

## CHIMERA OF INDIAN CULTURE IN JAYANTI M DALAL'S *ORDEAL OF INNOCENCE*

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### **Abstract:**

*India is a country with rich and varied centuries old cultural heritage and tradition. The multicultural background of India makes it more interesting to conduct research. The sub-continent though divided by languages and culture, yet remain integrated due to the similarities in their culture, thus the country is unique with all diversities. This is evident in Indian Writing in English. The aim of the research is to bring out the value of Indian culture as portrayed by Jayanti M Dalal in his novel Ordeal of Innocence. The novel is spun around the lives of an Indian husband and wife settled in United States. Besides focusing on the intricacies of relation between husband and wife, the novel could also be considered on the aspect of culture.*

**Keywords:** *Adaptation, Indian culture, Gujarati culture, Cultural conflicts.*

### **Introduction:**

Jayanti M. Dalal is an Octogenarian bilingual writer. He is an industrialist turned writer born in Kapadwanj, Gujarat. He has published 22 books which include 14 novels, 03 short story collections and 05 compilations. His works are popular for the elements of culture and tradition. Most of his writings portray the intricately spun familial relation and reflects the culture of the Indian society. The aim of this paper is to bring out the significance of culture in his novel *Ordeal of Innocence*, a translated work of his Gujarati novel titled *Ankhane Sagpan Ansoona*. The paper also highlights the Indian tradition as portrayed in the novel as well as the cultural conflicts faced by the Indians in an alien land.

### **Cultural Studies:**

The school of cultural studies has become a global phenomenon of great importance over the last decade from 1964 to 1979. During its "heroic period" in the 1960s and 1970s, a variety of critical approaches are developed for the analysis, interpretation and criticism of cultural artifacts by combining sociological theory and contextualization with literary analysis of cultural texts. Kellner Douglas expounds on cultural studies as a new area that productively engage postmodern theory. The present generation lives in a proliferating image of culture in which new technologies change every dimension of life from economy to personal identity. Cultural Studies has always been committed to the necessity of theoretical work and it is not committed to theory for theory's sake; it is rather interested in how theory and theoretical work can be deployed to better understand and transform specific historical conjunctures, contexts, and formations ("Cultural Studies Association").

In the United States, "Cultural studies was grounded in a pragmatic, liberal-pluralist tradition" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 60). Here, cultural studies is concerned with understanding the subjective and appropriate reaction of audience and the uses of mass culture and fandom. But in Canada, it is focused on issues of technology and society ("Cultural Studies"). India as a country with age-old culture and tradition provides much scope for research using cultural approach, where it highlights on culture as a principal force in shaping the personality of a society and the role of personality in maintaining cultural institutions and also how a community transforms and adopts to cultural traits, resulting in new cultural forms (i.e.)

transculturation.

The Hon'ble Prime Minister of India Shri Narendra Modi complimented the writer saying:

It was really heartening to note that a Gujarati Novelist's work is being published in English and that too in USA. This is 'GAURAV' of Gujarat. Please accept my heartiest congratulations. The subject of your forthcoming novel 'Spatial Echoes' is also very much important; I convey my best wishes to you on publication of the novel. ("Jayanti M. Dalal")

This shows that the novel is well received by the natives as well as the Westerners. Jayanti M Dalal's recent work *Silent Echoes* also reflects Indian values and many of the short stories too resonate his perception of Indian culture and tradition. The paper applies cultural approach to study the novel *Ordeal of Innocence*.

### **Summary of the Novel:**

The novel is intricately woven with human relationships and the flaws in them. The protagonist here is Sukanya Patel, young innocent women from India married to a rich motel owner Shashank. Their life moves on like a bed of roses till she gives birth to her first child. Unfortunately, the child supposed to be the symbol of unity and peace in the family, brings controversies due to its appearance. Even the protagonist Sukanya is unaware that she is bearing the child of her rapist. Thus the child's birth brings a drastic change in their quiet life. Paul, the manager of Shashank's motel is a black American whose roots go back to India. He is an honest worker and as fate decides, one day under the influence of alcohol, he molests Sukanya who is weak to fight back. The erstwhile happy life of the couple turns to a nightmare once the child is born. The child had black features; to be specific it resembled Paul rather than Shashank.

Even Sukanya is stupefied at the sight of her child and asked the nurse in disbelief if that is her child. It never occurred to her that she has borne Paul's child. She is always a devoted wife to Shashank but the only mistake she committed is not confessing the truth. Things move for worse and there is a wide gap in the couple's love life as Shashank suspects Sukanya's fidelity. Once again she musters her courage to meet Paul to clear things in her life which finally lands her in another hell of gangsters. The gangsters mistake Sukanya to be Paul's girlfriend and abduct her with him. Paul repents his sins by releasing Sukanya from the place. Meanwhile the child is left with Shashank who nurtures the child as his own. Time flies, but Shashank still thinks that Sukanya has cheated him. His doubts were cleared by Ron, his friend who delivers the message that Paul helped Sukanya to escape from the notorious gang. Shashank tries to locate Sukanya but in vein. As the child grows, she becomes a famous heart surgeon. Father-daughter relation strengthens and accidentally they meet Sukanya in her sixties as a nurse on whom Laxmi operates. Thus the later part of the novel portraying the life of Sukanya's daughter Doctor Laksmi Patel is filled with suspense.

### **East meets West:**

Sukanya, born and brought up in India married an NRI, Shashank Patel. She, unlike her friends did not dream of a rich life. It is her sheer luck that she met Shashank and both of them took an immediate liking for each other. For Shashank, though he could get many girls at United States, prefers a native Indian girl, as he is deep-rooted in Indian culture. Hence, he is reluctant to marry a woman brought up in western cultural set up.

Generally, people of Gujarat are highly adaptive which is reflected in the novel. This is described in a Gujarati Govt portal that: Social systems of learning, religious practices and forms of artistic expressions have led way to more balanced lifestyles in Gujarat. People of Gujarat are found to be sharing cultural traits and patterns with other regions and also extend beyond national boundaries towards International culture. ("Culture and Lifestyle")

### **Portrayal of Indian culture in the novel:**

From the beginning of the novel, Indian culture is reflected through the characters of Sukanya Patel and Shashank. In one of the chapters, it could be seen when Sukanya is indulged in the past thoughts, where her mother suggested her to take "Jaya Parvati Virath" a kind of fasting by young women who are yet to be

married. In the myth, it is said that those who observe this vrath will get a wealthy life and an understanding life partner. Sukanya thanks her mother in her mind for making her observe that vrath. Though has no such beliefs, yet she does for the sake of her mother. "Her mother would then smile and tell her, 'Dear child, I never kept a fast on *jaya Parvati vrat* and I shall repent that to the end of my life ...'" (4).

#### ***Athithi Devo Bhava:***

Now recollecting the past, she concludes that her mother's words are true. Another incident that demonstrates Indian culture is when some guests come home, Sukanya serve them tea and snacks. This is an Indian culture.

#### **Respect for Customs, Habits, Elders and Religion:**

In the same chapter, Sukanya recollects how she "chanted *Om Namah Shivay* and poured milk and water over the *Shivling*" (3). Even though she does not believe in religious practices, her respect for her mother made her to do so. This is another Indian custom of respecting the elders portrayed in the novel. In one of the chapters, Shashank reminds about his mother as a pious and devoted person. Though he lost his mother at an early age, he remembers his mother through the words of his father.

As per the Indian Custom, a child is named after a Hindu God and since the baby happened to be a female, Sukanya wanted to name her as Laksmi, the Goddess of wealth celebrated by every Hindu family India. A daughter is said be a bringer of wealth, a "Mahalaksmi". This is evident when Jyoti congratulates Shashank saying "Congratulations, Shashank. You are now the father of a lovely daughter. Laxmi, the Goddess of Fortune has blessed your home" (9).

When Shashank went to hospital to visit his child he was shocked by her appearance. Shashank recollects his meeting with Sukanya that ultimately led to their marriage. The innocence of Sukanya won the heart of Shashank. While sitting under the moon Sukanya innocently asks Shashank why the moon has a blemish to which Shashank responds, "Maybe it is given to ward off the evil effect of the millions of eyes watching its beauty!" (13) which shows some of the superstitious beliefs common to Indians. In Indian culture, a new born child is decorated with black Kajal to ward off evil eyes. So, Shashank compares the action of Indians to the blemish in the moon.

#### **Gujarati Culture in the novel:**

Gujarat is influenced with enculturation; a culture shared with members of the society and passed on from one generation to the next. Enculturation has unified people with common sense experience and influence that lead to knowledge and appreciation of cultural traditions and lifestyles. The aspect of joining hands to greet or bow down comes through age influences as offering reverence ("Culture and Lifestyle"). In the same way even in this novel, though Shashank lives in America, he has Gujrati neighbours Anu and her husband. Also he is friendly with Ron, a White American. Even when he relocates from Long Island, he has his friend Deepak. Most of the Gujaratis in the novel are portrayed as doing business, right from saree shops, grocery shops to some top class business.

The Gujarat Government website shows that, Majority of the Gujarati people thrive as Business persons. However, Gujarat is a leading Industrial State that ranks its commercial capital and textile city Ahmedabad as 7<sup>th</sup> in India. It possesses highest number of operating airports, the Gujarat cities are connected worldwide ("Culture and Lifestyle"). The study brings out culture as a system of meaning and interprets the meanings that cultural acts have for their participants ("The Idea of Culture"). The protagonist Shashank is business man who owns a hotel. He has employed a black American Paul Martin to take care of his motel. Though an Indian, Shashank was able to mix with the blacks as well as the whites. His friend Ron is a white man, who is very close to him. When Ron teasingly inquires Shashank, he responds thus: "Oh! No, I will never forget you, Ron; you are more than just a friend, a brother" (21). This is yet another Indian culture, where they treat the fellow beings as brothers.

Though Shashank lived in America, he still relished Gujarati food. Even Mary knew how to prepare a traditional Gujarati meal that comprises cooked vegetables, roti, lentils, sweetmeat, salad and

pickles. When Deepak, Shashank's friend pays him a visit, Laxmi prepares Gujarati dishes bajiyaa and fruit salad. These events prove that Indians have rich taste. Later, when Laxmi goes to London to attend the conference, she visits Dr. Kiran Patel who is at Wembley. Laxmi exclaims that there were many stores that sell saris in that part of London. Shashank informs her that the area is full of Gujaratis and compares Wembley as "Mini India".

### **Family and Relationship:**

In any Indian culture, family plays a vital role. Indians give more importance to their family over other things. When Sukanya Patel misses from her home, Shashank did not think of remarriage. Even his friend Ron, a white man with a different culture did not support a second marriage. Shashank too tells Ron, "No, I won't get married again ... I am planning to move to Houston'" (118). The conversation between the friends prove that, though Shashank, for the welfare of his daughter, relocates to another part of the country.

Not only that, he also appoints a nanny for his daughter Lakshmi. Thus, this novel focuses on the problems faced by the Indians in foreign countries. Their Indian neighbour Anu suspects Sukanya's fidelity and discusses it with her husband when she learns that Sukanya went missing from her home. Like any other Indian woman, she too like to gossip and comes to an early conclusion that both Sukanya and Paul had eloped together. This shows the common mentality of Indian women.

Throughout the novel, the writer maintains Indian ethos and culture. When Shashank goes in search of Sukanya to India, he hears the pathetic failed marriage of Kaushik. He thought that Kamini and Kaushik were a perfect pair but Kamini turns out to be woman with westernized life style. The reckless nature of Kamini brings tragedy to kaushik's life, whereas Sukanya is an innocent of situation. The birth of Laxmi led to the misunderstanding between the couple. Shashank, like any average Indian husband jumps to a conclusion that Sukanya had cheated him. This in turn leads to a break in their erstwhile happy family.

### **Cultural Conflicts and transculturation:**

Cultural conflicts are abundant in the novel. Set in the United States, demonstrates how Indians are affected by western culture. Shashank, for instance, who values the Indian tradition, welcomes his guest with a drink, also he takes to the habit of drinking when he was at stress, a custom of the Europeans that is not much appreciated in India. The major flaw is the protagonist is that, though he values Indian culture, he did not entirely Indianises himself. When Shashank was asked to suggest a name for their daughter, he wants to name her Rosy, a western name.

It is Sukanya, who wants to christen her as Lakshmi and finally they call her as Lakshmi. Shashank and Sukanya had adopted to live in the alien land and they never think of returning to India. Even when Shashank was in the company of his friend Kaushik, their serene trip to Gangotri, he wishes to return to America as early as possible. This demonstrates that Shashank is adapted to the Western life and the other reason is his daughter Lakshmi, whom he had left under the care of Mary. Laxmi fulfills the dream of Shashank by becoming a Heart Surgeon. During the Award ceremony she thanked her parents and touched the feet of her father as per the Indian custom and sought blessings of her father. Even at the end of the novel, when Laxmi comes to know that Susan is her mother Sukanya, she touches her feet as a matter of respect.

### **Conclusion:**

The protagonist Shashank, born and brought up in India decides to marry an Indian girl. The reason is, though in the United States there were women prettier and intelligent than Sukanya, their Westernised life style makes Shashank to reject them. This is the mind set of every Indian man. They expect their women to be docile, submissive with traditional outlook of life. Sukanya fulfills the expectation of Shashank but her fate turns everything against her that leads to the misunderstanding between the couple. But when he comes to know the truth through his friend Ron, he undergoes severe mental agony. Both Shashank as well as Sukanya did not remarry and follow their Indian tradition till the end of the novel. Not

only this, even their daughter Laxmi sacrifices her life to medical profession as her lover Carlo died of heart failure. He could be called as a “Sita” of the modern age. Thus, the novel is filled with characters full of Indian values and customs.

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