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Issues of Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

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Bharati Mukherjee is a well-known diasporic writer. She is a fictional chronicler of the 20th century immigrant experience in North America. She has explored the issues of identity very consistently in all her fiction.

This paper aims to study how Bharati Mukherjee deals with the immigrant's search for identity in an alien environment in her novel *Jasmine*. She presents the various situations and contexts in which identity crisis occurs, its effects on the immigrant and how they try to deal with it by rediscovering of self and inventing a new identity and what all they have to go through in this process.

Identity is concerned with the self-esteem and self-image of an individual, a gender, a community, a class, a race or sex or a nation – real or imaginary. Identity is having the power to redefine the terms of cultural practices and customs to fit one's own experience. One's inability to find proper identity results in rootlessness which ultimately leads to alienation. Alienation is one of the greatest problems confronting modern man. Its corrosive impact can be seen in the form of the conspicuous absence of a sense of meaningfulness of life. The problem of alienation is intimately related to the loss of and quest for one's identity.

Indian woman's identity is usually connected to and defined by the societal and cultural norms of a practicable familial structure. This identity is defined within the parameters of their social relationship to men. Indian women, in general, are believed to have no identity of their own. However, urban and metropolis educated Indian women, immigrants and expatriate are attempting to establish a new identity and remodel feminine gender identity and representations with their changing gender roles.

Mukherjee deals with the theme of re-discovering of self when the immigrants are looking for a position in a new place. She herself has undergone the experience that migration or "cultural transplant" leads to an identity crisis. She focuses, in all her fiction, on the particular condition of female alienation in contemporary society, on the male/female dichotomy and the continuing colonization of female identity in contemporary patriarchal societies. She deals most prolifically in the search for identity, as defined by the self, by others, by location and by circumstances.

In Mukherjee's stories, everything – including gender, homeland, geography, occupation, and role within the community can act in determining and qualifying identity. Fluidity of identity, or an ability to transform, marks the characters of Mukherjee's fiction.

Mukherjee deals with the topics of gender and marriage in her novels. Her protagonists subvert the doomed fate they are in. They all decide to make a life of their

own. Their born sex brings them the duty to obey the patriarchal authority, and their arranged marriages reveal that they cannot hold their own subjectivities because there is another patriarchal power from their husbands they need to obey. Moving to a new place is to free from the Indian traditional oppression of their sex and marriage rules which also represents their duty to the society and to their family.

There is a double barrier in their adventure to find a new status, a new self, a new place for the new them. This double barrier is their oppressive position in India, and their marginal position in America. Mukherjee attempts to free them from their depressed position and the frame of the restrictions.

Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* orchestrates a woman's quest for identity, quest for a new self. It shows how a woman comes to terms with her own self. It is about an ambitious woman. She is born Jyoti in a small village in terrorism ridden Punjab and is transformed into Jasmine, Jazzy, Jase and Jane through a journey that is marked by widowhood, murder, rape, illegal documents and an uncanny instinct to survive through all situations. She embodies the human spirit and has gained empowerment.

As Jasmine travels to many places during her lifetime, she is given different names which identify her as a new person. Jasmine believes that she is born more than once. Thus, her changing names reflect her rebirths and reincarnations. Her journey serves as a metaphor for the ever-moving, regenerating process of life itself. This journey becomes a tale of moral courage, a search for self-awareness and self-assertion.

Unfortunately, Jyoti is "the fifth daughter, seventh of nine children (39)"; Jyoti's worried mother wants to kill her in order to spare the pain of a dowryless bride for her and diminish her future distress for a happy life. In India, daughters are mostly considered a "curse", brought on by their own evil deeds in a previous life. Surviving infanticide, she is given by her grandmother the name Jyoti, meaning "light, brilliance and radiance", but in surviving, she was already Jane, a fighter and adapter.

Jasmine is faced with a loss of identity at each stage but she manages to evolve a new identity at each stage. She frames her own code of conduct to suit the particular situation in life. She comments:

"There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself. We murder who we are so we can rebirth ourselves in the image of dreams (29)."

Jasmine achieves self-actualization by a personality 'honing' through acculturation to different identities. At every stage of her life, Jasmine revolted against her fate and the path drawn for her.

Jyoti was a Sati-goddess. Jasmine lived for the future and Jase lived for today. In the US, Jyoti discards the old and takes on new identities till her metamorphosis is complete. She graduated from vulnerability to power:

"I feel so potent, a goddess (12)."

Mukherjee uses the archetypal image of Kali, the Goddess of Destruction for the protagonist. The image here is relevant to the strength of a woman like Jasmine who is

reborn by killing Half-Face who symbolizes evil in the novel.

Jasmine dies many deaths in her lifetime but is reborn many times acquiring a new though “a fluid identity”. She does not hold fast to a nostalgia that is dead but maintains certain basic traits of Indian culture even after imbibing American culture. Sometimes there is a conflict between Jasmine’s two selves, one still holding fast to traditional Indian values of life and the other an adventurer in a capitalistic culture:

“For every Jasmine the reliable caregiver, there is a Jase the profligate adventurer. I thrilled to the tug of opposing forces (176).”

Jasmine is in a dilemma as to which life and identity should she choose:

“I am caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness. A caregiver’s life is a good life, a worthy life. What am I to do? (240)”

Jasmine is suspended between the identities of Jyoti and Jasmine as she “shuttles” in search of a new identity. She realizes that:

“Jyoti of Hasnapur was not Jasmine, Duff’s day mummy and Taylor and Wylie’s aupair in Manhattan. That Jasmine isn’t this Jane Ripplemeyer (127).”

She creates a new world consisting of new ideas and values, constantly unmasking her past.

Mukherjee ends the book on a novel note and re-emphasizes the complex and alternating nature of identity of a woman in exile:

“Then there is nothing I can do. Time will tell if I am a tornado, rubble-maker, arising from nowhere and disappearing into a cloud (241).”

Thus, the terms once used to define identity actually call for redefinition, since such terms are mutually dependant upon one another for meaning. Identity is no longer an established characteristic given away by family name, ethnicity and gender roles. Rather, it can be ‘smashed’, ‘melted down’ and rebuilt. Mukherjee wants the people to get away from thinking of themselves--of their identities--as fixed, as dependent only on inherited things : language, race, class, culture. She wants them to improvise identity, to see themselves as part of a changing community in which their loyalty depends on what community they have adopted.

Works Cited:

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