

Reincarnation of Identities and Amelioration of Self in Bharati

Mukherjee's 'Jasmine'

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Abstract

Many of the Indian authors emerged and emerging these days belong to the vast genre of diaspora literature. Their writings enumerate the experiences and struggles of immigrants in an alien land. Typically their characters act as a mouth piece of the writers, whose roots belong to India, but their branches being spread in some other country. Bharati Mukherjee is such an author, born in Calcutta, took up her doctoral studies in USA. She lives in America, serving as a professor in The University of California, Berkeley. Totally she has written about eight novels, short stories, non-fiction and memoir. Her forte is her power packed diction penned in consortium with Indian and American cultures.

This paper focuses on the significant theme of transformation of identities in nexus with culture ,focused on Bharati Mukherjee 's renowned novel 'Jasmine'(1989)

Key words: diaspora ,immigrants, forte, culture perplexity

For the past two decades, cultural complexities and identity transition is focused in most of the literary writings. Cultural confusion arises when the individual encounters another culture, which may be owing to education, work, and family and so on. The depiction of such cultural alienations are beautifully depicted by the Indian authors like Anita Desai, Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri and many others.

Bharati Mukherjee 's focus mainly revolves around the sufferings of immigrant women .Being an immigrant herself, she was caught between the conflicting cultures in her own attempt to find an identity of her own. This identity crisis acts as a leitmotif in all her works. Apart from identity conundrum- migration, exile, displacement, identity, sense of belonging, isolation, and cross-cultural conflicts are some of the pivotal themes indispensably found in her writings.

Her women protagonists serve as role models for several immigrant women in North America. Her characters are victim of dual tradition making a transition from their native to a hostile land, where they struggle in distant lands in search of fortune, or to fulfill their dreams and ambition, or in their search for identity and stability in life. For four decades Bharati Mukherjee has maintained her familial ties with her motherland, and continues to write about India and Indian immigrants. As she puts forth in an interview with Ameena Meer that:

South Asian (or Indo-Pak, as we seem to call ourselves) immigrants are becoming an increasingly large community in North America. Gujaratis and Keralites run real estate operations in Southern California. Punjabis in Yuba City, just north of Sacramento, don't bother to learn English. In New York, every second restaurant is run by Bangladeshis.

---BOMB- artists in conversations

Bharati Mukherjee in 'Jasmine' fictionalizes the process of Americanization by tracing a young woman's experiences of trauma and triumph in America. Jasmine, the protagonist of the novel, reincarnates herself constantly, ferrying between the multiple identities in different spaces and times. The writer never feels exasperated by the cultural incongruities. She survives to make a new beginning in the host country, ignoring the impediments from her native past. The etymology of the novel traces back to Mukherjee's short story collection

'Middleman and other stories' (1988), where the protagonist Jasmine is portrayed as a menial in a hotel but in the novel form, the protagonist is pictured in a totally different perspective. The backdrop of 'Jasmine' is based on the idea of the marriage of the East and the West, with a story that portrays a convention Hindu woman whose husband is murdered by Sikh terrorists. Being widowed at merely the age of seventeen, Jasmine leaves India for the United States of America. The plot mainly concentrates on Jasmine's struggle in the hostile land and her emergence of success out of it. Women empowerment and women ideals are given more importance in the transition of the protagonist from the beginning to end of the novel.

The First Phase-Innocence

Jasmine, rather, Jyoti, born in Hasnapur in India, is the most beautiful and clever child in her family. She is a voracious reader of English and her master calls her as 'lotus bloomed from cow dung'. Though she is multifaceted, she has been controlled and dominated by the male members of her family. She overcomes all her impediments and emerges as a first female candidate of English instruction in her village.

Culture has been portrayed as a driving force in the novel. The writer embellishes the concept of marriage in India at a young age. In this plot Though Jyoti desires to marry an educated man who does not believe in the dowry system. Thus as a fortunate stroke of serendipity, she marries Prakash, a modern and practical man.

Marriage acts as an apex for Jyothi's identity crisis. Prakash encourages her to be modern in all perspectives. Prakash shuns old traditions, right from his early years. He prefers Jyothi to call by his first name. He often educates her saying that only in villages; wives remain as slaves to husbands. The element of humour is spotted, when Jyothi practices to call his name

The first months, eager and obedient as I was, I still had a hard time calling Prakash. I'd cough to get his attention, or to start with "Are you listening?" every time I coughed he'd say "Do I hear a crow trying human speech?" Prakash. I had to practice and practice (in the bathroom, in the tarped- over corner of the

verandah which was our kitchen) so I could say the name without gagging and blushing in front of his friends. (77)

He also gives Jyoti a new name Jasmine. This change of her name is much symbolic of the change of her identity as well as of her shift from the Eastern culture to the Western one. However, though Jyoti was quite happy in her marital life, it is too short-lived as Jasmine is widowed after Prakash is murdered. Emotional plight of the widows in Indian scenario is presented by the writer in quintessential manner.

Mataji and I were alone in widow's dark hut. My mother kept company only with other widows, bent old women of public humility and secret bitterness. I felt myself dead in their company, with my long hair and schoolgirl clothes. I wanted to scream, "Feudalism! I am a widow in the war of feudalisms" (97)

The second phase - fury

After grieving for some days, Jyothi as Jasmine decides to migrate to America. She plans to commit suicide in America as well to burn her husband's favourite attire he has stitched for his graduation. Jasmine leaves her oppressive family in India and chooses to live in America, as an illegal immigrant. Cultural attachment is emphasized in the lines 'I keep my sandalwood Ganapati hidden in my purse, a god with an elephant trunk to uproot anything in my path. (102)'. Lord Ganesh in Hindu mythology is considered to be a supreme God, who breaks all impediments in life and bestows a happy life. Jasmine is destined to suffer in an alien land. The initial horror being caught red-handed by officials asking for documents and proofs. She bursts out 'when the American visa bastards turned me down, I tried to kill myself' (102).

She starves for food without a penny. Jasmine meets nonchalant villain, Half-face, captain of the shrimper, *The Gulf shuttle*. He is a disfigured sailor. 'Half-face had lost an eye and ear and most of his cheek in a paddy field in Vietnam' (104). He takes Jasmine to motel and rapes her. Again she heads on the side of suicide, but she is forced to alter her plans her plans and her identity, a transitional shift is seen from sweet Jasmine to retaliating image of Kali, the vengeful goddess of Hindu mythology. Like kali with her tongue rolling out, she slits open half-face's throat and kills the captain who spoilt her. In killing Half-face observes critic writer Samir

Dayal, “Jasmine experiences an epistemic violence that is also a life affirming transformation” (12).

The third phase - ecstasy

Timely help is extended by a kind of Quaker woman, Lillian Gordan, who saves her from fatigue and starvation. Lillian calls Jasmine ‘jazzy’. She acts as an inspiration to Jasmine. Jasmine as Jassy gets shocked by her own transformation, dressing her in T-shirt, tight cords and running shoes. She gains courage by the words of Gordon ‘let the past make you wary , by all means. But do not let it deform you (131)’ She moves to New York and joins a Jippie couple, the Hayes and their adopted daughter Duff. She feels very happy about her American identity. For a couple of years, she stays with Taylor. Jasmine claims the identity of a care taker and home manager in Taylor’s house. When Taylor’s wife leaves Taylor due to his impotency, Jasmine takes the role of full time care taker. Taylor gives her a new identity and names her as ‘Jase’ and makes her an independent woman by helping her to get job in a university. Jasmine as Jase gets allured for Taylor’s goofy smile and his humanitarian ideal. The serene life of Jase turns into a tornado with the sight of Sikh terrorist, she witnesses in a park along with Taylor and Duff. The protagonist leaves from Taylor frantically that her presence may result as a threat to Taylor. In the words of the critic Nagendra Kumar puts it ‘not as an act of cowardice, but as an act of affirming. She is running away for life not escaping from life, which is a positive step’ (Kumar,114).

The fourth phase – conundrum

Jasmine moves to Baden and gets the introduction of Mrs. Ripplemeyer and her son Bud Ripplemeyer. She takes care of his bankers job and in one point of time, when he is shot by his neighbor, Jasmine takes care of him. Cultural shock becomes evident, when she becomes the entity of the new nation and becomes pregnant due to Bud Ripplemeyer. Taking into the account of physiognomy of Bud, he was a big, sturdy man and fifty three years old. Identity crisis conglomerated with confusion is highlighted in the lines ‘Bud wants me to marry him, “officially”, he says before the baby comes. People assume we’re married. He’s a small town banker; he’s not allowed to do impulsive things. I’m less than half his age, and very foreign’

(07). Other identities associated with this phase includes as recipe giver, a preserver and a tornado. She knows how to reinvent both herself and the American dream. For Bud's former wife Karen, Jasmine named Jane is a tornado.

The fifth phase – Halcyon

After staying for some days as an unmarried wife with Bud, Jasmine's identity changes to Jane in Baden yet she receives a less satisfactory life in Baden. In a nut shell Jasmine proves to be Mukherjee's model of assimilated immigrant. Jasmine is a reminder to non-progressive societies which inhibit women. From the narrow perspective Jasmine is a defiled widow. She has had so many husbands, one for each of her transformations. But from the broader view, Jasmine has been endured with her own sense of values and ethics, quite different from the set of ethics followed in the Indian society. She no longer belongs to the Indian sub-continent, but to the whole world. She 'cocoons the cosmos' and walks ahead of Taylor, even without bidding farewell to Bud and mother Ripplemeyer. She marches to Taylor as the lines showcases her mindset 'greedy with wants and reckless from hope' (240).

The character Jasmine seems to combine gentleness with tenacity in making her dreams come real. Only in her case, the dreams get fulfilled, not just in being in America, but becoming American in what she yearns for the analog in her mind and for the intensity of the spirit and the life-breath of willed destiny. Although one thing to note is that all the heroines of Bharati may be taken as projections of her alternate selves in the sense of echoing one aspect or another of her life, marriage to a foreigner, shabby treatment received as expatriate or feeling buoyed up by the bracing freedom of America. To conclude, Jasmine in 'Jasmine' marks the paramount of all her creations. Mukherjee's experience as a native and alien has taken a magnanimous and victorious shape in the form of this novel. She believes that only transformation according to the place along with the guts to meet out the challenges helps an individual to achieve one's target. She quotes:

“There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake one-self. We murder who we were, so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams.”

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