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The Cultural and Psychological Emancipation of an Immigrant Woman in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

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Abstract:

One of the most acclaimed writers of the Indian Diaspora, Bharati Mukherjee constantly voices out the multifarious problems encountered by the Indian immigrants especially women who journey to the land of opportunity – the United States of America through her works. As immigrants, they undergo a process of acclimatization and transformation of their personalities. Her works expose the conflicts of the immigrants with the ethos, cultures and the people of the country where they were born (India) and the land of their immigration. The novel *Jasmine* chosen for analysis deals with the gradual transformation of a woman culturally and psychologically and the tenacity with which she endures the problem and the way she assimilates the alien culture in order to have an identity of herself. Through her protagonist Jasmine, Mukherjee emphasizes the fact that the life of an immigrant is certainly a series of reincarnations. The subjection of her heroine to multiple codes of society and geographical locale, the author conveys an important note that one has to assimilate oneself to the mainstream culture of the adopted land, one should forget one's past. Jasmine, the protagonist truly embodies the modern, cross cultural shaper of the future.

Keywords: diaspora, multiculturalism, hybridity, nostalgia, emancipation

INTRODUCTION

Bharati Mukherjee (1940-) is one of the most celebrated and critiqued writers of the Indian American Diaspora. Her fame as a writer has reached the acme after the publication of her novel *Jasmine* (1989). Her writings have always cantered on the diasporic, hybridized state of migrant communities. The process of relocation, assimilation and transformation is the salient feature of her works. The psychological transformation of women immigrants especially from Asia and the consequent social and cultural conflicts and the various transitional phases the immigrants undergo constitute a major theme of her works. The quaint customs and manners of a new culture would obviously lead to complexities both physically and mentally to any immigrant especially women who are conventional or orthodox in their attitudes and beliefs. The exploration of the predicament of such immigrants in all its vicissitudes impels Mukherjee to focus on the problems of women. All her protagonists are women situated in diverse predicaments where they need to negotiate through complex situations to survive in a new world.

This paper is an attempt to provide insights on the various psychological and cultural metamorphoses of an immigrant woman who strives towards fulfilling the dreams of her husband and her own aspirations in the land of opportunities - the US. This paper also addresses the issues of cross culturalism, i.e. the past of the old homeland and the present of the new world woven together to show a direction for the future that immigrants desperately yearn to claim.

INDIAN DIASPORA WRITING – AN OVERVIEW

A major portion of fiction in Indian Diaspora Literature is contributed by women writers. Writers like Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Anjana Appachana, Kiran Desai, Sujata Massey, Indira Ganeshan and Jhumpa Lahiri are some of the greatest writers of Indian Diaspora and have achieved universal recognition. By writing about their homelands from where they have fled and the land in which they live now, these writers make a striking contrast between the various socio, cultural, economic and psychological problems and the difficulties the immigrants have, in adapting to an alien environment. All these writers firmly believe that one's identity is rooted in the culture in which one lives. The integrated pattern of thinking, understanding, evaluating and communicating determines one's culture. The innumerable social, ethical, moral values, norms, symbols, languages and knowledge are the elements of culture. It also includes norms of behaviour, system of belief, rituals etc., It is the product of social action.

The family structure, child rearing processes, myths, legends along with history constitute some of the elements that give identity to a culture as it manifests in expressive behaviour, language and literature. Any member belonging to a community must have to internalize this identity consciously or unconsciously in personality formation. Those who deviate from this accepted norms, behaviours, values etc., are always considered 'strangers' or 'foreigners' in any society. It is unusual for everyone to get accustomed easily and quickly to a new culture. In order to survive in the era of globalization, adapting to varied cultures is essential. Those who strive to get accustomed to cultural and linguistic barriers become successful. The ability to break the shackle and get rid of these obstacles can survive. The entanglement or the deep-rootedness to the social and cultural web of one's origin finds life more traumatic and complicated. The manifestation of this feature is found in most of the diaspora writings.

Steven Vretovechis essay on "*Three Meanings of Diaspora Exemplified among South Asian Religions*" defines the term 'diaspora' as – "any population which is considered 'deterritorialized' or 'transnational' – that is, which has originated in a land other than which it currently resides, and whose social, economic and political networks cross the borders of nation-states or, indeed, span the globe". To define the term in simple words, 'diaspora' signifies the communities of people dislocated from their native homelands through migration, immigration, or exile as a consequence of colonial expansion or imperialism or trade or business or better opportunities or better prospects. When the process of immigration takes place, the immigrants retain a collective memory, vision or myth about their original homeland. This recollection of the past memories finds expression in the form of verse or prose. The mobility of people from one

nation to another nation can be a temporal one or a spatial one. The temporal move enables the immigrant to look back at the past and a look forward at the future. This produces nostalgia, themes of survival and cultural assimilation. The spatial move involves a deterritorialization and reterritorialization. This paves way for the loss of old territory-geographical and cultural and the gain of a new territory. This movement also enables to draw a sharp comparison and contrast between 'home' and 'foreign', 'familiar' and 'strange' 'old and new'. The arduous journey of the immigrants, the cross-cultural experiences, the dislocation and relocation, the cultural shock are some of the problems focused on the diasporic writings. Mukherjee in her "imagining Homelands" refers to 'immigration' as an "act of adopting new citizenship, going the full nine yards of transformation" (216). Moreover she puts forth her arguments in her "American Dreamer" thus: "In the age of diasporas, one's biological identity may not be one's only identity. Erosions and accretions come with the act of emigration". (4)

THE ARDUOUS JOURNEY OF JASMINE

The novel *Jasmine* (1989) centres around Jasmine-a rustic girl from Hasanpur who breaks off all the shackles of class, caste, tradition, gender and the boundaries of space. After the death of her husband Prakash at an early age, she seeks to find solace by fulfilling the ambition of her husband who wished to have a successful career after his further studies in the land of opportunities, the United States of America. The author attempts to unravel the intricate layers of cross-cultural confrontations through a series of adventures which the protagonist embarks for America. Throughout her arduous journey from Punjab to California, the identity of the character gradually changes as her name changes from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jazzy to Jane.

Jasmine's oscillation between the past and the present and her attempts to come to terms with the two worlds, one of her nativity and the other of the immigrant are wonderfully intertwined to exhibit the interior and exterior changes happening in her. Jasmine seems to be caught in the web of eastern and western cultures, the past and the present; the constant flux in her state of mind makes her difficult to establish an identity of her own. There are many incidents in the novel that illustrates her whimsicality or capriciousness towards her perception of culture. When she is seven years of age in her village in India, she challenges an astrologer's prediction of early widowhood and banishment from the country, and chooses to carve out her own fate. In every sense of the term, Jasmine seems to be quite rebellious and unorthodox. Heedless of the predictions of the astrologer, she continues to study with the help of her mother and a school teacher, Masterji. She enjoys the pursuit of her studies and the English language but the unanticipated twists and turns in her life because of the Sikh's national movement has resulted in giving up her aspirations of becoming a doctor. However, her marriage with Prakash, who has a strong determination to go America or Germany to continue his studies and then find work there, has given her some hopes of detaching herself from the roles of a typical married woman. Prakash tries to inculcate his progressive attitude in his wife and changes her name from Jyoti to Jasmine. This exemplifies the first positive change in the mind of a rustic girl.

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION

Her husband's aspiration to pursue his studies in the University of Florida is thwarted by the Sikh's national movement, the Khalsa Lions, who kill her husband in an attack. Though she is dejected by the sudden and unexpected death of her husband, unlike the women of her village, she remains undeterred and takes persistent efforts to fulfill her husband's dream of leaving for the US and she also thinks of committing 'sati' by cremating her husband's suit in the ground of the University of Florida. By doing so, she believes that she would be carrying the most honourable duty befitting an Indian widow. Soon she sets off her arduous journey to the US with forged documents and reaches the Florida coast after an excruciatingly hazardous journey. But another misfortune awaits her in the motel where she is molested by the sea captain who has ferried Jasmine and other immigrants to America.

Aggrieved by the treacherous and ruthless act of the sea captain Half-face, she first decides to put an end to her life but changes her mind immediately that she cannot be retreated from her mission. "I didn't feel the passionate embrace of Lord Yama that could turn a kerosene flame into a lover's caress. I could not let my personal dishonor disrupt my mission. There would be plenty of time to die... I extended my tongue and sliced it" (117-118)

Assuming the role of deity Kali, Jasmine assuages her anger by killing Half-face. Here the transformation of her character for the second time is seen. A critic on Indian Writing, Samir Dayal asserts that "in killing Half-faced, she experiences an epistemic violence that is also a life time transformation". (71) Her first day in the land of opportunities begins with the denial of death of herself and the destruction of Half-face. She again embarks to carry out the mission of fulfilling her husband's ambition in the unknown land with nothing but hope and determination. She is helped by a kind-hearted woman Lilian Gordan, who illegally aids immigrants and refugees. She also renames Jasmine as Jazzy. The misery torn life of Jasmine is completely changed by Mrs. Gordan both physically and mentally. She is being educated and made herself free from all distress. The encounter with the American Gordan makes an indelible impression in her mind. She proves different from other immigrants and refugee women and soon adjust herself to training on being American. Within a week, the reincarnated Jazzy leaves aside all her diffidence and despair and with a change in her inner as well as outer personality, she goes to meet Professor Vadhera who has helped Prakash in securing admission at the University of Florida.

At Professor's Vadhera's place, she is diminished to the level of being a widow as she was in India. She finds difficult to cope with the Vadhera's life style of Indian food, movies, dress, language, and sleeping and eating habits and schedules: the typical defence of a diasporic community.

I could not admit (at the Vadheras) that I had accustomed myself to American clothes. American clothes disguised my widowhood. In a T-shirt and cords, I was taken for a student. In this apartment of artificially maintained Indianness, I wanted to distance myself from everything Indian, everything Jyoti-like. To them, I was a widow who should show a proper modesty of appearance and attitude. If not, it appeared I was competing with Nirmala. (145).

During her stay at Vadhera's, Jasmine feels deformed and regressed. She thinks that her life has become dormant.

I felt myself deteriorating. I had gained so much weight I couldn't get into the cords even when I tried. I couldn't understand the soap operas. I didn't know the answers to the game shows. And so I cooked, shopped, and cleaned, tended, the old folks, and made conversation with Professorji when he got home.(148)

She does not want to get entangled with the life of domesticity. Through the portrayal of Jasmine's change in attitude and life style, Mukherjee here strikes a sharp contrast between an India which shuts its door on widows and their lives and a US where there is renewed opportunity and hope for a stunted Life at Vadhera's house is indeed a despicable one to Jasmine. She finds herself stifled by the inertia of the home for it is completely isolated from everything American.

This is a typical characteristic portrayal of a 'Third World' as seen by the West, a 'Third world' where women can only be suppressed, oppressed and silenced. Considering the life at Vadhera's to be a stasis in her endeavour towards a new life, she tries to detach herself from all that is Indian including to efface the memory of an Indian. Hence she decides to run away from the typical way of Indian life and environment and attach herself to the American consumerist society and culture. Gurlin Grewal observes that Jasmine has travelled a long way both on physical and psychological plane, from India, 'locked into the inertia of stasis, the land of Yama/death' to America, 'equated with freedom from fate, poverty, and a repressive gender identity' (186). Jasmine tries to negotiate an opportunity that rises above this ghettoization, and seems to echo Mukherjee's own belief in the cultural gain that immigration offers. She does not see any bright prospects of happiness if she continues staying with Vadheras. They perhaps deny Jasmine the freedom of the adventurer and seeker. She is attracted to independence and distinctness.

From Vadhera's she flees to Manhattan, New York to join the sophisticated and emancipated couple, Taylor and Wylie Hayes and their fostered daughter Duff as a caretaker. Here she is renamed as Jase by Taylor and transformed into a sophisticated American woman. In Hayes' we again notice a phenomenal change which happens not from a reaction but from her own yearning

for personal change. In becoming Jase, Jasmine gets increasingly comfortable with her sexuality which she has always tried to repress earlier. She firmly asserts:

I changed because I wanted to. To bunker oneself inside nostalgia, to sheathe the heart in a bulletproof vest, was to be a coward. On Claremont Avenue, in the Hayeses' big, clean, brightly lit apartment, I bloomed from a diffident alien with forged documents into adventurous Jase (185-186).

Wylie's decision of leaving Taylor for another man in search of happiness does not affect Jasmine mentally. It indeed enables her to realize the brittle relationship existing between men and women in a multicultural society like the US. Mukherjee ingeniously expresses the human relationship through her protagonist thus:

In America, nothing lasts. I can say that now and it doesn't shock me, but I think it was the hardest lesson of all for me to learn. We arrive so eager to learn, to adjust, to participate, only to find the monuments are plastic, agreements are annulled. Nothing is forever, nothing is so terrible or so wonderful, that it won't disintegrate (181).

The sojourn at Taylor's makes Jasmine grow mentally stronger and understand the values of marital relationships which are completely in contrast to her own native land. However contrasting it is, she has a feeling that she is ingrained to that culture of the migrated land. When at the Hayeses, Jasmine seizes her opportunities and strike roots in the new land.

I felt lucky. My pillow was dry, a launch pad for lift-off. Taylor, Wylie, and Duff were family. America may be fluid and built and flimsy, invisible lines of weak gravity, but I was a dense object, I had landed and was getting rooted. I had controlled my spending and now sat on an account that was rapidly growing. Everyday I was being paid for something new. I'd thought Professorji out in Flushing was exceptional, back when I didn't have a subway token. Now I saw how easy it was. Since I was spending nothing on food and rent, the money was piling up. (179)

Meanwhile, Taylor gets romantically involved with Jasmine. But the period of romanticism with Taylor does not last for long when she identifies a neighbourhood hotdog vendor as her husband's murderer.

Throughout her life, the plight of Jasmine is in constant flux. As readers we find that her life is permeated with pleasant and unpleasant moments of time- a life which is laden with blissful and cursing moments. To escape from the sight of the man who murdered her husband she moves to Iowa, where she meets, a tall, handsome, fifty year old banker, Bud Wipplemeyer. In Iowa, Jasmine takes another avatar as 'Jane'. Her racial identity also undergoes an evolution in Bud's place. The community, in which she lives, sees her as a familiar one rather than a stranger. This new perception of her race is an essential portion of her identity as Jane because now she

feels assimilated and in fact becomes the typical American she always wanted to be. After some time, Bud is confined to wheelchair on being shot at the back by a distressed farmer facing foreclosure and Jane becomes pregnant while making him feel comfortable. Here we see a remarkable change in Jasmine's attitude. The girl, who murdered Half-Face for violating her chastity, now willingly, chooses not only to live with an American as a wife without being married to him but also carries his child in her womb also. She has fully assimilated herself to the American family life with adopted children and pregnancy, but is waiting for her love which she finds when Taylor comes to her. From her duties towards others, she now thinks of her duty to herself.

It is with Taylor and Duff, the Hayes' adopted daughter that Jasmine decides to settle down in distant California leaving Bud behind. Her choice is her individual fulfillment and not duties and responsibilities. Thus it is evident that Jasmine establishes a new, negotiated identity. It is an attempt to move away from her postcolonial past. She does not burden herself with nostalgia or paralyzing effects of memory. She has learnt to travel light, either to enable her to survive, or to assimilate with the new culture. In Jasmine's words, she seems to be always fleeing from it: ... I had a past that I was still fleeing. Perhaps still am"(34). As Jasmine's Americanization progresses, the memory of her homeland recedes further and she tries to efface it from her memory.

As self-conscious borderland dwellers, the female characters in the novels of Mukherjee seem advanced in their self-awareness although their identities and names are in a constant state of flux. Her protagonists endure a great deal of suffering while undergoing psychological and cultural transformation, but most of this suffering seems to stem from resistance to the hybrid identities they are forced to assume. Through the journey of Jasmine, Mukherjee emphasizes on the fact that those who can liberate themselves from the cultural identity of their homeland and assimilate the culture of the adopted land can lead a successful life.

In *Beyond Multiculturalism*, Mukherjee believes that immigration is a process of 'gain' in contrast to those who find a 'loss' in transit to a new culture. It is a gain in 'discarding the communal identity' to have access to an 'individual identity' - an individual identity which keeps transforming and evolving, as both Mukherjee and her protagonist in Jasmine undergo reconstructions of their identities. Undoubtedly this novel celebrates Bharati Mukherjee's exuberance of immigration. The idea of America persuades Jasmine to direct her course to realize her desire for an individual self, while subverting patriarchy and rigid traditions. As names, for her change, there is simultaneous reinvention of identity in her gradual identification with the main stream. Mukherjee in her interview with Hancock elucidates the identity reformation of diaspora as "Unhousement is the breaking away from the culture into which one was born, and in which one's place in society was assured. Rehousement is the re-rooting of oneself in a new culture. This requires transformations of the self." (39)

CONCLUSION

In this novel we find that Jasmine is an embodiment of the positive image of a maximalist immigrant woman and a transformative agent who encourages other immigrants to embrace their maximalist selves. In her interviews Mukherjee recognizes that she puts more stock in Indian immigrant women than their male counterparts. She explains women undergo a more "psychological transformation" whereas men aim to make money and return to India. Jasmine exemplifies the Indian woman undergoing this psychological transformation. She is 'reincarnated' multiple times through the roles and names she adopts. Jasmine embraces what she comes to understand as American culture and finally comes to recognize her own wants, which Mukherjee argues is a large accomplishment in the life of an Indian immigrant women. Jasmine's rebirths as Jyoti, Jasmine, Jazzy, Jase and Jane represent stages in Jasmine's ever-changing self-identification process and the cultural influence she undertakes at each stage.

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