

Articulating the Voices of Neo-nationalism: Bharati

Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine*

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Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee is a writer who always rejects hyphenation to describe herself. She considers it as racist to be called an Asian-American writer. Her writings are shaped by her Diasporic identity, immigrant experiences, and her personal experience as a woman. In her works, Mukherjee represents India, as a postcolonial writer who affiliates with the West, and she articulates the voices of neo-nationalism. One of the significant aspects of Mukherjee's writings is that it is not oppositional to mainstream American culture and society but represents the voices of "the new America." A parallel can be found in the endorsement of American nationalism by Mukherjee and the canonization of her fiction and other writings. Critics like Timothy Brennan consider Mukherjee among what he calls Third-World cosmopolitan writers and hails these writers for their vision of democracy and freedom. This paper offers a critical evaluation of the representation of neo-nationalism; freedom, democracy, and boundless possibilities and opportunities, in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*.

Keywords: Diaspora, Neo-nationalism, Bharati Mukherjee, Diasporic identity, Assimilation.

Bharati Mukherjee is one of the well-accepted and recognized Diasporic writers of North America. She was born into a Bengali speaking, Hindu Brahmin family in Calcutta, in 1940. Mukherjee left India for the University of Iowa in the United States of America in 1962. She then moved to Canada with her husband, Clarke Blaise. In 1980, she came back to United States became a naturalized citizen in 1988. In one of her interviews, she says: “I knew the moment I landed as a student in 1961... [t]hat this is where I belonged. It was an instant kind of love, a feeling of being at one” (Moyers, “Interview”). To Mukherjee, America was a land of hope and new opportunities, coming as she did from a world of despair and old ideals. She describes her immigrant experience in her essay “Two Ways to Belong in America”: “America spoke to me—I married it – I embraced the demotion from expatriate aristocrat to immigrant nobody, surrendering those thousands of years of ‘pure culture,’ the saris, the delightfully accented English” (Away 273). Mukherjee emphasizes in her writings and interviews that denunciation of hyphenated identities and cultural assimilation are the only means by which Asian immigrant can create an identity in United States. She clarifies her position in her article “Beyond Multiculturalism”:

To reject hyphenation is to demand that the nation deliver the promises of the American Dream to *all* its citizens. I want nothing less than to invent a new vocabulary that demands, and obtains, equitable power sharing for all members of the American community. (*Multi America* 460)

However, the process of acculturation was aggressive and painful for Mukherjee.

Suchismita Banerjee observes:

It is violent because it involves a deliberate rejection of one’s roots, past traditions and heritage to adopt and assimilate the dominant culture. The conscious annihilation of one’s selfhood thus takes place through psychological and physical violence, which, in turn, enables individuals to refashion their identities. (11)

Through out her writing career, Mukherjee has been involved in redefining the idea of western feminism and Diaspora as a process of gain in opposition to the traditional idea of immigration and displacement as loss of identity and rootlessness. She sees immigrants who are convinced, urbane, balanced, and who will not dissolve into an

American mainstream but perceptibly expand the margins of what one may label “the American experience”. She observes in “Beyond Multiculturalism”:

It is to sabotage the politics of hate and the campaigns of revenge spawned by Eurocentric patriots on the one hand and the professional multiculturalists on the other, that I describe myself as an “American” rather than as an “Asian - American.” Why it is that hyphenation is imposed only on non- white Americans? And why is it that only non-white citizens are “problematized” if they choose to describe themselves on their own terms? My outspoken rejection of hyphenation is my lonely campaign to obliterate categorizing the cultural landscape into a “center” and its “peripheries”. (*Multi America* 460)

Trauma, pain and violence become a mechanism in creating immigrant identity in Mukherjee’s fiction, particularly in one of her early works, *Jasmine*. The novel was published in 1989, and it portrays Mukherjee’s triumphant tone of violent refashioning of identity through drastic confrontations in the dominant culture. *Jasmine* is the story of an ordinary Punjabi girl. She is born Jyoti in a small village in terrorism- stricken Punjab and is transformed into Jasmine, Jazzy, Jase and Jane , through a journey that is marked by widowhood, murder, rape, illicit documents and an eerie instinct to endure through all situations. She represents the human spirit and has attained empowerment. She also changes those white Americans who she comes into contact with. Mukherjee explains about her character and how the novel *Jasmine* is created from an earlier short story:

This is about a very young widow who comes illegally into the United States and makes a new woman of herself. It is actually a kind of confrontation from *Jasmine*, one of the short stories in *Middleman* in which this young girl from Trinidad works as an au pair girl. I finished that story but the character wouldn’t die. She remained inside my head. So I changed her nationality from Trinidadian to Indian- - she’s changed physically but the essence of the character is still the same.(qtd. in Lal 30)

In the line of many events in the novel, Jyoti Vijn acquires many names, each suggesting a new phase in her “Americanization.” She is brutally raped the day she arrives in the United States and finds herself utterly out of favor in all-white environs.

However, in the course of her chanced encounters with well-intentioned people in America, she wholly transforms herself from an uninformed, vulnerable migrant to a self-assured working woman, an unwed mother, a hasty lover, and in the end, “greedy with wants and reckless from hope” (*Jasmine* 214). She denies herself the cozy comforts of her familial life and succumbs to the strange call of quest by running away with her former lover. In fact, *Jasmine* is a story of the protagonist’s various transformations from Jyoti to Jasmine, from Jase to Jane-- and each time we come across a different woman in her. She is a fighter, a survivor, and an adapter.

But even after accepting the ways and styles of the host culture, she maintains certain fundamental traits of Indian culture. She considers it quite unimaginable for her to have a non-genetic child like Duff and to her it seems a gruesome idea. Again, it is quite disturbing for her to sleep alone and Wylie’s statement at this completely shocks her: “What you do on your time is your business” (172). Jasmine in spite of many transformations remains an Indian woman at heart. The tales she tells Duff are about Indian Gods, demons, and mortals, and it supports the Indianness of hers. Thus the woman inside her becomes fully devastated when Wylie walks out of Taylor’s life and she comments:

In America, nothing lasts. I can say that now and it doesn’t shock me, but I think it was the hardest lesson of all to learn. We arrive so eager to learn, to adjust, 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 (181)

Jasmine has been very well received in America because of its language of optimism and promises of a new world. But the compulsion to Americanize has raised the concerns by many critics. Feroza Jusawalla says:

Bharati Mukherjee definitely seems to have found her “haven” in the United States, but with this comes obsequiousness, a pleading to be mainstreamed. These new generations of South Asian writers are ex-colonials, twice colonized, like the twice born Brahmins, oppressed by their European education and by their hunger to be Americanized. (qtd. in Parekh 285)

Mukherjee identifies the United Kingdom and Canada with Imperialism and explains her choice to move to United States as a choice for Liberation from racist Imperialism. She remembers her Canadian experience in the introduction to *Darkness* (1985) where she was

...frequently taken for a prostitute or a shoplifter, frequently assumed to be a domestic, praised by astonished auditors that I didn't have a 'sing-song' accent. The society itself, or important elements in that society, routinely made crippling assumptions about me, and about my 'kind'. In the United States, however, I see myself in those same outcasts...in professors, domestics, high school students, illegal busboys in ethnic restaurants. (2-3)

But this eagerness and overt enthusiasm to get Americanized had undergone immense criticism. Critics like Inderpal Grewal identify this internalization of dominant culture and identity as a common trait among Diasporic writers like Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and Amitav Ghosh. She observes:

American nationalism as a neo-liberal political vision of democracy in which ethnic identities are produced and racism overcome through choice and individual will and acts. Even though the protagonist in *Jasmine* encounters many kinds of violence in the United States, the country offers her something that India cannot, which is the *choice* to reinvent herself. As Mukherjee has said, immigrants have a privilege "of not only inventing your biography, but also deciding for yourself... *choosing* your homeland." (69)

Mukherjee's mythologizing of herself as a writer is intended to refashion herself as an American, and at reinventing her own experience as national or, more accurately, neo-national. In her essay "Beyond Multiculturalism", she emphasizes that her literary agenda begins by acknowledging that America has transformed her and immigrants like her are transforming America also. She calls the end result of immigration as a two-way transformation and says that it affects both the individual and the national cultural identity.

It is quite clear that Mukherjee shares the definition of America as a country which offers a bright future and a choice to reinvent oneself. Mukherjee maintains the

idea that migration to America offers opportunities for empowerment even to an ordinary woman like Jyoti from a Third world country. Anne Brewster observes:

Mukherjee's neo-nationalism, figured in the fantasy of the land of opportunity and the romance of the immigrant, is, therefore, the counternarrative to her own diasporic condition and the dilemma of postcoloniality. She no longer wants to be 'post' (the India of *The Tiger's Daughter* and of her childhood is, after all, 'past [its] prime' [1981: 36]) but to be 'neo', to identify with the centre and she in fact re-enacts its imperialist strategies in her appropriation of the label 'immigrant'. I would like to suggest, after Spivak, that Mukherjee's neo-nationalism is a 'species of collaboration with neocolonialism' (1989: 281) whereby the postcolonial diasporic 'finds a nurturing and corroborative space in this enclave [ie the discourse of canonised literature] in her attempts to remake history' ['in her own name', I would add] (1989: 279). (43)

It can be argued that Bharati Mukherjee's neo-nationalist discourse; the one constituted by her own writings and her deliberations and the readings of that writings articulates, the Diasporic post-colonial elite's aspiration to be cosmopolitan, to be American, to be a citizen of the new world. The immigrant underclass, exemplified by characters like Jasmine enters the New America not with the privileges of the cosmopolitan cream of the crop but through suffering, anguish, violence, and the trajectory of everyday life and its ups and downs.

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