

Different Female Perspectives in Diaspora: A Comparative Study of Jasmine and the Namesake

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Abstract

The term Diaspora connotes moving to a location of long time societal establishment, if not a space of permanence. The word often invokes the imagery of traumas of separation and dislocation and this is surely an essential part of the transitory experience, but Diaspora is also comprehended as a site of expectations, of new beginnings. People have been migrating since evolution, in search of better living. Thus the process of migration is a continuous one, whether it is within a nation or across the nation. The migrants not only take their skill and expertise but also their culture, modes of life and ideologies to their destination. The writers of Indian Diaspora are V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, Meera Nair and others. Diasporic women writers do not merely have dark experiences but also possess bright ones. As the diasporic people not only face assimilation problems but they also face bright things which are illustrated in the works of these women writers. Both the novels –Jasmine and The Namesake represent different female reactions of two female protagonists- Ashima in The Namesake and Jasmine in Jasmine, where as Jasmine reacts positively to her immigration, which is fraught with many negative situations, Ashima is not easily contented with her other positive surroundings. This paper is an effort to show comparative perspectives of both the females who shares the common predicament of living in diasporic conditions though for different reasons.

KEYWORDS: Diaspora, experiences, assimilation, alienation, identity.

Introduction

Bharati Mukherjee makes a distinction between expatriation and immigration. She finds her experiences in the U.S. far more favourable than Canada and she claims that she enjoys the exuberance of immigration. Mukherjee tries to prove that America is “the embodiment of openness, liberalism and freedom. A culture of dreamers, a land of transformation where an individual can reverse the omens [1]”- this is what Mukherjee did in America – reversed the ‘omens’ of her Canadian experiences. And this is exactly what Jasmine, the protagonist of her novel Jasmine does. It is through the eyes, ideas and reactions of Jasmine in foreign country that we see Mukherjee becoming an immigrant. On the other hand Jhumpa Lahiri [3] has no such immigration experience to relate with her protagonist Ashima, in her novel The Namesake. Her characters like Ashima have left behind the land of their birth and attempts to get acculturated in the new land.

1. Diaspora: A Land of Transformation

In Jasmine, Jasmine’s positive attitude towards life and her desire to move on is clearly seen as she rages against the norms of society which tried to condition her existence;

Jasmine asserts that she is not just nothing. She does not believe in the prevalent conviction that “village girls are like cattle; whichever way you lead them that is the way they will go [2]”. She shows the capacity to be a fighter and a survivor. To pursue her beliefs, she refuses to marry; the widower selected by her grandmother and eventually ends up marrying Prakash Vihh, a boy of her choice in court of law.

2. Sense of Belongingness

On the other hand, Ashima in *The Namesake*, shows no such reaction against her family’s decision and marries a boy named Ashoke selected by her family. She had learnt from the childhood to sacrifice her own desires and cravings in order to please her husband and children. So, for her, the pain, the yearnings for going back to her own country, own land was to be kept hidden in some remote corners of her heart. She keeps “disappointment to herself [3],” not wanting to offend Ashoke, or worry her parents.

It is now clear that in the novel Ashima leaves her homeland only after marrying Ashoke, a legal immigrant, in America. Then again, illegal immigrants who are always escaping and who live in dread comprise another category of migrants that Mukherjee depicts in *Jasmine*. Jasmine, after the death of her husband Prakash leaves for America on forged papers knowing not what future holds in store for her. The daring of the young rustic girl in undertaking these hazardous trips abroad is a measure of her innate affinity to the American ideal of fearless enterprise.

Lahiri appears to introduce a progressively purified form of the encounters of the emigrant group. As it is clear from Ashima’s experiences and reactions that none of her characters face violence of any sort or racial discrimination which disturbs them greatly. Ashima is even supported by the Americans and her landlords –Judy and Alan and Mrs. Buxton who helped her in her job at library. Indeed, even from that point forward, she carries on with a life of solitude far from the standard society and even as far as language is concerned, Lahiri limits her mostly to Bengali talking ones. Mukherjee's characters face issues like racial segregation and even assaults by the whites who dislike these browns who appear to swarm their country, as in her collection of short stories *Darkness*, “one boy knocked me down. Actually he tripped me, so it looked like an accident. Then the other two spat on me, called me names you wouldn’t believe [4].” In *Jasmine*, Jasmine’s first encounter with America begins on a jarring note- her brutal rape by the deformed captain half –face in whose ship, she is smuggled to America. After killing him, she emerges as Kali-an Avenger of evil. Instead of dying she decides to live. She thinks that God has deserted her and this new lease of life is like a re-birth. Her duties as an Indian wife are over when she burns her suitcase and walks out of the motel. Her response is noticeable here when she decides that “I could not let my personal dishonour disrupt my mission”. Her reaction in a foreign country in killing of Half-Face is a kind of self-affirmation.

It is clear that Mukherjee does not present a one-dimensional, stereo typed character. So far as Ashima is concerned, she is a typical Indian house wife and does her best to perform the role of a home maker in an alien land and to become accounting force in holding up traditional Indian values. Her children’s neglect of their original culture torments her. Whereas, Jasmine does not rigidly keeps her tradition in foreign country

and easily adapts herself to the American main-stream. She leaves behind her Indian legacy when she is in other country. She learns to respond positively to the speed of transformation, to the fluidity of American character and American landscape. So she feels at times “like a stone hurtling through diaphanous mist, enable to show myself, yet unwilling to abandon the ride I am on. Down and I go, where I will stop, God only knows”.

In contrast to this resilience is the resistance of Ashima. Through her reactions, it is clear that she wants to remain an Indian in America. She is against the materialistic values of American life. She feels a sense of belonging only with her own community and hence when a decision has to be taken, she constantly her deliberations only with her own Bengali community. The fear of losing her culture and identity, the possibility of being drowned in an alien society makes her hold on to her native group and culture.

It is through the characters of Professor Davinder Vadhera and his wife Nirmala that Mukherjee exposes their desperate trying to create an imaginary India for themselves. Jasmine lives with them for a short duration in Flushing. As Ashima could have rejoiced heartily in such a typical Indian atmosphere but as far as Jasmine is concerned her reaction is totally different from what could have been of Ashima. From her perspective, the Vadheras are cast in one dimensional world of nostalgia and inertia. Jasmine is cut off from her past and is unable to break into future. She spirals into “depression behind the fortress of Punjabiness”. In contrast to the inhabitants of Flushing and Ashima in the *The Namesake*, Jasmine believes that “to bunker oneself inside nostalgia, to sheath the heart in a bullet proof vest was to be coward”. She abhors artificially maintained Indianness and distances herself from “everything Indian and everything Jyoti like”.

Jasmine gets more Americanized and feels rooted in Taylor’s household. It gives her freedom from her past and the role of Jyoti and widowhood. She is enchanted by the Taylor’s lifestyle and their democratic behaviour with her, life with them sinks deeper the image of America as wonderland in Jasmine. Taylor rechristens her as Jase which means another birth for her: “... Jyoti now a sati goddess; she had burned herself in a trash-can-funeral pyre behind a boarded-up motel in Florida. Jasmine lived for the future, for Vizh and Wife. Jase went to movies and lived for today”. She blooms from a diffident alien with forged documents into an adventurous Jase: “I became an American in an apartment on Claremont Avenue...”. But this assimilation is not as smooth as it might appear on the surface: “Fear, anger, pain, bitterness, confusion, silence, irony, humour, as well as pathos-underline her observations as she discovers for herself the undefined median between the preservation of the old world and the assimilation into the new one [5].”

Jasmine is not unmindful of the positive side of American ethos. She appreciates the Americans for their democracy of thought and their sense of respect even for those doing menial works. On the other hand Ashima is quite critical of American thought and lifestyle. When Gogol is assigned a project to rub the surfaces of the gravestones, Ashima criticizes this prospect of the type of field trip, she says that, “It is only in America are children taken to cemeteries in the name of art”. She is even after so many years in America and even after having her own home there, not willing to refer to America as her home. It is clear from her reaction, when Gogol refers New Havens his home; she reacts

fiercely. Bhagabat Nayak [6] rightly says that “Ashima like many immigrant Bengali women is not culturally immunized by America’s multicultural milieu.”

Jasmine on the other hand has a totally different approach in a foreign country; she adjusts herself wherever she goes. Her each development is a determined step into her Americanization and with every improvement; a crucial change is set apart as a part of her identity. Jasmine has no dread in this land. Mukherjee by exposing her protagonist to various codes of society and geological regions appears to send the message that if one has to adjust oneself to standard culture of the migrated land one ought to overlook one's past. This thought finds sufficient support from Jasmine's responses in America: “once we start letting go-let go just one thing, like not wearing our normal clothes, or a turban or not wearing a tika on the forehead-the rest goes on it’s down a sinkhole”.

In contrast to this, Ashima’s reactions show that she often feels homesick and upset in her own home in America. After the birth of her son Gogol, she wants to go back to Calcutta and raise her child in the company of her parents. She is not ready 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”. Even after being miles away from her homeland she is fully attached to its traditions and customs. From her responses, we come to know that she is not comfortable with her migration from one country to another and even within the same country i.e.in America. Each change of place leaves her more disconcerted than the earlier one. After her husband’s transfer to Boston, she feels very distressed. For her, this migration is more drastic. Her reaction is very poignant here, she feels:

For Ashima, migrating to the suburbs feels more drastic, more distressing than the move from Calcutta to Cambridge had been...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.

But for Jasmine such migration from one place to another within a country creates no difficulty. She feels comfortable wherever she goes. Paradoxically, she is comfortable in a house in America where Indian traditions are being followed. Her every move is itself an indication of her efforts towards self-actualization in her life. At every step, Jasmine revolts against her fate and the path drawn for her. All these transformations show her as a survivor, a fighter and an adapter. There is no such transformation seen in Ashima in *The Namesake*. She remains Ashima throughout the novel and there is no such reaction revealing her revolt against her fate. She does not want to change herself; she remains a traditional Indian Bengali woman. Jasmine’s transformation indicates that she cannot remain in stable life. Jasmine is totally an adapter as she, unlike Ashima, wants to grow with the land of dreamers i.e. America.

3. Association with Homeland

Apart from these contrasts; there is something similar in both heroines Ashima and Jasmine. As Ashima is a typical Indian Woman and never cut-off from her homeland, Jasmine’s instinctive Indian values do surface now and then. She has learnt to adjust to a new set of values but she has definitely not shed all values together. Her analysis of her association with Bud demonstrates that there is a reasonable refinement in her psyche

between living with somebody isolated from his wife and intentionally breaking up a home. She again feels outwitted at Wylie's choice to leave Taylor for financial specialist Stuart looking for "real happiness". This is beyond imagination for Jasmine to consider snapping her bond with her husband. She comes to understand the liquidity and momentary of human relationship in America. Her response demonstrates that she gets the bitterest lesson: "In America, nothing lasts. I can say that now and it does not shock me but i think it was the hardest lesson of all for me to learn...nothing is forever, nothing is so terrible or so wonderful, that it won't disintegrate".

Ashima like Jasmine too assimilates in the American mainstream, though it happens quite late. As in the novel, we get some hints about her Americanisation. For instance, as she has no other option to bring a child all alone in a new land, she comes on her own and takes pride to move out alone with her baby and in communicating with the passersby, thus she grows confident. Apart from this she also learns to celebrate Christmas for the sake of her children Gogol and Sonia and she also wants to groom her children to cope up with their American lives. As she switches the Television to American channel to help Gogol converse in English; "Every afternoon Ashima sleeps, but before nodding off she switches the television to channel 2 and tells Gogol to watch Sesame Street and The Electric Company in order to keep up with the English he uses at nursery school".

Even she becomes more open in her children's relationships with Americans. Earlier she is not happy with Gogol's relationship with Maxine, an American girl. But for the sake of her son's happiness she has no other option and thus she is willing to accept this relation. Even when she comes to know about the breakup of Gogol and Maxine, she asks Gogol 'to move on with his life'. This is clearly a positive reaction on part of Ashima who always believed in traditions and customs of her homeland. Another instance is Ashima's acceptance of Sonia's marriage with Ben, a half Jewish and a half Chinese boy, which indicates her changed perspective.

A cross-cultural growth is seen in Ashima when she works in a library. Indira Nityanandam [7] rightly observes that "At forty eight, she learns to do chores that she did not have to earlier, give up chores that she always did earlier, takes up a part- time job at the local library, attempts to draw (an activity that she had loved as a child), makes American friends for the first time- mostly with women who live alone because they are divorced".

After the death of her husband Ashoke, Ashima has no desire to escape to Calcutta as she did on many occasions. This reaction of Ashima shows that she has learnt to live alone and all her fears of living alone have gone. At the end of the novel she decides to spend six months in America and six months in India. It is thus clear from her mixed reactions at her departure that the need to connect to one's origins and yet to be a part of new land is important to Ashima.

Now she becomes more confident and the prospect of making the journey entirely on her own no longer terrifies her. She learns to look at the USA with less troubled eyes. Ashima's reactions to her diasporic conditions reveal that Lahiri in this novel brings alive the multiple selves constructed so painstakingly to make sense of the unknown world that is as much a land of opportunities as it is of conflict and confusion.

A common features in both these novels is that both the heroines- Ashima and Jasmine- have reached this alien land, after willingly giving up there known world of comfort, for e.g. Jasmine leaves for America for the completion of her husband Prakash's mission and on the other hand, Ashima is here after her marriage with Ashoke, who lives in Boston. Thus it is clear that unlike the earlier expatriates who came as indentured labour, these twentieth century immigrants are here, very often, because of their personal choice.

Another thing which is clear in this comparative study is that, the expatriate writer is considered to be best suited to have an insider- outsider view of life. But yet, one notices that in Lahiri's novel, there is less interaction with the locals. Mukherjee's heroine seems to have moved with the outer world, while Lahiri's heroine has to deal with herself. The alien world does not make an impact on Ashima as much as it does to Jasmine.

4. Conclusion

In the nutshell we can say that in both the novels- *The Namesake* and *Jasmine*, both novelists with their subject matter artistically. Both the novels gave us a clear view of the varied female responses to diasporic conditions. Bharati Mukherjee deals positively with the delicate issue of immigration of woman, who is uprooted from her home land and has grabbed everything whatever befalls in her path of searching her identity among foreigners. To change from Jyoti to Jasmine, Jasmine to Jase, Jase to Jane is not a simple procedure. She has endured repulsive occasions that include assaults and murders, incredible emergencies. Unlike Ashima, she is not nostalgic about Indian personality, nor does she experience the ill effects of nostalgic yearning. Rather she has utilized all her qualities and makes plans to make new associations in the friendly soil of the migrated country. The combination between the East and West satisfies her and she celebrates that her adventure to America has unfurled her insisting self. On the contrary, Jhumpa Lahiri presents Ashima who, despite of full family support was lost in the family of her homeland and who has failed to individualize herself among those who tried to comfort her despite all her alienation. It is along with passage of time that she adjusted herself between the countries- India and America.

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