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Identity Crisis in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

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Abstract:

Bharati Mukherjee is a writer who explores through her fiction the meaning of life. Issues related to women are central to the vision of Mukherjee in her novels. She deals with the problems of the Indian immigrants mainly, women. She writes about the struggles and problems faced by Indian women. The problem of cross-cultural crisis and the ultimate search for identity is also one of her important themes. Her novels also reflect the temperament and mood of the present American Society as experienced by the Indian immigrants in America. Bharati Mukherjee takes up the problem of adjustment that the Indians in the West have to face. Her novels express the impulse of Indians, who, in their search for a better life, face the problems of adaptation and survival. Bharati Mukherjee also depicts the cultural clash between the East and the West. When a person leaves her own culture and enters into another culture, her original culture comes into conflict with the new one she finds in the alien land. This cultural transplant leads to a crisis of identity. As the immigrants are torn between two different cultures; quest for identity becomes very important and a must in their life. Search for identity has a very wide meaning and it is manifested in the will to survive against all odds. Identity is one of the most important factors in the life of a person.

Keywords: identity, immigrants, cultural clash, self-independence.

In the novel *Jasmine*, Bharati Mukherjee takes up the theme of search for identity. She writes how the female protagonist tries to tackle the problem of loss of culture and endeavors to assume a new identity in the U.S. The protagonist Jasmine leaves her country to fulfill her wishes. On reaching the U.S., she begins to search for self-independence. She struggles hard to achieve it and at last she realizes that self independence is not to be an Indian or American but to be at peace with herself.

In *Jasmine*, the main protagonist Jasmine search for identity and her true self began from the day she was born. She was born as Jyoti in the village of Hasnapur in Jullandhar district of Punjab eighteen years after the Partition Riots. She was an unwanted child to the family because she was the fifth daughter and the seventh of nine children. Her mother wanted her to be killed when she was born because she did not want her daughter to suffer the pains of a dowry less bride. As a girl child she was almost strangled to death so that her parents might free her from the problems of marriage. But she survived that attack.

Jasmine never gave up her childhood memories. She always remembered them. In fact, her childhood memories became the instrument in her fight against fate and her search for self-identity. She was predicted of widowhood and exile by an astrologer when she was only seven years old. She was not dismayed down by fate. She always tried to raise herself above blind beliefs and superstition. "Fate is Fate, When Beulah's bridegroom was fated to die to snakebite on their wedding night; did building as still fortress prevent his death? A

magic snake will penetrate solid walls when necessary. “Even in childhood, she knew that she had the potential to fight, win all battles and establish a strong identity. Her fight with the dog using a staff giving her a buzz of power,” her rejection of a marriage which was almost finalized by her father and grandmother, her affection of the electric switch in Vimla’s house which made her feel “totally in control, “all showed her confidence to go towards the realization of her potential. She learnt identifying “permissible rebellion” against the standard of the society which she would later use to her own advantage.

In spite of the strength and determination Jyoti had, she was threatened by dangers, challenges and many barriers in her quest for identity. Although she had the ability to grasp the ideas of power and control, she was cultured by the society in which she was born. And this was the main reason which made her to disguise her true identity most of the time and live accordingly to the images fashioned by others. Her father’s statement “that bright ladies are bearing bright sons, that is nature’s design,” she offends her father by disclosing her ambition that she want to become a Doctor.

But the outburst of her father to comply with rules did not discourage Jyoti from expressing a small part of her dream or ambition. She achieved a small part of her dream by falling in love and marrying Prakash, a very young and ambitious engineer. He wanted Jyoti to shed off her past and make a new kind of woman. Prakash “wanted to break down the Jyoti I’d been in Hasnapur and make me a new kind of city woman. To break off the past, he gave me a new name: Jasmine.” And this was the beginning of a new journey for her. After getting a new identity, Jasmine also took care of her husband’s driving ambition. Then she realized that she too could fight to prove the prediction which had been following her footsteps since her childhood which she had been trying to run away from it.

Renamed as Jasmine, she was looking forward to going to America with her husband to pursue his further education. She was sharing the ambition of her husband happily. But her husband Prakash was killed by the fundamentalists – the Khalsa terrorists on the eve of their departure. This made Jasmine grief-stricken and frustrated. And her dream was shattered. Instead of spending the rest of her life as a helpless widow at Hasnapur, she decided to go to America and commit Sati after reaching the campus of the University where her husband was supposed to study. It was a way of protest to express her anger for shattering her husband’s dreams. This kind of inner will in such kind of situation helped her to fulfill her mission successfully.

Then Jasmine went to America on a forged passport. She left India to survive against the forces of destiny but unfortunately her American journey began on a sad note. She was raped by Half-Face who had “lost an eye and ear and most of his cheek in a paddy field in Vietnam”. (P.104) Half-Face was the Captain of the ship in which Jasmine reached America. But after reaching America, Half-Face raped Jasmine in a hotel. After Half-Face raped she did not kill herself as she felt that her mission was not yet over. And she killed half-Face by becoming Kali personified, the Goddess of Destruction. She also performed a kind of death for her by burning her dishonored clothes symbolically. It was the death of her old self and the birth of a new self. Jasmine was reborn not by killing herself but by killing half-Face. Thus she began her journey into America. From that journey of Jasmine to America to fulfill her mission came out her inward quest – to unfold her true self and identity.

Jasmine was modern girl who faced the challenges of life boldly and struggled hard to survive against all odds. Then Jasmine met Lilian Gordon who entered into her life as a hope.

It was Mrs. Gordon who educated her, made her free from her past memories and strengthened her will to survive. With her help, she went to meet Professor Vadhera who helped Prakash in securing admission in an engineering course. In the beginning, she stayed at Professor Vadhera's house. But Jasmine was disappointed when she learned that Mr. Vadhera was depended not only on his living on teaching but on trading in human hair. She was not earning by the strict ethnicity in the house that she was to follow as a widow. So she decided to leave that house. This move indicated that self-actualization was developing in her life and it might be due to the acculturation to the American way of thinking and dressing. That was a protest made by Jasmine not against Indian culture but against its retentiveness. After a short time, Jasmine worked in the house of Tylor and Wylie Hayes in Manhattan as a care giver to their little daughter Duff. There her name was changed from Jasmine to Jase. While she worked as a care-giver, she also took up part time jobs like answering phones and tutoring graduate students in Punjabi in the University. She absorbed the alien culture rather greedily. At this phase of her life, Jasmine had been able to gain a personality and became very confident about her personality.

The pulling between these two opposite forces i.e. the Indian and the American did not frighten her but it made her excited. Even if the other immigrants remained suspended between these two forces, Jasmine was happy that she was able to assimilate the new culture. The alien country taught her to live with ease and confidence, in spite of her unstable identity Jasmine gave her care and love to those people who needed her and who believed and helped her. Taylor helped Jasmine very much irrespective of what she was. After his wife Wyle left him, he felt that he needed emotional support and confessed his love to Jasmine. She was overwhelmed by his sincerity and gentleness and became closer to him. Her immigrant status did not give any hindrance to the emotional bond between them.

Another phase of Jasmine's life was when she left Taylor and Duff in fear and terror because of the presence of Sukhawinder, the Khalsa terrorist who killed Prakash in India. Then she went to Iowa and met another benefactor Mrs. Ripplemayer in the form of a mother. There she got a job in Iowa's bank. She also made a place in the heart of the banker Bud Ripplemayer.

Jasmine had a peaceful life in Bud's house. She was happy of getting a new job and of her status as a step-mother to Du, a sixteen-year old Vietnam War victim adopted by Bud. Bud was separated from his Karin and his grown-up sons had left him. There she assumed a new identity and she became "Jane" from "Jase". She considered herself to be a catalyst and not the reason for the divorce of Bud and Karin. Violence struck her life again after a disgruntled farmer shot Bud from a point blank range which left him crippled waist downwards. Jane served him lovingly and caringly after he was crippled. She tried to comfort him and make him confident. And she became pregnant carrying Bud's child but did not wish to marry him she made Karin understand that she was not her enemy but it was Bud's happiness that mattered to both of them.

Jane had fully accepted the American family but she was waiting for real love. Then suddenly she got a letter from Taylor informing her that he would shortly come to take her. And it was a welcome surprise for her. She was worried about the impact on Bud when Du decided to go to California and stay with his sister and her family. She understood Du's condition as she herself was an exile and told the news to Bud gently.

At that point of time, Taylor came to her life again and convinced her that there would be nothing wrong to leave Bud. Then she walked out of Bud's life and agreed to go with Taylor and Duff to work as a care. Until now she had been serving her duty toward others, but now she thought of her love and herself. Her two remarks, "The moment I have dreamed a thousand times finally arrives" and "I am not choosing between two men. I am caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness," A care-givers life is a good life a worthy life." It was a clear response to her courage. She did not feel any guilt. She only did what she thought was right for her. Jasmine's desire – "I want to do the right thing. I don't want to be a terrible person" proved that she did not feel guilty and no longer was thinking of herself as Jane. She had survived the worst part of her life in America and now was free to make her place in Taylor's life.

Jasmine had a sense of relief at leaving Bud rather than feeling guilty. She was happy of doing what she had been wishing to do from a long time back: "It isn't guilt that I feel its relief. I realize I have already stopped thinking of myself as Jane. Adventure, risk, transformation: the frontier is pushing indoors through uncalled window. Watch me reposition the stars, I whisper to the astrologer who floats cross-legged above my kitchen stove. At last Jasmine said, and 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. I am out of the door in the pot-holed and ruttled driveway, scranding ahead of Taylor, greedy with a wants and reckless from hope." From this comment, it can be seen that at last Jasmine was out of bonds and had gained her true self.

Hence Bharati Mukherjee's Jasmine is the movement of Jasmine's life towards achieving true identity. Her journey to America is a process of her quest of true self. Even when the protagonist goes through the worst experiences of her life, she is able to come through the obstacles and attains self-awareness and a new identity and overthrows her past life. The protagonist Jasmine repositions her stars in the adopted country by deciding to remain as a care-giver to Duff in which she gets her peace of mind. At every step of her life, Jasmine is a winner, she does not allow her troubles and struggles to obstruct her progress in life and she is finding a place for herself in the society. In other words, she is a true feminist who fights every challenge in life to establish herself in the society. Jasmine realizes that the true identity of a person does not lie in being an Indian or an American but it lies in the inner spirit of the person to be at peace with her. Bharati Mukherjee has employed metamorphosis transformations in the life of Jasmine in the process of her search of her true identity.

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