

“Hues” of post – colonial diaspora in the writings of Bharati Mukherjee and Bapsi Sidhwa

Priyamvada Singh

D.Phil Scholar, Department of English & M. E. L. University of Allahabad, Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh, India

Abstract

Though the terms such as Diaspora, immigrant and exile, vary from one another in certain respect, yet they interchangeably mean ‘displaced people’ from their homelands. When considering the aspects of nativism, rootlessness ethnic anxiety, hegemony and cultural clash, we cannot do without discussing the theme of alienation and assimilation in the various diasporic novels. In this paper I would like to discuss two diasporic writer Bharati Mukherjee (India) and Bapsi Sidhwa (Pakistan) who have very creatively brought out the pain, anxieties, willingness to be a part of the new world, a desire to change, and all the conflicts between the alienation and assimilation in their novels, *Jasmine* and *An American Brat* respectively. This paper examines debates pertaining to the political, economic, religious, social and cultural grounding of diaspora experience in the context of postcolonial global inequality and limited citizenship. It also investigates forms of shifting cultural identities, exclusion / racism and the impact of state policies on diasporic social action. Contemporary globalization and postcolonial migration processes result in the emergence of dynamic transnational communities which both maintain lively connections to home societies and other satellite co-ethnic communities while, at the same time, engage the places of settlement in mutually transformative ways.

Keywords: diaspora, postcolonial, Bharati Mukherjee, Bapsi Sidhwa, *Jasmine*, *An American Brat*, alienation and assimilation, cultural clash, transnational communities

Introduction

From centuries Women have mostly been assumed to be species with limited vision, their horizons also being designed by the patriarchal society. Acting solely as subordinates and being continuously called “Dark Continent”. But now the 21st century women defy many such norms, not willing to cower down and be governed, instead intending to live with honour, demanding a fair share of their own life, are ready to explore and experiment. Eager to broaden “Her” outlook, not accepting to be a mere character in the story but becoming a story herself and indeed even writing one. With the changing scenario, among the main contributors to this legacy of vast literature, women writers are making their mark with dignity and pride.

Diasporic writing, born out of the dialectic between displacement and relocation, raises theoretical formulations which provide fresh perspective to creative works. The phenomenon of migration of Indian people to U.S.A. and other countries, their status there, and their nostalgic feelings for the mother country as well as their alienation to the new one is the major subject dealt by the Diasporic writer.

The Modern Indian Diaspora began during the colonial period when the British Empire had spread its tentacles around the globe and the red stain of imperialism had leaked into diverse land masses.

The “postcolonial” diaspora of the mid – to the late twentieth century forms an important dimension of the postcolonial engagement with the globalization of cultures. The postcolonial theories aims for an extra – or national solidarity and deals with hybridity and diaspora which have come to characterize mixed or globalized cultures. Diasporic writing, a

post – colonial scenario elaborates issues such as marginalization, cultural insularity, social disparity, racism, ethnicity etc. These writings address problems that arise from the transnational space created by a fluid community that is neither at ‘home’ nor ‘outside’. Oscillating between the attractions of home and those from the new world, the migrants wage a constant psychic battle.

The ‘politics of culture’ as addressed by Edward Said in his deliberations on ‘Orientalism’ introduces the theory of migrant sensibility. Cultural politics, as specified by Said, is a component of location / space. Cultural politics becomes the battleground for arguments when the orient moves towards the occident, either for a merger, or to create a ghetto. In this stride towards the new land, there is a simultaneous nostalgia as the native land has its own rich tradition and people which are to be almost forgotten, and the subject is obliged to develop a sensibility which can be phrased as compromise, negotiation and assimilation.

Postcolonial literary theory tends to privilege ‘appropriation’ over ‘abrogation’ and ‘multicultural syncretism’ over cultural ‘essentialism’. The diasporic novel is entirely explicit in its reflection of hybridity of cultures. Positioned on the margins or interstices of two antagonistic national cultures, it claims to open up an in- between space of cultural ambivalence.

The Indian-born American writer Bharati Mukherjee is one of the prominent novelists of Indian Diaspora. Among the fascinating diasporic voices Bharati Mukherjee stands apart by the virtue of representing Immigrant issues. Bharati Mukherjee, born in a period of transition was a sensitive observant of the then socio-political condition. She is a writer who is at her best when she draws on her experiences of the

old world while writing with insight about the New World to which now she belongs. She describes herself as,

“A writer from the Third World I left India by choice to settle in the U.S. I have adopted this country as my home. I view myself as an American author in the tradition of other American authors whose ancestors arrived at Ellis Island.”

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.

The traumas and the agonies that people of Indian Diaspora face, in fulfilling their dreams, constitute the prime concern of Mukherjee’s literary oeuvre. She mainly focuses on her diasporic women characters, their struggle for identity, their bitter experiences, and their final emergence as self-assertive individuals, free from the bondages imposed on them. Hence, this paper is intended to explore the series of transformations that the protagonist of Bharati Mukherjee’s novel *Jasmine* undergoes, as an illegal immigrant to America and her regeneration after many transformations with disintegration.

Bharati Mukherjee’s popular novel *Jasmine* is basically the story of transformation with disintegration and regeneration. The protagonist of the novel is an Indian peasant woman whose journey takes her from the village Hasnapur, Punjab, to Florida, to New York, to Iowa and as the novel comes to a close she is about to set off to California. Jasmine metamorphoses herself constantly during this journey, which starts from Jyoti the village girl in Hasnapur, to Jasmine, the city woman, to Jazzy, the undocumented immigrant, to Jase, the Manhattan Nanny, to Jane, the Iowan woman who enters the story. It is a story of dislocation and relocation, as the protagonist continually sheds her existing role to move into other roles. In this novel, the author expresses the idea of assimilation and makes it clear that Jasmine, the central character needs to travel to America to achieve something significant of her life, because in the third world she encountered only desolation and loss. In the beginning, the central character is immersed in the prejudices, exploitation and violence of migration- but it allows her to overcome these difficulties by internalizing the very tactics used against her.

Thus, Bharati Mukherjee’s masterpiece *Jasmine* reveals that the protagonist, Jasmine is a survivor, fighter and a trend setter. The protagonist Jasmine is a ‘wily participant’ in the dominant culture. The potential of fluidity which Bharati Mukherjee attributes to American culture is epitomized with the main character’s metamorphosis from Jyoti to Jasmine, Jasmine to Jazzy, Jazzy to Jase and finally to Jane. Each of these character transformations is marked by changes in behaviour and personality. Through her various transformations, Jasmine sets herself to be a best example for the girls in rustic areas in overcoming various stumbling blocks despite difficulties. The transformation of Jasmine is full of violence with disintegration which brings tremendous

changes in her in all respects such as psychologically, emotionally and physically. In this process she emerges victoriously self-assertive. Thus Jasmine succeeds in her attempt to regenerate herself through various transformations with disintegration.

The next writer, Bapsi Sidhwa, is a prominent writer of diaspora of Pakistan, was born in Karachi, Pakistan in 1938. Bapsi Sidhwa, like all other postcolonial writers, belong to the ‘cannot be categorized’ category. Her major works reflect her personal experience of the Partition of Indian subcontinent, abuse against women, immigration to the US, membership in the Parsi or Zoroastrian community, and other such related issues and concerns. However, Sidhwa has a different perspective, a perspective with religious difference and distance as she belongs to the Parsi / Zoroastrian community.

Uprooting of the individuals or individuals as a part of a disadvantaged social group from their native lands and subsequently, their efforts to settle in a country with alien socio-cultural ways and their yearning for the roots has become a prominent theme of post-colonial writing. More importantly, it has become a burning issue of Parsi community and prime concern of Parsi writers or Parsi novel. Though Bapsi Sidhwa belongs to India, Pakistan, and US, she likes to be called Punjabi - Pakistani - Parsi woman. In her view, expression of life incidents is like Aristotolian Cathartic relief. Strain, put on the Parsee community or any community in general due to globalization and resultant connectivity, is addressed in the novel *An American Brat*. This paper studies Nativism, Rootlessness, Ethnic Anxiety and Culture Clash in *An American Brat* by Bapsi Sidhwa

An American Brat is a novel about a sixteen year old Punjabi Parsi girl – Feroza who happens to visit the US initially on a three-month holiday and then to study. The visit is, actually, planned for a different reason. Feroza’s parents – Zareen and Cyrus Ginwalla are surprised rather shocked to see her conservative attitude, a result of Pakistani fundamentalist attitude. Sharing her shock, Zareen informs her husband, She objected to my sleeveless saree-blouse! Really, this narrow-minded attitude touted by General Zia is infecting her, too. I told her: ‘Look, we’re Parsee, everybody knows we dress differently.’ “When I was of her age, I wore frocks and cycled to Kinnaird College. And that was in ’59 and ’60 – fifteen years after partition! Can she wear frocks? No. Women mustn’t show their legs, women shouldn’t act like that. Girls mustn’t play hockey or sign or dance! If everything corrupts their pious little minds so easily, then the mullahs should wear burqas and stay within the four walls of their houses!”

Though quite young to her mother Zareen, Feroza carries narrow-mindedness and orthodoxy in her behaviour. Worried parents decide to send her to USA for a holiday. They are of the opinion that travelling will broaden her outlook and she will be in a position to get rid of her puritanism. They believe, Travel will broaden her outlook, get this puritanical rubbish out of her head. Cyrus agrees to Zareen’s suggestion as he has his doubts that a susceptible girl like Feroza might marry a non-Parsee. Finally, she is sent to America to her maternal uncle Manek who is just 6 years senior to her. Manek is a graduate student at MIT.

All through the novel Sidhwa depicts the story stressing the expatriate experiences that change and shape the attitude and

the psyche of the young girl. The novel also deals with quite sensitive issue and societal concern of inter – community marriage more importantly of a Parsi girl. However, the story does not present the girl as a rebellion who goes against the society and the religion to marry a person she loves. Instead, it presents gradual adapting and acceptance of the American culture by the girl though, initially, she gets baffled with it. She, gradually, goes self-confident and individual.

It is obvious that settling in a culture that looks down upon the entrants with suspicion, hostility and differing traditions and customs brings challenges before the migrant social group. Ethnic minorities, trying to nest in the world gifting it with multicultural environment, face unprecedented pressure and sometime exiles leading to extinction.

In *An American Brat*, Bapsi Sidhwa has aptly taken up the issue of cultural difference and divergence and resultant problems. It moves from peripheral issue to the central theme in *An American Brat*. Talking about the theme of the novel, Sidhwa informs, “Naturally, the book deals with the subject of the ‘culture-shock’ young people from the subcontinent have to contend with when they choose to study abroad. It also delineates the clashes the divergent cultures generate between the families ‘back home’ and their transformed and transgressing progeny bravely groping their way in the world.”

Thus we may conclude that the cultural and social consciousness of the communities residing the modern world is in the process of readjustment in modern times. They often oscillate between the continuum of traditional affiliation between their communal sensibility and the newly founded national identities and global flux. Culture is no longer subservient to the dictates of national agenda; it is homogenized entity that facilitates transnational and transcultural influx of values and mirrors the migration of populations, exchange of values, transformation and change.

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