

A Comparative Study of Female Protagonists in *Jasmine* and *Sister of My Heart*

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Abstract: African-American women have a long history of subjugation on the various levels. This race was colonized on the grounds of racism; where Black women were triply marginalized due to race, gender, and class. On the similar grounds, Asian cultures, and Asian women also fought the issue of patriarchy. It was only in the few recent years that they found their foothold in the area of literature and writing at the forefront. The objective of this research paper is to compare the two modern works authored by Indian-American women; Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989) and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* (1999). It draws parallels on the women characters portrayed in these novels. This paper includes the theory of comparative literature which is the basic theory on the lines of which above mentioned works are analysed. These works also call for the introduction to the genre of Diaspora literature which is the common binding agent of the works along with the fact of having women writers of Indian origin. The aim is to recognize the sensibilities of both the authors and distinguish the features of their respective popular works of fiction.

Keywords: Comparative Literature, Diaspora, Touchers, Ambition, Subjugation.

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper is an attempt towards a qualitative and comparative research on the modern diaspora fiction produced by women. The two works of concern here are *Jasmine* and *Sister of My Heart*. Both works have certain parallels as to portraying female characters as protagonists. In order to justify the purpose the prevalent major themes of both the fictional works have been examined.

II. THEORY OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

Everywhere there is connection, everywhere there is illustration. No single event, no single literature is adequately comprehended except in relation to other events, to other literature. (Arnold 222)

The field of Comparative literature deals with the literary study of two or more distinct linguistic, cultural, traditional, or national groups. It requires the ability to consider various types of art simultaneously. As it is interdisciplinary in nature, the practitioner must exhibit the acquaintance with translation studies, transnational studies, cultural studies, and linguistic studies, religious and historical studies.

To examine the Indian School of Comparative Literature, according to Sisir Kumar Das's work *A History of Indian Literature* (1991) where he stresses the significance of tradition as the fundamental concern of literary pursuits in India, and thereby suggested that its study should form an important part of comparative pursuits in India. Amiya Dev in his essay "Comparative Literature in India", bases his theory on unity and diversity of works and identifies the commonality with classification by authors' births and deaths, dates of text composition and publication, classification in genres, text dissemination, reception, literary reviews and their impact, literary society formations and debates. It becomes comparative chronology having a narrative base to it.

The future of Comparative Literature depends on recognition and study of various literatures, different schools, like Indian Comparative Literature, their literary and cultural traditions, ethos and specificities in different parts of the world.

The aim of comparative literature is to exemplify and embody some kind of comparative literary activity without any doctrines. The other kind is touching mode in which Comparative Literature seeks the identification with theory. Such practitioners of Comparative Literature are called ‘touchers’. They study literature comparatively and see the abstract structures operating in contexts and by systematizing them they want to access literature in a certain way, certain theory. The future of Comparative Literature would depend on the endeavours of pursuers of literatures—those who can ‘show’ and those who can ‘touch’ in the already pursued old areas and also the new ones like translation, multiculturalism, cultural studies, inter-cultural studies, folklore and oral literary studies. The future of Comparative Literature depends on the notion of “tradition” given by T.S. Eliot in his essay “Tradition and Individual Talent”, which says that the function of tradition is to compare and contrast and find out the ways and works in which tradition operates.

Now, an attempt to consider the concerned works in the light of the comparative theory.

III. *JASMINE* (1989)

Jasmine is a fiction by Indian-American writer Bharati Mukherjee (born July 27, 1940). Mukherjee was born in Calcutta, she later travelled with her parents to Europe and she next travelled to the United States to study at the University of Iowa. She received her M.F.A. from the Iowa Writer’s Workshop in 1963 and her Ph.D. in 1969 from the department of Comparative Literature. Mukherjee started her academic career by teaching at many renowned institutions such as McGill University, Skidmore College, Queens College, and City University of New York before joining University of California, Berkeley; where she is presently a professor.

IV. *SISTER OF MY HEART* (1999)

Sister of My Heart is a novel by Chitralekha Banerjee Divakaruni (born 1956 Kolkata, India), an Indian-American author, and poetess. Chitra Banerjee received her B.A. from the University of Calcutta in 1976. She went to the United States to attend Wright State University where she received her master’s degree. She received a Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkeley. She is presently the Betty and Gene McDavid Professor of Writing at the University of Houston Creative Writing Program.

V. DRAWING COMPARISONS IN *JASMINE* AND *SISTER OF MY HEART*

The comparison of these works calls for analyzing their major components like plot, setting, characters and themes. Both the works are written by Indian-American immigrant women writers and both are Diasporas in nature and can be grouped into exile literature. Exile keeps the strings attached between the writer’s place of origin and the place of exile. John Simpson in *The Oxford Book of Exile* writes that exile “is the human condition; and the great upheavals of history have merely added physical expression to an inner fact”, thus are these two works.

Both the works different on their plots, however boil down to some common points in the story. Jasmine and Anju both have inclination towards studies and have fierce spirit, but due to traditional culture “marriage” changes their plans and they try hard to perform a stereotypical role of a “wife”. Both the characters, Jasmine; due to the death of her husband and Anju because the man she marries stays there, they travel to States. Similar to both the girls, survival there is difficult as they are immigrants.

To draw comparisons between the two works, following is the analysis of some common themes prevalent in Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* as well as Divakaruni’s *Sister of My Heart*.

A. *Ambitious Childhood*

Jyothi (Jasmine), a middle class family’s youngest girl has an inclination for studies, and she is fortunate enough to have a wise masterji, who supported her education. She learns English and tries to quench her thirst for knowledge and new things as she gets books and education through his support.

Likewise, Anju and Sudha both are interested in making their dreams come true as they grow up. Anju is intelligent and performs academically well, with her mother’s encouragement. She goes on to win spelling bees and debate contests and she looks forward to getting enrolled at Lady Brabourne College’s English honours program; her excessive fascination with Virginia Woolf, her craze for Elizabeth Barrett Browning vouch for the same. While all of Anju’s academic aspirations are achievable, that of Sudha’s seem in danger. Sudha’s father left nothing other than debts. This becomes one

of the reasons for her inability to perform academically well even if she is as intelligent as Anju. Nevertheless, Sudha also does well with her cooking, knitting and crocheting. Sudha says,

“I want to design clothes, salwaar kameezes, pleated wedding ghagras with mirrors stitched in. Kurtas for men, embroidered white on white silk. I want to have my own company, with my own tailors and my own label, so that customers at all the best stores will ask for the Basudha brand.” (Divakaruni: 90).

She chooses to be traditional which also demands a lot of courage and tolerance. All the three girls; Jyothi, Anju and Sudha are shown to belong to middle class families, and in spite of their limited resources; they are dreamers of their own success and keep the spirit to fulfil them. Divakaruni though sets it clear through Anju that economic stability is a must for emancipation of women. This hints toward the next theme, which is central to all the women world-over.

B. Subjugation of Women

Jyothi is born into a family which was already “burdened” by four daughters in Hasnapur. She being a beautiful child made her mother worry about her groom as in those times parents bothered only about their girl child’s dowry but not her education. After marrying the man of her choice, Prakash Vij; starts her transformation from a village girl under the shell of her father and brothers to a wife of a traditional husband who gives her all liberties. He transforms her from Jyothi to Jasmine. When she is widowed she returns to her parents in Hasnapur. Ironically Jyothi was once warned by a sage about her ill- fate, widowhood and exile. When she chooses to go to the States, her first steps prove to be fatal even here which is considered the First World. She gets raped by Half-Face, the ship’s captain. Even Khalsa Lions (a group of men-fighters) are responsible for her husband’s death. In States; Bud Ripplemayer, Jasmine’s love-interest is shot by some man. Thus the protagonist of *Jasmine*, she is subjugated by men in many phases of her life irrespective of the Third or First World.

In *Sister of My Heart*, the first book in the novel is titled *The Princess in the Palace of Snakes*, which symbolizes the protagonists’ attempt to conform to the traditional feminine roles allocated by the male hegemonic society. Here both the girls are said to have brought ill-fortune, since even before they were born they doomed their fathers to die. They suffer economically also, as all the responsibilities of recovering debts their fathers created came on their shoulders. Sudha is tormented by her in-laws and husband, who demand abortion of her girl-child. Helpless, she returns to her mother, Nalini; who says, “A woman can have many children, after all, but a husband is forever . . . what will we (sic) tell our relatives? Uff, she’s smeared kali for ever on the Chatterjee family.” (Divakaruni: 266). Traditions and societal bounds are audible in her mother’s voice. Both the sisters and Jasmine, directly or indirectly are subject to subjugation; either from patriarchy, society, or fortune.

C. Bond of Women

In search of their identity; women, often find succour and solace in other women and become companions of each other. Jasmine is helped by Lillian Gordon, a lady in the States who gives her shelter and a job as well. Jasmine finds a lifelong companion, a self-less friend in Gordon.

However, this theme gets personified in Divakaruni’s novel, it’s a titular theme. The author creates an all-women household to look at the dynamics at how such women find collective strength in patriarchal society. The two sisters are bound by destiny; their birth, marriage, pregnancy, all occurring at about the same time weaves a magnetic love around them. Sisterhood to them is not just a matter of ties of blood but of love. As Anju says, “I could never hate Sudha. Because she is my other half (sic). The sister of my heart (sic).” (Divakaruni: 11). These sisters share a tight bond of love which is much stronger than any blood relation. They are separated by fate and marriage, but they let nothing stand in the way of their love for each other, even jeopardizing the love of the men in their lives for each other. The women through their lives showcase the experiences of their jealousy, loss, depression, surprise and prolonged separation and find that these battles and triumphs hold a universal thread with which women of many cultures shall easily identify.

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper thus examined the various binding features which are universal in the two concerned works. It also proves how the literature of Diasporas and Exile literature bring impetus to comparative literature. A major contribution in this regard has been that of the Indian writers, like Rushdie and Naipaul, who live as world citizens - a global manifestation of the exilic condition. Indian-English writers like Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Shashi Tharoor, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram

Seth, Rohinton Mistry and Jhumpa Lahiri have all made their names while residing abroad. The non-resident Indian writers have explored their sense of displacement—a perennial theme in all exile literature. They have given poignancy to the exploration by dealing not only with a geographical dislocation but also with a socio-cultural sense of displacement. The comparative literature, thus bridges the east and west; the collaboration and the amalgamation of the two worlds.

To conclude with the words of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, she says,

“To me, the art of dissolving boundaries is what living is all about.”

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