

**TRANSNATIONAL IDENTITY IN BHARTI KIRCHNER'S
'SHIVA DANCING'**

DR. ROHINI ARYA

GOVT. COLLEGE DABHARA, JANJGIR
CHAMP C.G, INDIA.

Abstract

Kirchner is the great observer of India and the dilemmas of a bi-cultural heritage. Her fiction is typical in its portrayal of how a successful immigrant woman in the American industry may still suffer from 'identity crises'. The writer thus brings together the East and the West, a theme that is predominant in the works of writers of Indian Diaspora. Her fiction is designed by her personal knowledge of the software industry, health and world cuisines. The strong points of the novels are its portrayal of cut-throat software industry competition, its meticulous descriptions of cuisines and customs, and its evocation of a globalized world. The novel depicts the helplessness of the protagonist, who struggles for her stable identity at both places, India the place where she was born on and America where she brought up.

Keywords: *Transnational identity, Indian Diaspora, Immigrants Indian, Identity crisis, Globalization*

Higher Education &
Research Society

TRANSNATIONAL IDENTITY IN BHARTI KIRCHNER'S 'SHIVA DANCING'

- DR. ROHINI ARYA

*India is for me a difficult country; it is not my
home and cannot be my home, and yet I cannot
reject it or be indifferent to it.*

V.S Naipal

Bharti Kirchner has written numerous articles and essays on food, travel, fitness, and lifestyle in magazines that include 'Food & Wine', 'Eating Well', 'Vegetarian Times', 'The Writer', 'Writer's Digest', 'Fitness Plus' and 'Northwest Travel'. She is a freelance book reviewer for The Seattle Time. Previously a systems analyst with IBM and a prize-winning author of several cookbooks, including 'Indian Inspired' and 'Cuisines of India', Bengali-born Kirchner has now conquered the front position of fiction writing with the publication of her first novel, *Shiva Dancing* (1998) and her second novel, *Sharmila's Book* (1999). Both books have received good reviews from both South Asian and Western audiences alike, its bi-cultural themes and highly romantic plots attract the audiences.

Kirchner's debut novel *Shiva Dancing* is designed by the author's personal knowledge of the software industry, health and world cuisines. The main character, Meena Gossetts is a software engineer and a distance runner as well as a connoisseur of food like her creator.

Skillful...The author has created such appealing characters and has done such a good job of portraying her heroin's longings and uncertainties that we are kept guessing...

Kirchner's descriptions of domestic customs are richly suggestive, adding colour and flavour to an already evocative novel. (Christian Science Monitor)

The strong points of this novel are its portrayal of cut-throat software industry competition, its meticulous descriptions of cuisines and customs, and its evocation of a globalised world. It inquires into search for roots, the relationship that is strained by in-between locations and the means by which ethnic American identity- the identity in flux is maintained. 'Meena's rare pathway through life as drawing upon the author's bicultural life and the sometimes- jarring East- West juxtapositions she has experienced.' (Fry 14)

As well *Shiva Dancing* unfolds several parallel lines, as it traces the separate lives of Meena Kumari and Vishnu, it places before us two separate cultures, the western and eastern, and it also employs the overriding motif of the dance of 'Shiva' which is performed

in gaiety and triumph. The title of the novel 'Shiva Dancing' is symbolizing the great cosmic dance of creation that will go on forever, the divine energy that cannot be restrained. It means the journey of the life does not stop. The novel also depicts the divergent points of view, like separate worlds that must remain distinct that can never be coerced into a whole. In other words, the protagonist moves in search of roots from one to the other, in this way she involves giving up the one in favour of the other. This is what makes this novel painful. Like her protagonist, Kirchner was once a predominantly Indian sensibility, which she later exchanges for an American one.

The story begins on seven year old Meena Kumari's wedding day:

Seven, her people had always believed, was an auspicious number. One's life began anew every seven years. So it seemed quite natural to Meena Kumari that she was to wed Vishnu Chauhan on her seventh birthday, the night of the full moon. Named after the Hindu god of nurturing, Vishnu was also seven. (Kirchner 3)

On the way to her best friend and new seven year old husband's house, she is Kidnapped by marauding bandits in greed of jewellery which that little girl decked with. Fortunately, Meena is able to escape and ends up on a train in India, where she is found by an American couple the Gossetts who adopt her.

Meena bristled with rebellion. You cannot take me away for very long, she thought. Matajee wouldn't know what to do without me. Vishnu would be broken-hearted. Everyone in the village would miss me. I was born there. I'll get back there before I die. You see, I'm a Rajput. (Kirchner 27)

Twenty eight years later Meena Gossett, who is a successful software engineer in software industry is unhappy because of her loneliness in other sphere of her life. Her adoptive mother has just passed away, leaving her absolute alone, she does not feel any attachment to her friends, has no man in her life. She is unsure of whether to consider herself Indian or American or whether she even has a connection with either culture. Although Meena is attracted to the sexy American novelist Antoine,

The novel also explores the partiality of Meena's boss at a San Francisco computer firm where she has been working for the last twelve years as a project manager. But she felt underestimated when her boss Mr. Alex abruptly decides to give his charge to her junior Jean in his absence: 'To check out new marketing opportunities. While I'm going, Jean will be in charge of the division.' Meena was stunned, 'How could Jean be an acting division head? A mere office manager nicknamed the Pencil Czar, Jean hoarded office supplies and questioned expenditure.' (Kirchner 168) Meena feels that Alex is clearly playing both sides.

Meena whole heartily tries to assimilate in American lifestyle except cut her hair. But what happened, here she feels as an outsider because of her boss partial behaviour. she splits into two. She had everything here parents, friends, running work. But now all these things are falling away. 'She breaks into nervous laughter. 'May be I'm feeling this way because I'm not in relationship.'(Kirchner169)

Meena comes to know through the diary of her mother that her adoptive mother had care for Meena, which her mother never shows to Meena, due to which Meena had never felt comfortable and ease in her relationship with her mother. It is written in the diary that:

How I wish I spoke Hindi, so I could comfort her. Our cook and servant understand her, but they're quite busy. I don't like to admit it to anyone, but I've never good with language. And I'm embarrassed to speak the few Hindi words I know. I'd pronounce them all wrong. Her adoted mother says Meena is still having difficulty in adjustment. She eats little, jumps at every sound and nightmare. I asked Bimla to talk to Meena, Bimla tells me Meena is a Rajput and Rajputs don't cry. There is so much about this culture I don't understand. I feel like an alien, helpless and on the sideline. (Kirchner 89)

No sooner did Meena feel close with her mother then she annoyed with her. When she reads the last page of the diary. **'The girl does not want to go back.'**

She shocks and the tears roll down on her cheeks. She feels empty inside, as if some vital organ has been snatched from her. 'How could Mom do that? God, she'd have returned to Matajee in a minute... But by eliminating that option, her mother had cut her off from her very live source.' (Kirchner 89) Most of all she resented Mom for presuming to decide the course of her life. For the first time in her life, she finds herself missing the simplest joys. Meena never shows to want to go back. 'She had fulfilled Mom's expectations, but not her own. At first came a feeling of outrage, then of letdown, finally of freedom. Perhaps it wasn't too late yet.' (90)

But after a moment she feels with a newfound confidence with a purpose. Many times Meena deliberately tries to remember India and is not able to disconnect herself from her recurring memory of India and Indian past. For example she dresses herself like a complete Indian woman, such as she wears sari and jewellery and braids her hair etc. to go Indian Muslim family's home, Mr. Ahmed. There she enjoys talking about India. Looking at the kite of Sonny she says, 'I flew the exact same ones in India when I was your age, Bhai.' (Kitchner 105) While talking with them the seed of going back to India is sown in her mind. To Meena India was just the germinating seed of a memory. She must help to bring that tiny seed into life.

Further the novel explores the confused state of her mind as her quest is got complicated by her growing involvement with Antoine Peterson, as well as by the path she has chosen, a road that will lead her back to her lost love, Vishnu. Her concern for both Vishnu as well as Antoine shows her dilemma of decision. Anyhow she wants to meet Vishnu and stop her journey. She is perplexed in her thoughts that what to do to have her stability. She makes a conscious effort to capture and present a culture fading in memory, an exercise that often makes her fall back on stereotype.

The message which Antoine gives her makes her excited that his friend Deepak has informed him that, Vishnu is a journalist and well-known reporter in Calcutta. He writes for an 'English Daily'. After an e-mail reunion with Vishnu, her childhood husband, Meena finally decides to make the trip to India to rekindle her Indian-ness and find her old village. But situation goes opposite and her excitement gets over as she reaches her old village Karamgar in Rajasthan and finds very cold reception and worst reaction of Vishnu's aunt Teelu. There people reproach her for leaving Vishnu and her family alone for facing insult. On such reaction she shocks. Meena compares her situation with that of the goddess 'Sita'. 'The Goddess Sita wanted to disappear after going through fire test & being humiliated. Meena finally says in a small vowel, 'I feel humiliated, like her I just want to disappear.'(Kirchner 170).

Upon finding Vishnu and Antoine Meena becomes serious for her further decision for her future either to live in India or America because she feels it is hard balancing the heritage you've been brought up in with a whole new lifestyle.

Meena thinks, as India is known for its tightly knit tradition she couldn't have lived peacefully in this tightly Knit community even if the Gossetts had brought her back. It is now clear to her. She would not have been accepted. She silently released Mom and Dad from any reproach. Being at her own native place she feels Alien here. Even here she is not getting her roots from where she had been rootless once. She does not get such a respect as she had expected. She was excited to come to this village but people do not accept her because she has spent many years among foreigners. She says in emotion 'I envy you, Vishnu. I've lost some precious things. My mother. My house. My Rajput self. I have lived in the lap of luxury in San Francisco, yet I feel quite incomplete...' (Kirchner 286). But living in India had moulded him and it would shape her too. Now it is very difficult for her to start a fresh journey in India. Vishnu would expect her to take on the role of an Indian wife preparing the meals, cleaning the floors, hanging up the wash, visiting relatives. She would think of herself only secondarily. She says 'After all those years in the U.S. She needed more from life. How easy it would be if she hadn't changed was that innocent Rajput girl again.' (Kirchner291-92).

She is in dilemma in taking decision to live in India. Now she has spent twenty eight years in U.S, and may feel uneasy to adopt Indian culture. May be she would not be able to follow Indian lifestyle. After all she has spent a long year in U.S. that influence is also with her. Her favourite attire of jeans and tee-shirt would shock him. She would always have to wear a sari adapt to cultural norms that might well offend her. She can never be free & reveal parts of herself that she could show to Carlos or Antoine. Vishnu accepts only the Indian side of her personality. 'Time had tested everything, upset everything, snatched away was once most Precious.' (Kirchner 292)

She realises the whole situation and comments: 'Americans think I'm from India and Indians think I'm from America. That's the Story of my life.' (Kirchner326). She tries to compromise. A shadow of melancholy passes over her & at the same time vanishes quickly. In this way she says:

Who can tell what exciting things are around the corner? All that I've struggled to be – a Rajput warrior, a software techie, a runner – are just parts of me and I won't ignore them. They helped make me what I am. But now I know my happiness and fulfilment come from being a whole person, a woman, with no baggage from the past, nothing to prove. From being with you. (Kirchner 327)

Kirchner is typical to show how a successful woman in the American industry may still suffer from 'identity crisis' when Meena desperately tries to recover her past. She finally realizes the futility of her effort and discovers in Jaidka's words 'you can't go home again.' For 'home' is a world, that has now changed beyond recognition. It is miles time left behind forever.'

Thus Meena after lots of confusion decides to live with Antoine in America, where she had come at the age of seven. Now she finally gets rid of her dilemmas of finding stable identity between the East and the West and tries to feel satisfied with her present situation. Somehow or the other her quest completed and she understands the difference between the root she was born with and the country she had grown in. However the country India also has stored something for her, the country reveals her true identity that was unknown to her so far. Many things in India make her realise that to live in India with all traditions, rituals and above all reactions of people are very much difficult for her. This is the trip of the protagonist to India helps her to take final decision to live in U.S.A with Antoine Peterson without any past baggage.

WORKS CITED:

- Kirchner, Bharti. *Shiva Dancing*. New York: Plume (Penguin Group) Publication, 1999. Print.
- Christan Science Monitor. Butt 2 chair wordpress.com/ tag/ the-register-guard/. < http://
www. CS monitor. Com/world.>
- Fry, Donn. "In Life and in Art- In Her First Work of Fiction: Bharti Kirchner Straddles
Two Cultures". Seattle Times 15 March. 1998, Print/
Jaidka, Manju. The Tribune Sunday 6 Sep, P 1998.
- Naipaul, V.S. *A Wounded Civilization*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1979. 18. Print.

Higher Education &
Research Society