

## OF GODS AND GODDESSES: READING BHARTI KIRCHNER'S *SHIVA DANCING AND GODDESS OF FIRE*

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### **Abstract:**

*The paper proposes to explore how literature by such Diaspora writers as the Indian-American author, Bharti Kirchner, deals with myth and/of modernity at a psychological and emotional level with respect to the South Asian immigrant experience. Nuances such as being uprooted from native cultural traditions and values; the loss of native language; the feeling of being in exile; the expatriate position of being a sheer outcast or an unaccommodated alien, together with the multiple afflictions of the mind and the heart, lead to a crisis of identity in Diaspora writing. The focus will, therefore, be on how Kirchner - in writing about India and the Indian-American experience - lets her work be informed by themes such as the clash of cultures; the importance of female autonomy in matters of the heart; balancing cultural values; and the like. It may be noted that Kirchner also makes use of ancient mythological stories (as in her use of the myth of Shiva), traditional religious practices, or descriptions of ritual and ceremony, in her works. The very title of one of her earlier novels *Shiva Dancing* (1998) represents her motifs - by symbolizing - the great celestial dance of creation that will go on forever for the divine energy cannot be controlled. Kirchner's recent novel entitled *Goddess of Fire* (2016) too is an exercise in myth-making as she tells the story of her birth-city (Kolkata) by amplifying voices that have been ignored for way too long. Using her own myths, the novelist fills in the gaps in the history of her hometown of Kolkata. The story is set in seventeenth century India when British and Dutch merchants were making inroads into the Indian subcontinent. The paper will thus be an attempt to examine how Kirchner - politically, sexually, and racially - returns some small amount of agency to the people who lost everything - even their names - to history.*

**Keywords:** *Agency; Culture; Myth; Tradition.*

Today a woman writing is a woman fighting. For truth, for honesty, freedom, and for equality.

Bharti Kirchner is a versatile writer, who writes about warm, interesting, strong, courageous, cautious, attractive, worthy and graceful women who are deeply scared with some tragedy or trauma and how they overcome their ordeals, in spite of everything going against them. Kirchner also underlines the Indian immigrant experiences in the United States on one hand and the strange and unique Indian customs and traditions, which are difficult to explain to the west on the other. There is a dichotomy which characterizes her novels and brings out clearly the reality of living in the west, with all its positive and negative aspects. Cultural values are questioned; there are shocking revelations, disillusionment, anger double-alienation of women and severe identity crises.

Kirchner transcends from an immigrant or diasporic novelist to a truly multicultural one. She has also portrayed cultural diversity from a western perspective, and tried to present the problems of the Indian women of different background and cultures. Kirchner reflects in her novels both the Indian culture and also a great deal of multiculturalism, which is experienced by the Indian immigrants not only in other foreign countries, but in India as well, where there are so many different regional cultures and traditions in various different parts of the country. The art and culture of the Indian subcontinent as well as its

integration in to the immigrant's new way of life, finds prominence in both of her novels *Shiva Dancing* and *Goddess of Fire*.

Like other women Diaspora writers have done before, Kirchner also invokes the myth of Sita from the Ramayana in *Shiva Dancing* to inculcate a feminist theme. It is seen that in *Shiva Dancing*, Meena identifies herself with Sita who was swallowed by the earth and never seen again, having suffered the humiliation of being suspected of adultery when she was in fact the victim of a violation. The story contains many modern-day parallels in a society which criticizes women for any situation. After Meena is deceived by Antoine she explains her pain to her friend, Carlos, using the myth of Sita as illustration,

I've been rereading the Ramayana. Sita, the goddess, is a role model for Rajput women. We Rajputs are supposed to have descended from her.... after her marriage she was abducted by Ravana.....her husband Rama, fought to get her back, and in the end she returned to him safely.....And Rama asked her to take a fire test to prove her purity.... Sita felt humiliated. (Kirchner 170)

Meena compares herself with Sita but she promptly realises that, "This is modern day America. Unlike Sita, I have options" (Kirchner 170). Further reference to the mythical Sita is the incident of Meena's condemnation for abandoning her child-husband, Vishnu, when she was in fact kidnapped by bandits. Therefore, Kirchner's use of an ancient but popular myth has a clear feminist indication underlining the injustices meted out to Indian women. Bharti Kirchner is very much aware of the position of women in India. She also delineates the difference between modern American girl and traditional Indian mentality.

It is noted that Kirchner has not avoided the use of mythology, ancient mythological stories, traditional religious practices, or descriptions of ritual and ceremony in her story. The very title itself represents her motifs. The title of the novel '*Shiva Dancing*' symbolizes the great celestial dance of creation that will go on forever, the divine energy that cannot be controlled. It means the voyage of the life does not stop and is uncontrollable. The novel also depicts the different points of view, like separate worlds that must remain distinct that can never be force 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. Kirchner's use of the myth of Shiva is quite subtle. It is not just inferred by the title or alluded to by oblique reference. It is interpretive that the novelist manipulates her characters to make speeches about Shiva. She provides speech about lord Shiva at various places,

Our new party logo is Lord Shiva in his Nataraj dancing pose; Pradip said Shiva has many hands and legs, many powers. When he dances, the world moves, shakes and changes. Vishnu pictured the pose: Shiva with four extended arms carrying weapons, his enemy under one foot, and his other leg ... forming the circle... Shiva, who destroyed before recreating. There were many interpretations of that pose. (Kirchner 53-54)

*Shiva Dancing* can also be implied and interpreted that the Shiva is the God, the the Destroyer, the one who creates a cycle of birth and death which symbolizes construction and destruction eventually the constructor, the destroyer and the re-constructor of Meena's life by dancing. Meena's life is destroyed when she is kidnapped, recreated when she is adopted, destroyed when her adoptive mother dies, and again recreated when she returns to India and concludes her predicament.

The story unveils numerous parallel lines, as it traces the separate lives of Meena Kumari in America and Vishnu Chauhan in India, it places before us two separate cultures, the western and eastern, and it also employs the over-riding motif of the dance of 'Shiva' which is performed in gaiety and triumph.

Social conscious comprises of customs, traditions, rituals etc. Meena who always has been longing for her root, to find her husband Vishnu, her culture, tradition, gets excited that when to know that, Vishnu

is a journalist and well-known reporter in Calcutta. After an e-mail reunion with Vishnu, her childhood husband, Meena finally decides to make the trip to India to rekindle her Indianness and find her old village. But situation goes contradictory and her excitement gets over when she reaches her old village Karamgar in Rajasthan and finds very cold reception and worst reaction of Vishnu's aunt Teelu. She faces criticism and insult of her own people for leaving Vishnu and her family alone. Indians still blame females for every loss of family, hierarchy or any disaster. 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). Kirchner also represents Cultural Identity in dominant manner. Her two novels have been taken for the study and it is found that both of her works *Shiva Dancing* as well as *Goddess of Fire* present cultural Identity Crisis and traditionalism through situations, characters, beliefs, food, religion, language etc.

*Shiva Dancing* revolves around the theme of displaced Meena's endeavour to integrate her cultural identity. Literature are mostly produced by women and created by bi-culturalism in the sense that they are born of two worlds (or more), expressions of marginalisation which emerge from migrant experience and cultural border zones: plural and fractured voices, multiple personalities struggling with placelessness and the rootedness of old, hollowed-out belongings. Both the protagonists, Meena and Moorti or we can say Maria struggle to maintain their own identity though differently. Therefore, both of them bring the contrast in spite of both being brought up in different environment.

Kirchner's another novel *Goddess of Fire* was set-up in seventeenth-century Bengal India, it is a place of wild beauty, great wealth, dire poverty, and violent battles between the many rulers of small kingdoms. One of the most reprehensible customs of old India is the practice of Sati. This is where a widow, no matter the age, is forced by family (usually the deceased husband's relatives) to throw herself upon the burning pyre while her husband is being cremated.

In 1600s India, Moorti has some contentious beliefs, starting with how she doesn't think she should be burned on the pyre with her husband. Moorti is about to be immolated on her late husband's funeral pyre when an Englishman traveling the Ganges rescues her and forever changes her life. Job Charnock, an Englishman with the East India Company, steps in to rescue her and changes the course of Moorti's life. Given a new name, Maria, she sees it as a rebirth and works to better her life and protect her homeland and people. It's a tumultuous time but Maria's inner strength will build bridges, create a family, and found a city.

Job Charnock is an agent of the English East India Company, which is slowly making inroads into the Dutch trade in India. The company promises advancement and wealth to men like Job, a poor farmer's son who would have little chance of success back in England. Job takes Moorti back to his factory, a walled compound of buildings including a grand house where all the business agents live, renames her Maria, and gives her a hovel to live in and a job helping in the kitchen. Moorti, a bright and ambitious girl with some education, quickly proves her worth as a cook, although she soon realizes that mastering English will be her path to success. Job, who is so enamored of India that he dresses in native clothing, finds Moorti both beautiful and helpful. She in turn falls in love with him even as she struggles to improve herself and overcome the English dislike of darker-skinned people. Duplicity reigns among the workers and the business agents. Luckily, Moorti saves Job from a plot to kill him. Their love blossoms, but can it overcome the very dangers and prejudices that face them in their efforts to improve trade and the conditions of the poor? But this too, brings great risk for the couple because of racial and cultural prejudices.

*Goddess of Fire* is a fictional account of real life characters and events. Job Charnock was a real historical figure who worked for the East India Company and is thought to have founded Calcutta (now known as Kolkata). He was also married to a Hindu widow, who he allegedly saved from a funeral pyre and renamed Maria. The story's foundation is these truths but changes the known narrative and instead is told from Maria's point of view, a view unknown by history. The author's artistic license takes the reader on a journey of racism, classism, redemption, and humanity at its best and worst. "*The day after my husband*

died, ....dragged me by the wrists to the funeral pyre."

We are introduced to our heroine when she is only 17 yrs old; she hasn't left her village and as a consequence is very naïve about people and the world in general. When Job, her rescuer, renames her Maria, it is obvious she has some misgivings about losing her identity, especially with Anglicizing her name but goes along with it as she sees it as a chance to better herself; a theme that continues throughout the book. There is always a drive and desire in Maria but as she gains age and experience, she starts to push more and take her feelings about right and wrong more seriously. It's a humbling look at the innocence and excitement of youth and the greed and cynicism of the real world mashed together. The author uses Maria's inexperience to get explanations from secondary characters that really are cleverly described to help the reader but it also clogged the story at times, as focusing closer on characters would have been more intimate but you do get a broader, expansive look at 1600s India. "*They get so much from here, but they treat us like...*"

Job Charnook or as he is referred to mostly in the story, Job Shaib, is for the most part a non-entity, until the last 30%, in the story. Maria's feelings for him are clearly hero worship and they have very few and very far in-between interactions, their relationship doesn't truly get going until around the 60% mark. This story is about Maria growing up, navigating the world, and trying to create a harmonious relationship between the East India Company and her people. Maria forms close relationships with the male kitchen crew she works with and a fellow servant Teema. Through these interactions we witness her optimism with working with the English and how the other characters with their life experience try to warn her about how the English really view them. Job rescued her and embraces some of her culture but towards the end of the story, Maria begins to see that some of her hero worship is misplaced, life experience.

From the title, to the cover, and the way the reader follows Maria, I thought and for the most part, this felt and was a capable narrative on a woman's struggle, survival, and journey to the top. It starts with Moorti rejecting the custom of widows burning with their husbands and ends with Maria becoming second in command for the East India Company in Calcutta. However, when Maria goes back to her village to visit her family she finds her mother and father dead and her brothers kidnapped and sold into virtual slavery (we later learn their horrific fate), due to reasons associated with her rejecting the pyre. All of her family's misfortune seems to be linked to her rejecting the "natural" order of things and sends a very mixed message, whether this was intended or not, and one I wasn't comfortable with.

Overall, this story definitely had its compelling moments and even though there is only a sprinkling of true historical accounts throughout, more stories from women's point of views and cultures outside of western need to be told more often. Seeing the first spark of Maria's inner fire and watching her finally be able to set it ablaze was an engaging journey.

The best part about this book is that *Goddess of Fire* is based on real characters. It makes a strong statement about the prejudices and turmoil between the English and Indians while giving readers a detailed glimpse into the more exotic India of old as the nation and its people must come to terms with tumultuous changes set aflame by English traders.

The works of South Asian women writers follow this pattern and the novels are increasingly introspective, open-ended, and questioning. Issues are no longer black and white, answers are neither stereotypical nor easy to find, and there are fewer obvious villains. Men are no longer seen as the enemy, but the society, the norms, the customs and traditions, continue to be regarded as fettering or at least hampering the growth and development of women. A new order seems to be emerging with the rapid changes of women's economic circumstances, the disintegration of large joint-families, and the migration from rural to urban areas. Female protagonists are seen to be in search of self-fulfilment, order, meaning and security amidst the confusions and uncertainties of their new conditions.