

PORTRAYAL OF JAHAJI BEHEN AS THE CULTURAL AMBASSADORS IN TRINIDAD WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO PEGGY MOHAN'S JAHAJIN

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Abstract: *Peggy Mohan's seminal work Jahaji, tells us the story of trans-Atlantic exodus of Indian labours from Basti district of Uttar Pradesh to Trinidad. The women, who braved this excommunication from their land of origin, further maintained the unified identification of Jahaji-Behen. The protagonist in the novel is a young unnamed linguist from East Indian family in Trinidad. She embarks on a quest to find the root of Bhojpuri language and traces her own genealogical roots to come back to India. Jahaji features a diversity of factors that reproduces memory narratives that are transmitted, negotiated and contested across the spaces and generations. The threat of losing Bhojpuri as an Indian language is linked with the idea of mislaying one's cultural legacy. Language is considered as an instrument or a medium through which the immigrated Indians tried to reconstruct the past and revive the memory of trials and tribulations in the process of reestablishing themselves in the new land.*

Key Words: *Jahaji-Behen, excommunication, Bhojpuri Language, cultural legacy.*

What makes Indian diaspora unique in the Caribbean is the fact that Indian populace constitutes a significant proportion of the Caribbean countries like Trinidad, Tobago, Guyana and Surinam. Indian culture has created an important influence on the socio-cultural, economic and political life of the Caribbean region. The identity of Indians as the South Asian diaspora in the Caribbean had stemmed out of the ambitious British colonizer's policy of transporting thousands of poor bonded labour to the sugar estate in the Caribbean. The migrated Indian populace in the Caribbean has suffered in number of ways in the new land before gaining their foothold in the Caribbean settlement. The problems like poverty, inhuman treatment meted out to them by the estate owners, trauma of being uprooted from the land of their cultural origin and obvious racial contestation with the dominant Afro-Caribbean people formed a permanent imprint in the consciousness of these people. The historical process of indentureship started with the official abolition of slavery on 1st August, 1834. This prompted the imperial masters to invent 'a new system of slavery' (Hangloo p. 04) The importation of Indian coolies was considered as the economic salvation for a number of sugar producing British and other colonies in Caribbean. This resulted in the deportment of thousands of cheap labourers from Indian subcontinent to the West Indies Island. The crossing of 'kala-pani' (Mehta p.09) and settling down in an alienated Creole milieu was

always reported as one of the most traumatizing experiences for Indians in the Caribbean, where the problem of re-establishment was always a major issue. Although the system of importation of indentured labourers from the Indian subcontinents was abolished in 1920, by that time approximately 1,43, 900 Indians were already being brought from India. The coolies were being employed as farm labourers in sugar and paddy estates. Surprisingly enough, when the system of indentureship officially ended in 1920, only a few Indian workers agreed to return back to India, most workers had left estates and settled in nearby small dispersed village communities.

In the backdrop of their assiduous efforts of finding foothold for themselves in an alien land, one can find acute awareness of having lost their ethnic and cultural root as one of the most striking features of their civilization. It is their incessant effort to retain their ethnic otherness by reviving their art, culture, culinary skill in the new land which is the most unique features of East Indian in the Caribbean. The accounts of this can be found in the literature of Indo-Caribbean female writers. East Indian women did not receive acceptance and approval from their Caribbean society to pursue literary career. About the struggle of female writers in finding literary space for themselves in the gamut of West Indian *littérateurs* Brinda Mehta writes in her book *Diasporic (Dis)locations: Indo-Caribbean Women Writers Negotiate the Kala Pani*

"...the heritage of indentureship and plantation labour; the inhabiting impact of repressive social and familial structures; the lack of support from and and invalidation of work by family members, which had led to feelings of insecurity; self-censorship to placate family and community; the ambivalent relationship with and negotiation of dominant Afro-Caribbean culture; isolation within community; limited access to a wider support network of diasporic writers; and exile, immigration and the symptoms of cultural estrangement, experienced both at home and in the diaporic metropolis." (Mehta, Brinda (p.08)

Peggy Mohan's seminal work *Jahaji*, tells us the story of trans-Atlantic exodus of young *Parvati* and other ship-mates from Basti, district of Uttar Pradesh in India to the Plantation Island of Caribbean. The protagonist in the novel is a young unnamed linguist from East Indian family in Trinidad. She embarks on a quest to find the root of Bhojpuri language and traces her own genealogical roots to come back to India. This quest transcends the narrow confine of finding one's linguistic origin and soon becomes the author's search for identity. In doing so, she identifies herself with the *Jahajis*, and feels herself to be a part of Jahaji tradition of migration. Her study leads her to revelation that Bhojpuri had its origin in India as a pure language. In India, this language has undergone a metamorphic change giving rise to *kari-boli*, surprisingly enough in Trinidad Bhojpuri is still spoken in its pure form on being assiduously preserved by *Jahaji-Behen*. In the novel, Peggy Mohan gives a detailed description of spatial segregation of the ship which carried the migrated labourers in highly gendered space. About this stratification Mishra writes: "The ship, the medium of mercantile capitalism, and of the (middle) passage of both slavery and indenture, is the first cultural unit in which social relations were re-instated and renegotiated." (Mishra p.201) It was a space where caste related purities of the Indians were finally jeopardized, since crossing of Dark

Ocean or *kala-pani* signifies at one level, the loss of caste. This change has created a new form of socialization that went by the name of *Jahaji-bhai*. The women, who braved this excommunication from their land of origin, further maintained the unified identification of *Jahaji-Behen*.

They acted as the cultural custodians in the new land, trying to preserve their heritage through safe-guarding their art, culture, language and tradition. Mohan in her work, *Jahajin* hints at the emergence of Bhojpuri as a common language among the East-Indians in Trinidad. This linguistic heritage is transmitted from one generation to other in care of older women in the community, '*Khilauni*', who were entrusted with the care of young children while their mothers were engaged in the farm labour. Thus, Bhojpuri emerged as a common language among the Indians in Caribbean land. But a century later Bhojpuri in Trinidad faced a linguistic death, since younger generation preferred English for their professional use. Older women like Deeda consciously tried to retain linguistic legacy through recitation of folk-narratives like '*Sada-Birji Aur Saranga Ke Kisse*'.

Jahaji features a diversity of factors that reproduces memory narratives that are transmitted, negotiated and contested across the spaces and generations. In the novel, the protagonist links three vital aspects of Indian exodus in Trinidad. The threat of losing Bhojpuri as an Indian language is linked with the idea of mislaying one's cultural legacy. Language is considered as an instrument or a medium through which the immigrated Indians tried to reconstruct the past and revive the memory of trials and tribulations in the process of reestablishing themselves in the new land. The novelist uses a folktale, '*Rani Saranga ke Kisse*' to connect the strands like loss of cultural lineage, historical eclipsing and the threat to losing one's linguistic legacy. Like most of Indian folktales, the story of *Sada Birji* and *Rani Saranga*, is a typical folk-narrative which gives an account of a strong woman character negotiating her gender specific role in patrilineal social set up. The folk narrative finds a parallel between the transformations of young Parvati into wise Deeda after trans-Atlantic exodus i.e. crossing the *kala-pani*.

Similarly, the transformation of a she-baboon into beautiful maiden *Rani Saranga*. Like *Rani Saranga*, Deeda too fends for her identity in the paternal set up of Indo-Caribbean society. Mohan uses a unique technique of going back and forth in the timeline of past, present and future for delineating the chronicle of immigration, recuperation and reassertion of *Jahaji Behen* her work, *Jahajin*. Women in the novel like *Deeda*, *Sunnariya*, *Janaki* and many other regains autonomy in these plantation estate and discards the notion of returning back to India. In the alien land of Trinidad they always feel bereft of cultural mooring due to the loss of motherland, yet they are resolute not to return back to the same. In the novel Deeda ruminates "And that moment it suddenly came to me, as clear as the sky, that I was never going back, that I would live and die across the *kala pani*" (Mohan p.07) Regarding the possibilities of returning back to India, there was always some reluctance among the migrated women due to the possibilities of again being subjected to paternal upper-hand, caste stratification and the treatment as pariah in India. This induced them to lead a libertine life in the foreign land.

Deeda and the author's great-grandmother Sunnariya met for the first time in the section of ship meant for single women. Although the immigrants strongly believed that on crossing the dark ocean, the *kala-pani* the caste related purities are mostly lost. Yet in case of *Jahaji-behen* there could be found a higher degree of segregation. Deeda, (the young Parvati) toiled her entire life in the sugar plantation of Trinidad whereas the narrator's great grandmother Sunnariya looked after the household and worked as 'Kilauni' i.e. the care-taker of Deeda's son and the other children in the farm. Sunnariya got married in the caste of goldsmith and led a secluded life of a domesticity. We can find a gradual development in Sunnariya's family status from farm workers, to the gold-smith, office workers and the linguist. The women like Deeda and Sunnariya acted as the promoters and the custodians of Indian language and culture in the alien land.

Deeda's act of cherishing her husband's memory through the recital of folk-tale *Sada-Birji Aur Saranga ke Kisse* in pure Bhojpuri language typifies her yearning to connect to her roots. She uses Bhojpuri language in its purest form which was spoken in the Basti district of Uttar Pradesh. Although in the later period the *Bhojpuri* dialect in Uttar Pradesh got transformed into *Khari-boli* due to multiple influences. The story of *Saranga* induces Deeda's yearning for her soul-mate with whom she got separated after crossing *kala-pani*. The narrator of the story, the young linguist finds affinity with Deeda's folk-tale. She considers her quest for finding the origin of Bhojpuri dialect in India as a gate way through to connect with her ancestral land. Like *Saranga*, Deeda to yearns for her soul-mate with whom she got separated after crossing *kala-pani*.

Saranga transforms into a beautiful princess leaving her beast-like form, similarly Deeda, too, casts aside her demur status of a vulnerable Indian woman and emerges out as an economically independent and determined custodian of Indian culture in the alien land. Deeda is apparently very strong and autonomous but inwardly she is extremely nostalgic and yearning at heart for her long separated husband in India. Her act of declining proposal of Sunnariya's father proves Deeda as a staunch Indian female.

Apart from having the moral integrity towards her husband, Deeda preserves her ethnic identity through her customs, costumes and preserving the Indian style of cuisine. In the novel, we come across the reference of Deeda preparing *Litti-chokha* in the typical Indian style. The folktale of *Sada-Birji* and *Saranga* has for its leitmotif the idea of romantic love and separation. Deeda's longing for her roots and her emotional tribulation form the characteristic features of her narration. Mohan successfully weaves the tale of immigration, recuperation and re-establishment in the backdrop of this folk-tale. The story has its origin in the state of Chhatisgarh.

A female monkey leaps into a magical river water and transforms into a beautiful maiden named *Saranga*. She gets married to a prince, yet searches for her true lover *Sada-birji*. Much like *Saranga*, Deeda, too, keeps on wondering about her husband and stays tuned to his memory. In the folk-lore the unfortunate lovers are permanently separated following the sad death of Sada Birji. Unlike the folk- story, the young linguist in the novel reaches

India to trace the origin of Bhojpuri dialect and by a quirk of fate meets Deeda's husband, who not only interprets her tale but brings it to a fine culmination.

In the parallel strand, we read about the young linguist who is the protagonist in the novel and the connecting link to all the strands. She is a prototype of modern Indo-Caribbean women in Trinidad who finely blends her ambition to study linguistics along with her quest to find her cultural origin. The protagonist is pursuing her dissertation on the linguistic study of Bhojpuri dialect spoken in Trinidad and attempting to find out the reason behind diminishing practice of speaking Bhojpuri among the Indians in Trinidad. During her interview with Deeda, she finds herself connected to Deeda's tale. She, too, identifies herself to the folk character *Saranga*, who is destined to find herself away from her homeland. Her quest to find out the linguistic origin of Bhojpuri dialect in India through her dissertation on linguistics finds closeness to *Saranga's* desperation to meet *Sada Birji*.

Mohan successfully portrays Indian women in Trinidad as the preservers and transmitters of Indian culture in Trinidad. The passion to hold on to one's culture continues even in the younger generations. The young linguist's passion for learning ancient dialect and her desire to find the genesis of the language is no where weaker than Deeda's efforts of conserving her cultural legacy. Sunnariya, great-grandmother of the narrator too preserves the Indian culture in the domesticity by making her children learn Hindi language and eat Indian cuisine. Thus, the female characters of Mohan prove themselves as strong cultural custodians in an alien land, Trinidad.

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