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CONTENTS

Sr. No.	Author	Title of the Paper	Page No.
1	Dr. Santosh D. Rathod	Adaptation of Novel to Film: a Theoretical Perspective for a Student of Film and Literature Studies	1
2	Deepanjali Mishra	Non Verbal Etiquettes of an Employee in Corporate Work place	8
3	Meenakshi Gogoi	A Critical Analyses of Edward Said's Orientalism through Foucaultian Perspective of Knowledge-Power Relation	16
4	Krutika Agrawal	Space Solar Power	25
5	Nidhi Pareek	Are Scholastic Experiences Sufficient for Moral Development in School?	35
6	Afsal PC & Dr. S. Karthik Kumar	Politics Turned Art: Appreciating Dionne Brand's "Sans Souci and other stories"	37
7	Sanna Usman	Language Use, Attitude and Vitality among the Burushaski Speakers in Kashmir Valley	41
8	Francis D'souza	Schooling Nationalism: Gender, Violence and Language Education	47
9	Dr. Rajib Bhaumik	Bharati Mukherjee's <i>Jasmine</i> : Cross-Cultural Revision and Mutation of Identity through Re-Invention and Cultural Translation	57
10	Abdul Rasack P. & Dr. S. Karthik Kumar	Communicative Language Teaching: Aims and Methods	66
11	Mamta Muthal	Emoji : Emergence of a new age lingo	70
12	Vinay Kumar Dubey B.N. Chaudhary	A Study of Alienation in Shashi Despande's <i>The Dark Holds No Terrors</i>	74
13	Dr. Hanumanthappa D. G.	Significance of Human Rights in India	80
14	Dr. S. Karthikkumar	Text and Discourse in Communication	84

		Competence	
15	Manjari Shukla	Text-Celluloid Interface: a Study of Cinematic Presentation of Ruskin Bond's <i>A Flight of Pigeons</i>	92
16	Sankha Maji	Listening to the Silence: A Quest for Identity in Bama's <i>Karukku</i>	97
17	Durgesh Mohan Bartwal	A Learning Style of Intermediate Players in Relation to their Extroversion-Introversion	100
18	Shomik Saha	Issues in Sustainability in the Tourism Industry in West Bengal: Moving towards Eco-Tourism	116
19	Nishtha Mishra	Rashmi Jain, <i>Kaleidoscopic Visions: A Collection of Poems.</i>	125
20	सुधीर कुमार & डॉ० स्नेहलता शिवहरे	यूनेस्को तथा शिक्षा: एक विश्लेषण (Unesco and Education: An analysis)	127

Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*: Cross-Cultural Revision and Mutation of Identity through Re-Invention and Cultural Translation**Dr. Rajib Bhaumik***Asst. Professor, Dept of English, Alipurduar College, (West Bengal) India***Abstract**

While exploring the same realms of the progressive destiny of transnational migrants, Mukherjee as a writer faces the issue of nostalgia for one's native country and culture in the transformed, globalized world. She traces the contradictions in her own native culture and presents a dramatically revised vision of India, America, the world and the new immigrants. In her fiction, Mukherjee represents and writes about what may be termed as the hybridization of the new America. In this pursuit, Mukherjee deconstructs cultural clichés, acknowledges the realities of the world's cultural alienation, economic system, and sets her texts against a background of tangled, transnational economic activities, mass exodus and dislocations in the diasporic space. *Jasmine* is face to face with culture's twin blow, fragmentation and assimilation and also the third impact, hybridity. Even after fragmentation and dislocations, she looks forward, not to the present reality, for she feels that reinvention of self, not nostalgia, is her strength. Transformation and compliance are the key to survival, and that the thriving immigrant has the instinct of reinventing oneself in recurrence to adjust with the postcolonial exilic reality. Thus, in the flurry of change and action, conflict and confusion there is the whole nucleus of cross-cultural reality.

Key Words: origin, Diaspora, surface-tensions, diasporic cross-over, exilic exclusions, polyphonic construction

In Bharati Mukherjee's fictions, translation is an important enunciativeⁱ mechanism for cross-cultural revision and mutation of identity. The process of cultural translation and mutative change involves remaking and murdering the past self. The relocation in the language of Mukherjee is 'rebirth' in the 'image of dreams.'ⁱⁱ It is the enthusiasm and keenness of *Jasmine* to murder her past self that enables her to dynamically press forward into indefinite but promising future. In the process of deferral and displacement, she looks forward to the all important third dimension. In the great literary surge of Mukherjee, *Jasmine* then represents the

significant transcultural and transnational realities. Mukherjee's obsession on the conflictual diasporic identity and 'hybrid hyphenation'ⁱⁱⁱ proliferate in a new discourse on dislocation as a precondition of a new hybrid signifier 'peculiar to borderline existence.'^{iv} Finally, the climax of her literary voyage has transformed her from a 'chronicler of exile to a champion of immigrants.'^v Mukherjee asserts:

I am inventing an American for myself, I am writing an America that hasn't been written about. The 'frontier' is up there, in front of me, I am pushing it back all the time. This is

what makes the new stories so different. They are a natural outgrowth of where I am. I feel it's the writer's business to write about his or her environment, whatever that may be.^{vi}

While exploring the same realms of the progressive destiny of transnational migrants, Mukherjee as a writer faces the issue of nostalgia for one's native country and culture in the transformed, globalized world. She traces the contradictions in her own native culture and presents a dramatically revised vision of India, America, the world and the new immigrants. In her fiction, Mukherjee represents and writes about what may be termed as the hybridization of the new America. After probing this new identity, she explores the consciousness of the diasporic subjects who are not of one ethnic group or the other, 'but who are many, many different ethnicities together, which is the real America.'^{vii} In this pursuit, Mukherjee deconstructs cultural clichés, acknowledges the realities of the world's cultural alienation, economic system, and sets her texts against a background of tangled, transnational economic activities, mass exodus and dislocations in the diasporic space. Jasmine is face to face with culture's twin blow, fragmentation and assimilation and also the third impact, hybridity. Even after fragmentation and dislocations, she looks forward, not to the present reality, for she feels that reinvention of self, not nostalgia, is her strength. Transformation and compliance are the key to survival, and that the thriving immigrant has the instinct of reinventing oneself in recurrence to adjust with the postcolonial exilic reality. Thus, in

the flurry of change and action, conflict and confusion there is the whole nucleus of cross-cultural reality. In *The Location of Culture* Bhabha is categorical:

To grasp the ambivalence of hybridity, it must be distinguished from an inversion that would suggest that the originary is, really, only an 'effect.' Hybridity has no such perspective of depth or truth to provide: it is not a third term that resolves the tension between two cultures, or the two scenes of the book, in a dialectical play of 'recognition.' The displacement from symbol to sign creates a crisis for any concept of authority based on a system of recognition: colonial peculiarity, doubly inscribed, does not produce a mirror where the self apprehends itself; it is always the split screen of the self and its doubling, the hybrid.^{viii}

In *Jasmine*, the diasporic dislocation to which Jasmine/Jane is persistently subjected is indicative of her postcolonial predicament of mutation and translation to re-historicize existence. A disjunction produced in the act of restructuring creates the split subject of the racial stereotype which attempts to define identity as a 'fantasy of difference.'^{ix} Dwindling between such polarities of absorption and rejection she ends up having different names (which people give her, except in the case of "Kali") and diasporic ambivalence. She is Jyoti, Jasmine, Kali, Jazzy, Jase, and Jane Ripplemeyer. She first marries Prakash in India (and he changes her name from Jyoti to Jasmine); then is raped by Half-Face (which she acknowledges as one of her "men") and she calls herself Kali;

falls in love with Jase's boss Taylor; and marries Bud Ripplemeyer in Iowa, and becomes Jane.

Jasmine thus, represents the female post-colonial subaltern subject under dual subjugation of native tradition and the compulsions of being resident alien. Conjecturally, postcolonial subjects are entangled in doubleness, and this doubleness is marked by spatial trouble of displacement and dislocations. In *Jasmine* through multiple identity formations there are multiple displacements and near obliteration and amnesia of the past. She acquires different names, husbands, dwelling places, with recurrence of reincarnations. These displacements do not occur as sudden events nor are they epiphanies rather they are non-temporal signifier of a diasporic dread to construct identities which is exuberant, emancipatory and remote from the trauma of expatriation.

This exuberance of immigration, which comes with the acquisition of Americanisms and the immigrant Indianness or the rebirth, results in a sort of a fluid identity. This does not come easily, for it is difficult to divorce oneself completely from one's own past, nor it is easy to overcome the aloofness of expatriation, or disunite oneself from the roots and tradition of the culture that one belongs. The transformation of Jyoti-Jasmine-Jase-Jane is the postcolonial condition of every exuberant immigrant.

After going through a whole process of deracination and displacement, Jasmine wishes to settle down, a desire not in contradiction with her existential struggle and perpetual transformation before re-location. She has to undergo the theoretical

recognition of the split-space of accent thus accommodating herself in the 'Third Space of enunciations.'^x The whole process of re-location recognizes the cultural difference as against stasis and rootedness. In the ongoing process of translation and new meaning, her future self can never entirely escape her past inscriptions. For Jasmine, history is in the discontinuity and the rupture produced by material and political events remixes the self in a different structure, and as a result, the transplanted becomes plural and contradictory. Her survival depends upon a negotiable flexible strategy of appropriation and mutative change before transformation prefixed by a series of dislocations and disjuncture. The shifting of her identity from Jyoti, Jasmine, Jane and to Jase is suggestive of the death of one personality and an emergence of a new, but it does not have negative-implications. The protagonist does not see her 'Indianness as a fragile identity to be preserved against obliteration, now it is seen as a set of fluid identities to be celebrated.'^{xi} Thus caught in the dialectic between the past and the present, Jasmine does not attempt a revolutionary synthesis. She simply dissolves the claims of the past. She changes herself through violence, dissection and self extinctions. The novel strikes the reader with its protagonist's changing identities with the changing locales: Hasnapur, Jullandhar, Florida, Queens, Manhattan, and Iowa.

Jane's adopted son in Iowa is the 14-year old Vietnamese boy, Du Thien he is an ex-refugee. Du functions textually as Jane's mirror image. Like Jyoti he was forced to leave his own nation out of violence and such similar trauma. For Jyoti this was the

massive turnaround in the Sikh separatist conflicts in Punjab; while for Du, it was the occurrences in the refugee camp in Vietnam where he had two lives, one in Saigon and another in the refugee camp. In Saigon he'd lived in a house with a large family, and had been happy. His older brother was raised fighting fish; his married sister brought back live crabs and worms for him to eat whenever she could sneak a visit from her own camp. Du's mother and brother were hacked to death in the fields by a jealous madman, after they'd gotten their visas.^{xii} Thus Du had undergone tough and critical moments in the process of his maturity into adulthood. His trajectory of exilic self is similar to Jasmine, both uprooted and re-planted after multiple ruptures and dislocations.

Like Jyoti/Jasmine/Jane, he too seemed to slough off selves upon his arrival, and tossed himself unreservedly into his new life, watching sitcoms, eating at McDonalds, and acquiring English. Because of their past lives, both Du and Jane seem to share some sort of attachment; as she says, 'once upon a time, like me, he was someone else. We've been many selves.'^{xiii} Both Jasmine and Du share the trauma of multiple selves and dislocations in each of the transits of their exilic trajectory. At one point Jane observes 'secrets roll like barbed wire between us.'^{xiv} And it is Du's eventual fortune in the text that also, somewhat strangely enough, provides the conclusion of Jane's own story.

Close to the end of the narrative, Du announces his intent to move to Los Angeles to live with his Vietnamese sister, whom he has tracked down through Vietnamese acquaintances. Jane's reaction to this is

significant. Her shock at the prospect of losing her adopted son is overshadowed by her realization of Du's successful amalgamation of his Vietnamese and American selves. She says: 'I am amazed ... My transformation has been genetic; Du's was hyphenated. We were so full of wonder at how fast he became American, but he's a hybrid.'^{xv} Not only does Du transform himself, but he also transforms his environment. Jane insists that she was a *re-born* American and through this she discards her Indian identity. Thus, her transformation was 'genetic' as she puts it – contrasts with Du's added-on Americanness, and serves to underscore Mukherjee's belief in ethnic identity as an alternative choice.

Jane decides to leave Bud when Taylor and Duff come looking for her, and Taylor proposes marriage and a move to California: 'I am not choosing between men. I am caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness. [...] It isn't guilt I feel, it's relief. I realize I have already stopped thinking of myself as Jane.'^{xvi} As Taylor remarks-- 'We'll be an unorthodox family, Jase.'^{xvii} The American family that is reconstituted by Jyoti/Jasmine/Kali/Jazzy/Jase/Jane/Jase, her lover Taylor, the adopted Duff and Du, and Jasmine's unborn child consist powerful content of transnational fluid identity.

For this transcultural and transnational formation, adherence to tradition and obligation to the past are of secondary nature of importance. In the process of cultural assimilation the 'self' and the 'other' are not locked in rigid binaries, rather, they are liberated into a free space. In Mukherjee's visualization of the immigrant

status nostalgic aspects of such preservation holds no importance. Thus Jasmine undergoes personal changes in her movements from culture to culture, changes that Mukherjee characterizes in the strongest terms in her exuberant essay "Immigrant Writing: Give Us Your Maximalists!" published on 28 August 1988 in the New York Times Book Review. The phenomenal essay records Mukherjee's excitement about the ceremony in Federal District Court House in Manhattan that February that made her a citizen of the United States. Fakrul Alam writes: 'Eight Years after she and her family left Canada in frustration at that country's policy of multiculturalism, Mukherjee is clearly delighted by the prospects awaiting her now that she had formally cast herself into America's melting pot culture.'^{xviii}

The process of mutative reincarnation is initiated when Jyoti/Jasmine/Jane sheds previous lives. In the gradual transition from one self to another with each new incarnation she moves closer to embrace America as her home. The first instance of this is upon Jyoti's arrival in the US, when Mukherjee uses the image of *sati* (voluntary immolation by a Hindu wife upon her husband's funeral pyre). Prior to this, Jyoti's husband Prakash has been murdered by Sikh extremists in India, and Jyoti has vowed to fulfill their joint dream of immigrating to America together, on her own. At this point, Jyoti – soon to become Jasmine – literally burns all her belongings:

My body was merely the shell, soon to be discarded. Then I could be reborn, debts and sins all paid for [...] I buttoned up the jacket and sat by the

fire. With the first streaks of dawn, my first full American day, I walked out the front drive of the motel to the highway and began my journey, travelling light.^{xix}

She struggles to avoid marginalization through her various mutations as *suttee* goddess, illicit lover, compassionate care giver and a courageous, exhilarating dreamer. In her search for self there is a wild transformation from pastoral innocence to perversion. In *Jasmine* the narrator's journey from the rural India of her childhood to the city, to America and finally into the cornfields of Ohio mimics the multiple translation and conversions in her social roles. She transforms in turn from the country girl looking for an improved life into a good Indian woman, an Americanized city girl, and finally the considerate and humble Midwestern wife.

In several occasions Mukherjee spoke about her American citizenship and for that matter herself an American writer by choice and preference, with no regrets at all. Unlike her protagonist Jasmine, who is in a sense, compelled to leave India, Mukherjee claims that she had developed a choice in leaving India under a specific postcolonial situation. The implications of this preference are worth looking at. In an interview, Mukherjee asserts 'I totally consider myself an American writer... now my roots are here and my emotions are here in North America.'^{xx} She exercises a rational choice to shift her identity and the process of her relocation is marked by the dread of secondariness in a foreign country and as an 'alien' other in her own native space.

For Mukherjee, her past identity as an Indian is something she has left behind although she has internalized it. She is quite aware of the ongoing process of Indian and global culture and prefers to shed her nationness to emerge free in a deconstructed ethnicity of America. She describes the shift a 'culmination of a long process of searching for a home'^{xxi} and positions herself emphatically within America as a part of what she asserts the 'ethnic and gender-fractured world of contemporary American fiction.'^{xxii} Her declared affiliation with America and Americanisms seems to be a major obstacle to define her position among the postcolonial writers where anti-centricity and racial 'othering' are the key words.

Mukherjee is critical of racism in America, but with a certain simplification her fictions ignore the fact that the America she opts to belong is the main carter of colonialism today with its declared objective of setting up a new world order, unquestionably with America at the helm. In this context her endorsement of America as a strategic ground for positive change in novels like *Jasmine* problemizes her position as a postcolonial intellectual.^{xxiii} *Jasmine* explores the transition and translation in a radical and violent way, represented by dislocations and uprooted identities.

Such diasporic changeover of location has certain anxieties in it. In the Interview for Iowa Review, she says 'America represented a kind of glitziness-as in Jasmine-a chance for romantic reincarnation.'^{xxiv} But this glitziness is not symptomatic of all diasporic experiences. The word *Diaspora* is not a substitute for the word immigrant. *Diaspora* essentially is bitter experience of dislocation

that leads to alienation, a sense of loss and nostalgic desires. Some of Mukherjee's characters begin their overseas engagement as diasporans and feel dislocated. Some of them are fascinated by the same 'glitziness' as Dimple in *Wife*, while there is no such lure of glitziness as in *Jasmine*. Hers is the transmigration with no predestined history; instead history is always in the making with each new experience in a foreign land. She is propelled by necessity and romance which overshadows the 'glitziness.' In this regard there are similarities between Hannah Easton of *The Holder of the World* and *Jasmine* as both are guided by romance, not glitziness.

In Mukherjee's delineation of the phenomenon of reverse Diaspora *The Holder of the World* has a significant track reversal from *Jasmine*. It takes a far more ambitious, epic approach, attempting to chronicle the full sweep of colonial history in America, England, and India. Nevertheless, like *Jasmine* the main importance of its narrative is the connection between notions of femininity and roles that can be played to dissolve a singular notion of the subject. Hannah Easton travels from her native America (she is member of the early Puritan society that settled there) to England and then to India where—as though in a complete transformation from her former self—she becomes the Bibi (a courtesan) of an Indian prince.

Not only does *The Holder of the World* emphasize the importance of an open subjectivity that not only transgresses the bounds of any single or stable notion of the subject, but also has the ability to transcend the restrictions of any political or social

position. It also shows how the exile can make an important intervention in the world. In both her novels, Mukherjee shows displacement and the acceptance of certain violence as preconditions which are to be confronted and complied as parts of the discursive construction of transnational reality. The transnational reality is transmigration, the whole transgressive odyssey towards mongrelization prior to assimilation.

However, her depiction of Jasmine as a dynamic, cross-cultural exilic self, establishing herself by heroically relocating gender, power and racial relationship, is itself a strong representation of what a woman can achieve in a postcolonial global context. Her struggle allows us to relish a new insight into the complex relationships and transactions between the local and the global, East and West, home and location, especially when the agent is a woman who is out beyond boundaries of all sorts to redefine herself through negotiation and performance. Fakrul Alam writes:

The character of Jasmine, it will now be clear, has been created to depict Mukherjee's belief in the necessity of inventing and re-inventing one's self by going beyond what is given and by transcending one's origins. For Mukherjee, immigration---specifically immigration to America --- is a crucial step to be taken in any move to remake oneself in the light of one's desires.^{xxv}

The Americanization of Jasmine is a postcolonial trajectory of remaking oneself though it hints at breaking of the rigid behavioral norms of the traditional Indian society. She breaks the binaries between

'base' and 'superstructure'^{xxvi} through inventing and re-inventing self 'in the face of the multiple points of transnational globality.'^{xxvii} Though bold and assertive, still Jasmine's character delimits the definition of woman as a function. The one very positive step in the direction of establishing her self-hood is that she has exercised her freedom of choice. Jasmine reflects a combination of postcolonial womanliness and feminism. Her feminism is not designed to alter or replace the male symbolic order or anything radical in that line, what the American feminists have laid out. Her female protagonists have a critical subject position to assert liberation from the colonial bondage in denial 'to keep house, cook, and pray'^{xxviii} to perform independently as the author herself, in the same transnational global environment.

Alam says:

Jasmine continues to reflect Mukherjee's concern with the lives of Indian women, whether battered by their husbands or leading unfulfilled lives. [...]Mukherjee has gone out of her way to distance herself from American feminists in her portrayal of Jasmine by making her not only into someone who ultimately wants to do the right thing for herself no matter what that will do to others, but also into someone who tries very hard to please others and be as feminine as possible.^{xxix}

Her dislocation and uprooting have effectively contributed to the hybrid formation and finally the third space of culture. She has deracinated herself from her original culture and is now trying to re-

territorialize and re-locate in a new culture. She is now characterized by conflicting desires. On the one hand she would like her readers to believe that she is in a state of constant change and moving from one identity to another, on the other hand, she is getting rooted in the new culture. The following passage suggests the trajectory of the third dimension that takes shape:

Taylor, Wylie, and Duff were family. America may be fluid and built on flimsy, invisible lines of weak gravity, but I was a dense object, I had landed and was getting rooted. I had controlled my spending and now sat on an account that was rapidly growing.^{xxx}

She goes through an existential crisis. On the heap of broken images of her past and exilic presence, she feels a strange kind of *otherness*-subverted, dislocated and divided. She becomes a mongrel structure, she posits as a possibility of a different kind in the global multi-culture, the moving identity, a non-transparent dense object. She reflects: 'Nothing was rooted anywhere. Everything was in motion.'^{xxxi}

In postcolonial condition such self or symbols of social order and depersonalized dislocated characters like Jasmine are

constructed through discourse and thus inevitably decentered. In such 'shared symbolic and spatial structures'^{xxxii} the struggle to free herself from restricting colonial discourses of identity in the tapestry of different temporal and cultural power relations leads to some counter-essential narrative and trans-cultural discourses of identity. She is an alien 'other' and her existence is felt through her multiple dislocations, subversion and marginalization. After her geographical dislocation she assimilates the roles and expectations of the dominant culture and undergoes an exilic acculturative process. In Mukherjee's postmodern immigrant America, there is a conflict between bilateral location and symbolic consciousness of the immigrant other. Global and local trans-leave each other and prove increasingly interchangeable. In the process of translation and mutation, ethnic repositioning becomes the insignia of mainstream identity. Mukherjee's revelation of cultural heterogeneity as an American norm does not form the foundation of a countercultural assault on a ruthlessly centered American ethno-cultural structure. What Mukherjee aims at, in her fictions is to make fully transparent what an awakened, multicultural America can reflect a multi-cultural globe.

ⁱ Homi K. Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, NY: 1994. P.85.

ⁱⁱ Bharati Mukherjee. *Jasmine*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1990. p.25.

ⁱⁱⁱ Homi K. Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. *op.cit.*,p.313.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, p. 312.

^v Fakrul Alam. *Bharati Mukherjee: Criticism and Interpretation*. *op.cit.*, p.115.

^{vi} An Interview conducted by Vrinda Nabar, "America revealed through an immigrant's eye," *The Times of India* (July 9, 1989), p.17.

- ^{vii} *Ibid.*, p. 198.
- ^{viii} Homi K. Bhabha. *The Location of Culture op.cit.*, p. 162.
- ^{ix} *Ibid.*, p.153.
- ^x *Ibid.*, p.54.
- ^{xi} Bharati Mukherjee. *Darkness. op.cit.*, p.3.
- ^{xii} Bharati Mukherjee. *Jasmine. op.cit.*, p.18.
- ^{xiii} *Ibid.*, p. 214.
- ^{xiv} *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- ^{xv} *Ibid.*, p. 222.
- ^{xvi} *Ibid.*, p. 214.
- ^{xvii} *Ibid.*, p. 212.
- ^{xviii} Fakrul Alam. *Bharati Mukherjee: Criticism and Interpretation*. New York: Twayne's United States Author's series. 1996. p.9.
- ^{xix} Bharati Mukherjee. *Jasmine. op.cit.*, p.121.
- ^{xx} Ameena Meer. (1989) "Bharati Mukherjee", BOMB. Fall V.29, 26-27.
- ^{xxi} Bharati Mukherjee. "Immigrant Writing: Give Us Your Maximalists!" *New York Times Book Review*, 28 August 1988, 28.
- ^{xxii} *Ibid.*
- ^{xxiii} Debjani Banerjee. "In the Presence of History: The Representation of past and Present Indias in Bharati Mukherjee's Fiction." *Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspectives*, Ed. Emmanuel S. Nelson, New York: Garland, 1993. p.176.
- ^{xxiv} Connell Michael; Jessie Grearson; and Tom Grimes. *op.cit.*, p.25.
- ^{xxv} Fakrul Alam. *Bharati Mukherjee: Criticism and Interpretation. op.cit.*, p.109.
- ^{xxvi} Homi K. Bhabha. *The Location of Culture. op.cit.*, p. 316.
- ^{xxvii} *Ibid.*, p. 314.
- ^{xxviii} Brinda Bose. "A Question of Identity: Where Gender, Race, and America meet in Bharati Mukherjee." *Bharati Mukherjee, Critical Perspective*. Ed. Emmanuel S. Nelson, New York: Garland. 1993. p.50.
- ^{xxix} Fakrul Alam. *Bharati Mukherjee: Criticism and Interpretation. op.cit.*, pp.114-115.
- ^{xxx} *Ibid.*, p. 179.
- ^{xxxi} *Ibid.*, p. 152.
- ^{xxxii} Homi K. Bhabha. *The Location of Culture. op.cit.*, p.79.

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