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Reading of *Jasmine* through the Canons of Maximalism: An Insight

Dr. Sachidananda Panda

Asso. Prof. English,
BIMIT, Bhubaneswar, Odisha India.

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Abstract:

The etymology of the term ‘Maximalism’ stands poles apart and vertically opposite to the concept of Minimalism. A maximalist reflects an obsessive tendency beyond the stretchable limits of genuine consumption; in a sense, a sort of showmanship and greed, or could be a mad pursuit to satiate a whim or a fancy. This may be at the cost of anything and everything that comes on its way of achieving the set objective, either to prove a point to self, or to the world around. However, the principles of Maximalism are not confined to the Individual attributes only, rather applies to all the branches of human consumption, that include - Arts, Literature, Music and Multimedia, encompassing all the attributes of we call as ‘expressionism’. The term often refers to the ostentatious display of extensive possessions or the obsessive behaviour of people for something. At times people relate it to the post-modern novels, where narrative twists, references, and elaborations of details occupy the bulk of the text. In a nutshell, it refers to anything which is excessive, overtly complex and showy or displays a repetitive overkill in features like grossness in quantity or quality which we call a maximalist tendency. This study aims to locate the elements of Maximalism and the maximalist characteristics of the eponymous heroine of the novel, 'Jasmine' by, the Indo Anglican feminist novelist Bharati Mukherjee.

Keywords: Maximalism, Expressionism, Obsessive, Dream, Redundant, Accumulation, Realism.

The history of literary productions across the ages has gone through varied concepts and influential trends that have considerably shaped the quantitative and qualitative aspects of any piece of art or literature to suit and meet the readership needs. The concept of 'Maximalism' is a product of the past couple of decades, primarily in architectural publication as a sort of shift in choice, and as an alternative to the predominant “Minimalism” in Europe, and other parts of the Globe, particularly in the US before the early seventies; when there started a vehement

opposition to the idea. Although the historicity of the term, 'Minimalism is still debatable, it all started, as often attributed with the statement of Robert Browning that- 'less is more' till Madison Smart Bell put it otherwise in 1989 and say- 'less means less.' Before Minimalism and before World War II (1939-45) the Period was grossly affected by various movements like; Nihilism, Existentialism, Absurdism, Dadaism, etc. worthwhile to mention here that Dadaism is a nihilistic movement in art that came after Nihilism in the early part of the 20th century, and was followed by Magic Realism, which is equally an influential movement in the 20th century and so on.

Critics are of opinion that minimalism's pared-down, elliptical and in-explicit aesthetics, necessarily inculcates an impoverished and valueless effect upon its reader. They are of opinion that- 'more' means a richness of effect, an interpretative poly-valance, an interactive vitality which exists because, of the 'less' which is minimalism's restraint, and its tendency of reduction, that seldom gives importance to effect. The principal argument here is that, a minimalist narrative technique creates an interpretative indeterminacy that asks the readers to make a growing contribution to its meaning, culminating in an awareness of what is revealed, rather than what is resolved at the end. It's natural to note that- any piece of literature makes typical demands upon its readers, but minimalism because of its specific narrative style demands the reader to do more, in the evaluation of the text as it [minimalism] refuses to provide answers to the questions it raises.

Authors do play with facts, reshaping them via minimalist writing that creates an immediate effect of the incident. Minimalism as a style of writing has a long history from the early times, yet is often linked with Ernest Hemingway, to have an immense contribution for its emergence in literature. To believe R.C. Clark "American literary Minimalism stands as an important yet misunderstood stylistic movement" [1] Ernest Hemingway, Raymond Carver and Frederick Barthelme, are the pioneers of Minimalism in American literature yet are often criticized for being non-inclusive in their narrative to incorporate vital details leaving much space and room for readers interpretation resulting in a variety of perspectives and no reliability. Minimalists describe the moment where the author leaves the text for the reader to finish it. The author ends the text at a point where everything is ambiguous, and the end is best left for the reader's intellect. Although it provides certain hints that the writer leaves from time to time to create a puzzle. At the end of the text, the reader has to crack it out and solve the equation.

Further, it is more difficult for the reader to find a source of reliable information about how the narrative should be interpreted; the suggestive figurative language the implied connections between disparate elements, employing unconventional objects and actions and the significance; in its thematic import which are highly ambiguous, and become increasingly complex because of individual choices and preoccupations or psychological state of mind of the reader which differ from person to person. It is a scenario when nothing is wrong, rather everything is acceptable. On the other hand, as noticed that towards the late seventies there started a multipronged criticism of minimalism and the changing readership needed added impetus to it. It was the time when Elaboration, traditional forms of theoretical approaches, and theories of formalism took centre stage amongst the readers. The need for various forms of expression with, hyperbole, exaggeration, redundancy, minuteness of narrative, metaphors, apart from the multiplicity of cultural studies and their explicitness, the quintessence of gender or queer studies, gradually got more sympathizers and takers than the miserly precision and pithy writing. As a result, fictions and prose works were found to be a bit of elaborative and exclusive and fanned exuberance to find the space between the need of the hour and readers choice for 'more'.

Besides the treatment of detail in the content in 'Maximalism,' it also propels the readers to navigate, tolerate, and roam in the narrative landscape. The maximalist novels adhere to overly detailed writing to serve the typical, emotional, and intellectual needs of contemporary readers and writers. Within the perceived limits of style, subject matter, and scope, it strives to remake the usefulness of the same to match the contemporary culture, giving it a refreshing look to the act of reading. These novels are preoccupied with a detailed description, with the set objective of communicating particular values and fantasies of intelligence, enthusiasm, and abilities attached to the management of complex and excessive information. It is either to reinvigorate the triviality and banality in the mainstream thought or trying to soothe the anxieties of human insufficiency. These texts model significant abilities, rather than plain objects of significance, and encourage readers to adapt and complement the demands of an increasingly detailed culture while generating a new theme of maximalist writing, a novel way of approaching the usefulness of literary objects in the contemporary scenario.

As argued above, the central idea that differentiates Minimalism from other movements and specifically its immediate opposite concept of 'Maximalism is that the former advocates - Prose, poetry or fictional writings ought to be extremely efficient, allusive, and implicative in its approach. The language in this type of art or fiction needs to be simple and direct, Narrators must not often use ornate adjectives and should avoid offering effusive descriptions of scenery or extensive detail about characters' backgrounds, rather they should use few words, each one those have to be invested with a heightened sense of interpretive significance where Allusion and implication by omission can be employed as a means to compensate. In the present fiction '*Jasmine*' by Bharati Mukherjee we find just the opposite of the argument and the latter is more applicable than the former.

In one of the articles in *The New York Times* on Immigrant writing in the year-1988 Mukherjee advocates in favour of Maximalist approaches in writing, as such by declaring to American readers, that "I am one of you now,"[35] upholding a new identity as an American citizen and author. After such an article, she wrote two Novels in the same period namely *Jasmine* and *The Holder of the World* where she tries to enumerate and encompass all possible angles of immigration. Besides the later Novel- *The holder of the Word*, the former one- '*Jasmine*' In particular marks the beginning of her journey into the fold of *Maximalism*. It was a sort of revolt against the concept of *Minimalism* that she declares her opposition was because of the simplistic sentence constructions and character descriptions that leave most of the story's content in limbo, primarily because this type of writings mostly lack in its content and its subject matter, at the same time. Mukherjee believed that novels ought to give equal significance to multiple characters by putting multiple narratives together so that they are inextricably connected to one another. Similarly, she also argued that writers should keep in mind the importance of secondary characters and their rightful places of equal importance to main characters. A scenario only Maximalism adheres to forge all angles into one single entity that attempts to be more reflective of its subject than on the multi dimensional views on the piece of art or the cultural ancestry it carries with it.

Bharati Mukherjee, one of the major novelists of Indian origin records the complex layers of cross-cultural moorings, relating to identity, space, and alienation and keeps her focus on the realistic representation of life's struggles while chasing a dream in *Jasmine*. The protagonist's journey, from India to America shows the various threads of her transformations. The

eponymous character 'Jasmine', metamorphoses into *Jyoti*, *Jase* or *Jane*, at different levels of her journey, as she passes through from one situation and country to another, so also her inner self reborn several times until she finally attains the desired place to find solace. Jasmine revolts against every adversity she meets on her way. The tough nature of Jasmine that Mukherjee presents and the display of violent moments reflect the psychological turmoil that comes along with the cultural shifts and the life that Jasmine experiences. It also focuses on the issues of home, belonging, nostalgia, and quest for self and cultural identity as well as transnational and trans-cultural situations. Jasmine is an ebullient novel offering a spiced up a recipe for assimilation into a dominant culture. However, the central problem of the novel that remains unanswered to the reader's quest is that - it remains silent about the conditions and conducive conducts which could make such assimilation possible.

Mukherjee uses violence in her work for a complex yet definitive purpose of challenging the preconceived notions which expect it for a woman to display power. But throughout the fiction violence plays a vital role in the making of *Jasmine's* identity and her sense of self. We can say [violence] is used as a tool of assertion of self. She Resorts to violence when confronted with a mad dog because sans which and with no other alternative she could have invited dangers to herself. It was rather a need for personal safety when confronted with extreme situations. It was equally the same situation with the captain who rapes her on the day one of her encounters. Out of utter humiliation and anguish, the guilt of being an Indian woman and the vulnerability in a different land brings out the predative persona in her and she reacts violently. It is her sense of freedom and self-respect, personal loss, and the anguish of her loving Husband in one of the violent acts in India, as well as bitter experiences on the way of herself goal cumulatively, contributed to the change of her personality, and violence was used by Mukherjee to ensure the life of Jasmine on her own terms and expression of freedom. As *Inderpal Grewal* mentions, "even though the protagonist in *Jasmine* encounters many kinds of violence in the United States, the country offers her something that India cannot, which is the choice to reinvent herself" (2005). It is in this continuous effort of deconstructing and reconstructing selfhood that Jasmine encounters violence at every step of her identity construction yet keeps chasing her American Dream.

Mukherjee's novel serves to illustrate the typical Indian social situation where women are subject to male authority. *Jasmine* as a girl is not free to make her own decisions, especially within the cultural framework. She was lucky to find a husband like Prakash who was liberal and open-minded, to allow her every liberty, but it could be just an exception. Under Lillian Gordon's care, *Jasmine* learns to value herself better, learns the nuances of American culture so as to be successful on her own, but was still apprehensive and felt vulnerable as a woman after surviving great adversities all through, yet at the same time- She too finds the strength in her femininity and in her lived experience.

Mukherjee creates a maximalist text by fusing her narratives with canonical references such as the Goddess *Kali* [the deity of Destruction] *Third eye* of Lord *Siva*, the *Broken Pitcher*, Astrological predictions of widowhood, the lord *Yama*- the messenger and record keeper of Death *etc.* and other sources of Hindu mythology. The texts are presented as a new incarnation; one that adapts itself to the "New culture" A significant example of textual references of 'sati' as has been upheld for generations in India as an ideal woman, but what we notice; the very idealism is lost at every turn of succeeding events and challenges posed to the established psychic inhibitions. Jasmine is raped by a sailor during her time in America. She executes the man for his violation, which is a full depiction of melodrama or the horror of rape. She experiences something evil and painful, but in response, she demonstrates the emotional consequence for this loss of innocence, which she understands as her natural authority to defend herself.

In *Jasmine*, Mukherjee wants to present a life of choices, and the ever-changing circumstances around. she introduces us to spiralling of events, several twist and turns, ethical and moral wrangling of the main protagonist – Jasmine – in the way of her journey from the rural Indian Punjab to that of America's Mid-West, along with extensive narrations that exposes the inadequacies of both these worlds, the vulnerability of being a woman, redundant appearance of violence, sexual extremes and covers all angles of readership to the fullest possibility. At the same time, she also explores the individual search for peace and happiness, giving the main character of her novel the liberty to make a more humane choice towards the end, despite the hollowness of both the American Mid-West and the myriad social cruelties of rural India, Mukharjee treads carefully between and uses them to highlight the gradual transformation to an absolute metamorphosis that takes place in Jasmine's personality. The author also does desist

from showing how each such transformation is accompanied by its own stroke of pain and violence. The novel carries no shortcuts rather weaves the web of multiple dimensions of one's life through the character of Jasmine. A reader is kept engaged and in continuous negotiation between eventful narratives to stay connected with the plot and its relationship in the making of the character as a singular entity while giving due justice to the entry of other characters at different stages.

A daughter's birth is observed as an unwelcome entity and not as a bounty of good luck in India. From the very moment of her birth, shadows of dowry preoccupy parents mind till she attains the marriageable age. Mothers who give birth to girl child are doubly cursed, as they once were unwelcome daughters themselves. Such attitudes characterize the society in which Jasmine is born in, and these things probably shaped her resolve to grow with an indomitable will to survive against those challenges expectations and possibly fate that shadows the events and are detrimental to drive her course of the journey from the very childhood days. While Mukherjee's representation of Jasmine's early life might seem to suggest that India is stunted by its blind commitment to tradition, Jasmine's attitude and ability to defy her grandmother's wishes complicate perceptions of culture and gender roles in jasmine as something stable or fixed, besides the political turmoil and moments of partition equally contribute to providing a glaring image of the then social conditions and their impact on people and families as units.

In Jasmine, Mukherjee crafts a character defined by her attitude of defiance and extremes of exceptional expectations. While she is found to be competent in performing her domestic tasks like boiling milk and haggling prices down at the market with notable skill; she also excels at school. She displays enough promise in the study yet, her mother complains that God is, "cruel to waste brains on a girl," [40] but Jasmine's intellectual potential earns admiration from the village teacher, who lobbies for her to be allowed to continue her education and pursue a career further.

Mukherjee's Jasmine is basically a story of transformation from a fragmented persona to a coherent self. These different phases of her self-development are mostly shaped by external conditions beyond her control as well as internal transformation as a consequence of these forces. At every step, she revolts against her fate and the dotted lines drawn for her. The narratives shuttle between past and present and across continents between India and America. The past includes Jyoti's childhood days at Hansapur, a small village in Punjab, her marriage to

Prakash Vih and the successive events leading to her departure to America as well as her present life as Jane in an alien land. It addresses issues such as identity, culture, hybridity, nationality, home, homelessness and binary categories like self and other, insider-outsider, tensions of adaptations and assimilation, marginalized and the focal centre, the question of nostalgia for a lost home, the disillusionment of expatriation, fragmentation of the self, the exuberance of immigration, assimilation, cultural translation and negotiation and in the process of such negotiation, Jasmine metamorphoses herself constantly during this journey, which starts from *Jyoti*, the village girl to *Jasmine*, the city woman, to *Jazzy*, the undocumented illegal immigrant, to *Jase*, the Manhattan Nanny, followed by the long, and arduous march to *Jane*, the Iowan woman.

More specifically, Mukherjee depicts all her characters as female, in a deliberate effort to focus on the particular condition of female alienation in contemporary society. The protagonists in her novels are presented as highly sensitive women with the courage to question accepted social codes. Through *Jasmine* Bharati Mukherjee efficiently transmits a message about multiple codes of society and geographical locales, that women are subjects to be in the receiving end. *Jasmine* though assimilates herself to the mainstream culture of the adopted land. The past remains there to haunt. The novelist admits that series or reincarnations are elementary preconditions in the life of an immigrant. *Jasmine* is a metaphor for Indianness and is typically Indian. Her transformation can be considered as superficially American but in the core of her heart and mind, she is Indian, because, in spite of every change she undergoes all those remain as the external guises with no corresponding growth appears in her learned childhood cultural fabrics, the spiritual awareness and the treasured to lead a life with a lesser deviation from the codified and spiritualized way of life as per the Indian tradition and mythology. Her search for self-recognition takes her in social and spiritual directions till she reaches a time when she is in a position to evaluate the future as a combination of greed and madness of endless hope.

The novel *Jasmine*, apart from being a novel of social criticism, sheds light on different dimensions of social realism and explores the critical contours of life's struggles, identity crisis, cultural dilemma, vulnerability, psychological turmoil, elements of hybridity, tangling of timelines, references, and interwoven canonical texts and citation of mythical images, symbolism and characters, all combine to prepare and present a maximalist footprint thoroughly and convincingly. The journey of *Jasmine* comes to full circle in the end, and her settlement/

assimilation into the new culture was not a renouncement of the older one rather finding the relevance and a way to balance between the two. To conclude our argument with the epigraph of Jasmine, which has been taken from the famous Chaos Theory of James Gleick could be an appropriate statement of Maximalist perspective of the fiction “ the new Geometry mirrors a universe as rough, and not rounded, scabrous and not smooth, it is a geometry of the pitted, pocked and broken up, the twisted, tangled and intertwined” hence the journey of Jasmine is certainly a glaring example of the same tangled geometry of maximalist universe that Gleick observes in Physics. Her journey is a fine blend of Indo American cultural tangle generating new geometrical sketches in the formation of a new identity, a space of her own new world...a maximalist world.

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