. She internalizes the

transformation myths and understands its role to survive in the New World. However, her husband's killer appears in New York as well, and she flees to Iowa, where she marries Bud, a rural banker, becomes Jane Ripplemeyer, and adopts a Vietnamese refugee son, Du.

The novel closes as Taylor, her now-divorced former employer in Manhattan, asks her to come with him and his daughter to California, where Du has already gone. Pregnant from her time with Bud, she leaves him to be with Taylor in California. This is the simple story outline of the novel, but its unifying theme is Jyoti/Jasmine/Jane's mutability, her adaptation to conditions, expressed as a transformation from inert, traditional object propelled by fate to energetic, modern, cross-cultural and assimilated subject.

The psychic split in Jasmine does not terminate in the decision of accepting or not accepting the tradition; now the stress is on the excitement for life and a concern for a woman's right to live and to relocate oneself. The narrative treatment is an attempt to de-familiarize the traditionally acknowledged representation of an Indian woman. The collapse of the heroine's submission to convention aims to establish her independence and emancipation.

The protagonist of the novel thus, is both a victim and an agent in postcolonial context. Her disjunctions in a location of adversative unipolarity is synaptic and in between there is the diasporic ambivalence and trauma of displacement. The novel is an account of Jasmine's coming into her own as a woman destroying selves and superstructures in order to realize the potential self. She thus transforms herself with increasing rapidity. Jasmine's journey of self-discovery takes her from the feudal condition to her migrancy and exile in the West. This change is marked by chaos and dislocations. In fact Jasmine experiences one chaos after another. Jasmine's violent substitution of self can be taken as a liberating move, chaotic and discontinuous but emancipatory.

In the novel Mukherjee has given her heroine a society that was so repressive, chaotic and traditional, so caste bound *genderist* that she could discard it easily ^[16]. The novelist therefore sets out to find metaphors and symbolic location for the re-incarnation of Jasmine and shows how Indianness in a woman gets horrible transformation as she moves towards Americanization and further away from her native resources. *Jasmine* is a story of the trauma of circumstantial subjugation experienced by a woman in home and expatriation. It too, is a story of a semi-feudal rural India where a mother has to strangle her baby girl just because she will be a 'dowryless' girl in the time of her marriage and also of an astrologer who menacingly sets the destiny of the others.

The transmigration of Jasmine is anti-centric and not simply peripheral. There is a definite emancipatory appetite in *Jasmine*. She develops an urgent assimilative urge and internalizes deterrents of human survival and with a radical defiance swerves far away from indigenous femininity to a greater self-choice. She has learnt the art of living in becoming an ever-changing animation to slough off her formal identities and superstructure, acculturating to a new location and retaining her original self that is built at an impetus of the astrologer's prediction. She needs to resort to violent self-emancipation and substitute her temporal trauma to a substantive attitudinal change in view of falsifying the astrologer's prediction. The astrologer's prediction is a symbolic prompter of such violent denial of feudal periphery

which demands disjunction and search for relocation.

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