

An Insightful Analysis of the Representation of Indian Women in “Jasmine” and “The Death of a Passport”

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how Indian women are portrayed in stories by Indian authors living outside India. It focuses on two books: “Jasmine” by Bharati Mukherjee and “The Death of a Passport” by Iqbal Ramoowalia. Both writers are part of the Indian diaspora settled in North America. In these stories, the women characters share their experiences, come to terms with their identities, and push back against challenges. The main characters, Jasmine and Seema, represent women who feel disconnected and in pain but also go through significant personal growth. Gaining ideas from different writers, the paper aims to explore how women in these narratives find their voices and become more aware of themselves and their surroundings. By analyzing these stories, the paper hopes to shed light on how Indian women navigate life, find themselves and confront obstacles while living outside their homeland.

Keywords: Woman, Challenges. Disconnected, Navigate, Homeland

INTRODUCTION

Ramoowalia highlights the predicament of women confronting situations where they feel powerless and compelled to surrender. ‘What could a woman do when she’s faced with a situation in which she has no power, no choice but to surrender ...’ (Ramoowalia, p. 192)

It emphasizes social issues concerning women’s agency, voice and subjectivity. Fictional stories, like those found in literature, can help us understand how people navigate social norms and limitations. Although fiction is based on imagination, it often takes inspiration from real-life experiences. This means that fictional stories can offer valuable insights into the complexities of our society. Stories that represent social reality are an effective way to understand and discuss women’s experiences. These stories highlight the relationships and power structures that become more evident when individuals, especially women, are marginalized. This paper focuses on how Indian women are represented in diasporic narratives. Studying the diasporic milieu is crucial to having a complete understanding of a nation’s reality. It also helps to compare how women live and are represented in India versus its diaspora. For this paper, two texts written by Indian diasporic authors who have settled in the United States and Canada will be looked at. They are “Jasmine” by Bharati Mukherjee and “The Death of a Passport” by Iqbal Ramoowalia.

Bharati Mukherjee is a writer who focuses on the issues faced by Indian women. Her work on the conflicts faced by Indian women migrants is unique, setting her apart from other feminist writers of her time. Her works have been widely analyzed from a feminist perspective, due to the range of issues concerning women as natives and migrants. In her fictional works such as “The Tiger’s Daughter”, “Wife”, “Leave it to Me”, “Desirable Daughters”, “The Tree Bride”, and “Jasmine”, the female characters are bold and assertive.

Jasmine tells the story of an Indian woman who moves from her rural hometown of Hasnapur in Punjab to the United States of America. Her journey is both physical and cultural, as she learns to adapt to her new life and identity. This is a story of transformation that encompasses the woman's suffering and the series of events that shape her life.

Iqbal Singh Ramoowalia is a writer who was born in Punjab and moved to Canada in 1975 and is a teacher and writer. His novel "Death of a Passport" is notable for its woman-centred narration, which is rare for a male writer. The story portrays the conditions and pain of an illegal Indian woman immigrant through the character of Seema.

Women from different backgrounds and nationalities can share their stories and talk about how they across national borders are connected and interact with each other. The link between reality and representations is one of these connections. The stories discussed in the paper focus on women who have immigrated under unfavourable conditions. These stories show us how vulnerable they are and how they fight for their rights to be equal, and free from oppression, and exploitation. Their struggle is a step in resisting old traditions, patterns, norms, values, and rules. It signifies freedom, independence, and selfhood. They struggle to repeat the unrepeatable and present the unrepresentable, as seen in Brazil and Mannur's states.

Diaspora refers to social relationships created by migration, rather than groups defined by crossing borders. It involves maintaining a collective identity and struggling to be accepted in the host society. A particular sense of feeling and awareness is common among migrants. Structural, conscious and non-conscious factors all play a role in reconstructing and reproducing identities and socio-cultural institutions in groups outside their place of origin. The Indian diaspora is in a state of flux. It is essential to analyze the factors affecting a diasporic woman's existence as a diasporan. This is especially true when they have no choice but to surrender to given circumstances for survival. Women, whether living abroad or in their home country, can face different forms of oppression. The roles and expectations placed on women can shift in a new country, affecting how they are perceived in terms of family, reproduction, sexuality, politics and cultural norms. Migration studies overlook the experiences of women, but looking at migration from a gender perspective can help us understand the cultural influences and actual differences experienced by women.

THE SELECTED NOVELS

Mukherjee's novel "Jasmine" is about a young Punjabi woman named Jyoti, who becomes Jasmine after marrying her husband Prakash. The story covers her journey from her hometown to the United States, where she takes on various identities, including a pregnant woman named Jane. Along the way, she becomes a mother to a Vietnamese boy and is raped by a man named Half-face, leading her to attempt suicide. However, her dreams keep her going and she continues to pursue a new life. Throughout the novel, Jasmine's changing names reflect her struggle to adapt and her quest for fulfilment.

"The Death of a Passport" by Ramoowalia is an account of Seema's tribulations as she departs from her spouse, Anmol, and their six-month-old infant, Amroz, in Canada. The first half of the narrative outlines Seema's difficult voyage and various transformations, to which she adapts. The latter half of the story sees Seema meet Sodhi, who appears to offer hope in obtaining a passport. Seema is helpless and submits herself to Sodhi, for she has no one left to whom she can return. She undergoes immense suffering to evade deportation, as a woman who is separated from her husband, without a passport or marriage documents, is a vulnerable being. Seema's

experiences aim to reflect this. She is left to fend for herself and to cope with the burden of illegal immigration. Despite the availability of numerous work opportunities, Seema has no legitimate authorization to take advantage of them. Along her journey, Seema encounters men, mostly Punjabis, who help her in earning a livelihood. Rajan and Sodhi are some of the names that come to mind. These men, however, demand favours from Seema. While Rajan monitors her earnings, Sodhi monitors her body and mind. Seema tries desperately to acquire legal status in Canada but to no avail. After Sodhi's demise, she destroys her unstamped passport and embarks on a new journey in search of another passport, which she knows to be 'a blind flight without any wings'. (p. 238)

The stories centre around two Indian women who are living in the diaspora. One of them is living there illegally, while the other has committed murder. This study aims to provide a new perspective on the struggles of these women.

REAL VS REPRESENTED

These stories describe women who migrate under pressure and are affected by their marital circumstances. When they move beyond their borders, their deep-rooted ties to their native culture become significant. Vertovec suggests that social relationships are cemented by ties to history and geography. Jasmine's story exemplifies this theory, while Seema's story lacks sufficient detail on her memories of home. Analyzing their experiences allows us to understand how gender roles are internalized, elucidated by Butler's theory of 'performativity'.

In Mukherjee's novel, it is shown that the birth of a girl is often looked down upon in society. People believe it is the result of the mother's past mistakes. As the protagonist, Jasmine grows up, she learns about the rules of society for women, both in her family and the community. Women are expected to complete their tasks sincerely. These social expectations are a common experience for Indian girls. Despite Jasmine's academic success, she is discouraged from pursuing further education. Gender is a social construct that dictates women's roles, which in turn affects their identities. Women's roles are often limiting, leading to them being treated as the 'Other' in society, according to Beauvoir. This process begins at birth and continues throughout their lives. The woman's 'othering' is emphasized by comparing her to animal imagery such as 'cattle', as her brother does to Jasmine. Dehumanization, to quote Freire (p. 26) 'marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen but also those who have stolen it.' Jasmine's father believes that sending girls to school can lead to a violent struggle against the whole process. He thinks that the discourse dislocates girls from the advantages they could get from such benefits. This view contrasts with Jasmine's mother, who believes in the importance of education for her daughter. Freire calls such impositions laid by the oppressors as 'prescription' (p. 28) which was not just implemented in words or actions but also as how a person dressed and conducted her/himself. After becoming accustomed to her American clothes, which is a disguise for her widowhood, Jasmine is given plain saris and salwar-kameez by Nirmala at the Indian Professor's house. '... a widow who should show a proper modesty of appearance and attitude. If not, it appeared I was competing with Nirmala'. (Mukherjee, p. 145)

The way a woman dressed and looked was important in defining her identity. Not only did it serve as a link between her and her homeland, but it also reflected the expectations imposed upon her by those in power. These expectations often limited her choices and actions. Nirmala's false generosity garbs the oppressor's violence and lovelessness which Jasmine struggles with her act of love 'opposing the lovelessness which lies at the heart of the oppressor' (Freire, p. 27).

Seema, being an illegal immigrant, has no other option but to accept Rajan's 'prescription' of taking charge of her earned income. This not only limits her choices but also transforms her consciousness, which in turn affects her thoughts and behaviour, making her appear lifeless and motionless.

Seema is portrayed as an inanimate object, unable to speak or participate in self-consciousness. She is as non-living as any other item in the house she belongs to. Seema lives an alienated life and longs for her voice and agency. In her writing, Ramoowalia uses the ant and elephant imagery to express her realization of being oppressed. Her whispers signify her low resistance and longing for an existence of her own. She draws parallels to the situation of wives in India and as diasporans.

The migration to America in the mid and post-1970s was for a better life. Women who migrate after marriage, often due to their husbands' choices or circumstances, face harsh realities and struggles. They adapt to whatever the host society offers and negotiate their collective experiences. Shared experiences reflect the vulnerable conditions they face. Migrant women remain silent about the humiliation they undergo to save relationships, marriages and families. But they can gain agency only when they break the cage of silence. 'Concealing is feeling and, in many cases, being secure' (Ramoowalia, p. 51)

Seematries to justify silence. Silences for women, like Seema and Jasmine, are not just a garb to hide their internal turmoil but also keep other relations unaffected. To illustrate, Seema's silence about Veena's (her friend) husband molesting her saved the relationship between them. She could have complained to the police about the priest's attempted rape but lacking a legal document would have caused problems for her. Similarly, Jasmine, after being raped and lacking legal sanctions, is left with no secure measure to get justice but to murder the man. They have the fire overpowered by fear. It is the fear that they are unable to quit. To overcome this fear, one needs to recognize the causes and discover the yearning to be free. This is seen in varying degrees in the case of the women characters. Seema's voice is heard for the first time when she talks to Rajan, the person who employed the illegal immigrants in his warehouse in Canada and helped Seema get shelter. She says, '... How long will I live in this miserable condition, hiding and running away from my own shadow! ... What's my reality? Who am I?' (Ramoowalia, p. 97)

Jasmine and Seema challenge patriarchal control and assert their voices and subjectivities. Jasmine is bold, and assertive, and controls her household like a mother. She maintains her individuality and is not under male control. Seema works with Indian men and lacks control over her earnings. Both become aware of their oppressive conditions and desire to locate their agency.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF AWARENESS

The process of discovering one's true identity and enacting positive changes within oneself can only occur when a person resists oppression and embraces their fundamental self. This concept, known as 'catalytic validity' according to Lather, is achieved by examining oppressive realities and taking steps towards emancipatory research. Throughout a particular novel, the two protagonists experience increasing resistance as they strive to establish their place in the world. Oppression, whether based on gender, race, or migration status, can lead to feelings of isolation and disrespect, as often seen in diasporic literature. However, by pushing back against their oppressors, the protagonists take a significant step towards shattering the 'culture of silence', as described by Freire. By recognizing the extent of their oppression and seeking freedom from it,

they challenge prescribed gender roles and undo the constraints of their gender. As Butler (p.1) suggests, gender is not solely a performance, but rather a practice of improvisation within certain boundaries. Men and women 'do gender' to be validated as socially acceptable beings. However, if the only means of validation available to us are those that either grant or withhold recognition, then recognition itself becomes a source of power that produces humans unequally. (Butler, p.2) This is where social power comes into play and victimization begins. Resistance serves as a means of challenging oppression and undoing these constraints, thus acting as a catalyst for transformation.

The 'fire' image used indicates the vigour and rage inside Jasmine after she was robbed of her chastity. She is raped but is not broken. The murder of the 'half face', the person, who rapes Jasmine, marks the beginning of her realization and germinates the seeds of resistance which makes her a strong woman unlike Seema who suffered till almost she had no other way left for herself. She executed the whole plan with great caution and the murder, rather than claiming her victim, purifies her of the pain and guilt which she did not commit. She dies as far as her honour, love, respect and security are concerned. The life is nothing but an existence without any hope. The 'ruin' Jasmine undergoes affects her similarly and so she tries firstly to cleanse her body with the hot water and soap and then attempts suicide.

The protagonist in Mukherjee's Jasmine, Jasmine herself, is portrayed as a strong woman who doesn't let things happen to her but rather has her subjectivity. The bathroom, where she committed a hideous crime, appears to her as a spot that permits a kind of purity. In contrast, Seema, another character in the story, is relatively not as resistant as Jasmine and has had a different upbringing. The two women's representation reflects their different ways of life. Crying at home for hours, before gliding into sleep, at the loss of something inseparable from her being, receded gradually '... It was not easy to overcome the feeling that something integral had been plucked out of her'. (Ramoowalia, p. 85)

But slowly she regains her confidence. She arises as an individual when she leaves her home. In the Gurudwara, when she battled the molestation done by the priest, her strength is reflected. She is without a passport and finds temporary shelter at Rajan's warehouse, Patricia's restaurant or with Sodhi. But, none of the places is safe for her. Following a fixed schedule, Seema occupies the position of a slave earning for Rajan, helping Patricia, and giving sexual satisfaction to Sodhi. She rarely raises her voice. Towards the end of the novel, she is compared to a wingless goose that flies despite a bleeding beak and wings. She is always in a fear of being caught.

'But I don't think any strength is left in me ... to endure being trampled along any longer ... and rolled around like an unclaimed ball of rags' (Ramoowalia, p. 181)

Seema's words reveal her inner struggle and shattered sense of self. She questions her existence and the meaninglessness of her life. Sodhi helps her find the strength to rebuild her lost sense of self and confront the challenges of the new world, much like how Prakash supports Jasmine. When Seema packs up and moves on for a new life in search of a passport, she's taking on the challenge of avoiding deportation. She doesn't return to anyone she's left behind, showing her newfound independence, which she gained through her experiences in Canada. She turns confident at the end of the novel. '... I can't let myself die a perennial death.' (Ramoowalia, 181)

The desire to live life fully, find one's identity, and reclaim their voice symbolizes their emergence. which Beauvoir (p. 767) calls, 'the free woman is just being born'. These women defy societal norms, overcoming the fear of surrender and oppression to become 'new women'.

Their presence in the diaspora, as Vertovec suggests, shows how identities can change and adapt.

SEARCHING IDENTITY

Butler says that identity can float around freely and cannot be tied to any fixed core. These women, each in unfamiliar places surrounded by strangers, were seen as not dangerous but as needing help. (Mukherjee, p. 131) and thus targeted as pity sights of exploitation. This idea sheds light on how the identities of women evolve, adapt, and are negotiated throughout their lives. It is evident in the transformations that take place in places like Rajan's workshop, Patricia's restaurant or Lillian Gordon's house, where the changes are explicitly represented, starting from the women's shifting names. As Jasmine recalls to herself, 'I am sure that I have been reborn several times...' (p. 126)

'And which of us is the undetected murderer of a half-faced monster, which of us had held a dying husband, which of us was raped and raped and raped in boats and cars and motel rooms.' (p.127)

People can change their identities, but their desires remain the same. Changing their name can transform their character and create a new, self-dependent and strong woman in a new environment. However, women can lose a part of their existence in the struggle, which is never compensated for. Despite this, their inner strength enables them to overcome adversity.

The society around us is represented by a voice that demands women to please the devil and survive, even when they are expected to surrender. The state is symbolized by a woman who lacks support and is helpless to perform. However, she still has the will to live. The narratives focus on the strong side of women and their existence through characters like Seema and Jasmine. These women create their lives in a new hostile environment, showing independence, strength, and determination.

A passport is a critical document that proves one's identity, especially for those living in a foreign country. In a story, two characters must move to another country without proper documentation. Seema, one of the main characters, agrees to marry Sodhi, despite not loving him, to prevent being deported. However, after Sodhi's sudden death, Seema questions whether she married him for love or just to secure her stay in Canada. She realizes that a passport is as important as the person who owns it. Sodhi's death not only took away Seema's husband but also her legal right to stay in Canada. This open-ended story leaves us wondering what will happen to Seema after Sodhi's departure. She questions herself, 'Who had I married? Him or this passport? Who was he? Was he a human being or just a thin bunch of papers bound together with a landed stamp in it?' 'What will you do now?' (Ramoowalia, p. 237- 238)

CONCLUSION

The stories of Seema and Jasmine represent the experiences of many women who are forced to submit to their circumstances. They face conflict from both external forces and their internal struggles. This paper aims to study the representation of such women and explores the complexity of human experiences. By examining the concrete lived conditions from an insider's perspective, we can understand how power operates and resistance occurs. Although the two novels differ in their endings, with Jasmine finding happiness and Seema embarking on a new journey seeking a passport to stay in Canada, Seema's escape symbolizes the continuation of her struggle. While she has become stronger, she still experiences pain. These women are strong

individuals who bring about change and awareness. The representation of their experiences exemplifies the existential reality of their diasporic identity. This prompts further research into the reason behind their pain in the diaspora, including the role of cultural background.

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