

Jasmine: The Endless Quest for Identity

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Abstract:

Bharati Mukherjee, in her novels, tries to portray the image of those women who have tried to assimilate the alien culture and have tried to accept changed identity overthrowing the Indian cultural legacy. What is more important in them is their spirit with which they overthrow their old culture and adjust themselves with the new surroundings. No doubt that in the process of immigration, her women protagonists find themselves in a cultural dilemma and ultimately, they face despair, loneliness, alienation and frustration, many times resulting to psychological imbalances too. In her novel *Jasmine*, Bharati Mukherjee explores female identity through the story of an Indian village woman whose path takes her from Punjab to Florida, to New York, New York to Iowa and as the novel draws towards a close she is about to set off for California. With each new step, she reinvents herself with a new identity.

Keywords: immigrant, culture clash, destiny, disaster, quest, identity.

The issues of Indian women and their struggle in migration, the status of new immigrants, and the feelings of expatriates are the central themes of Bharati Mukherjee's novels. Bharati Mukherjee herself was in exile from India, expatriate in Canada and an immigrant in the United States. Her own struggle with identity works as motivating force behind her attempts to find identity for her protagonists. In her works, we can observe her attempts to find her identity in her Indian heritage. In Bharati Mukherjee's novels, female protagonists, in general, are as the central characters. She portrays the transformation of women when they pass through the process of immigration. Bharati Mukherjee, in her novels, tries to portray the image of those women who have tried to assimilate the alien culture and have tried to accept changed identity overthrowing the Indian cultural legacy. What is more important in them is their spirit with which they overthrow their old culture and adjust themselves with the new surroundings. No doubt that in

the process of immigration, her women protagonists find themselves in a cultural dilemma and ultimately, they face despair, loneliness, alienation and frustration, many times resulting to psychological imbalances too.

Almost all the major literary works of Bharati Mukherjee highlight the immigrant anxiety, their problems and the trauma they suffer due to cultural clash. All immigrants, including men and women, Asian and Europeans became the victims of these cultural conflicts. Transplantation of human beings from one cultural world to another is always painful and it is more painful to the female immigrants. Being an immigrant, she understands the feelings of other immigrants. She writes- "Many of us have lived in newly and independent or emerging countries. My aim is to expose Americans to the energetic voices of new settlers in this country." (Interview *The Times of India*)

The experience of America is described by Bharati Mukherjee as one of 'fusion' and immigration as 'two-way process' in which Americans and immigrants are growing by the interchange. Her recent books prove that she is an original writer in American immigrant/multicultural literature. Her writings largely reflect her personal experiences she has encountered with as a woman immigrant caught between two cultures. Mukherjee's *Jasmine* was published in 1989. An Indian widow, Jasmine migrates to USA and lives the life as Jase and Jane with Taylor and Bud as their live-in partner. In *Jasmine*, Mukherjee gives us the story of an immigrant from the Third World to the U. S. who faced various disasters in her life journey. As the story of the novel moves forward, Jasmine emerges not as a tragic character but as one who is determined to change her destiny to explore infinite possibility. Of course, she passes through physical, mental and emotional agony affecting her to such an extent that she is driven to violence. In this novel *Jasmine*, Bharati Mukherjee explores female identity through the story of an Indian village woman whose path takes her from Punjab to Florida, to New York, New York to Iowa and as the novel draws towards a close she is about to set off for California. With each new step, the protagonist reinvents herself with a new identity - Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase, Jane and with each new identity, she steps closer to her dream of being an American belonging to the new globe. Jasmine's ongoing journey highlights her rootless position and her and her endless quest for identity. In *Jasmine*, we hear the story of a seventeen-year-old girl widowed after her husband's murder in a bomb attack. As the story develops, we come to know that Jasmine and

her husband originally planned to move to Florida, but as a result of her husband's death Jasmine continues with the trip on her own. On her way, she faces many obstacles as she travels from Florida to New York City to Iowa.

The story of the novel begins with Jasmine, who retells a story from her childhood. She tells about an astrologer who predicts her future as a widower living in exile. The story moves forward to her life in Baden, Iowa where Jasmine (known as Jane in Iowa) is 24 years old, pregnant and living with 53-year-old banker Bud Ripplemayer, and his adopted son Du. Bud was shot in the back two years ago, so he is described as a man on a wheelchair. Their neighbor is Darrel Lutz, who inherited his family's farm. He is thinking about whether or not to sell his farm. Bud doesn't trust Darrel's character as a farmer and a manager so he refuses to loan Darrel money to expand his herd and grow his crops because. Both Bud and Darrel show some romantic interest in Jane. Jane walks us through her life with Du and Bud before flashing back to her life in Hasnapur, Jullundhar district, Punjab, India (*Jasmine* 39). In India, as we know, she is known as Jyoti. There is a school teacher named Masterji, who teaches her English. It is her teacher Masterji, who urges Jyoti to continue with her education instead of getting married. After the death of Jyoti's father, she meets Prakash. Soon Jyoti and Prakash marry and move in together. In the new married life of her, her husband begins to call her Jasmine. Both of them try to earn, while Prakash works two jobs and studies for his diploma exams, on the other hand, Jasmine runs a Ladies' Group raffle and sells detergent to make money. Professor Vadhera sends a letter to Prakash and encourages Prakash to study in America. In the meantime, Prakash gets admission to the Florida International Institute of Technology, and the two await visas to the United States. While waiting for visa, against the backdrop of escalating religious tensions between Muslims and Hindus, Jasmine and Prakash find themselves the victims of a bomb blast. The tragedy starts when Prakash is killed during shielding his wife and saving her life.

Jasmine decides to move to Florida according to her husband's plans, travelling by plane, train, and ship. The ship captain drives Jasmine to a motel when they arrive to land. The tragedy begins when he sexually assaults her. Jasmine, after the rape, resolves to kill herself. But immediately she drops this idea, because she has a sense of an uncompleted mission—she has yet to burn her dead husband's clothes—she decides not to die. She, with the help of knife, kills that captain. Jasmine is now a psychically transformed woman and continues on her covert

mission to honor Prakash and to make contact with his old professor. In Florida, Jasmine is rescued by a woman named Lillian Gordon, who provides Jasmine's basic needs and assists her in becoming as much an American as possible. Another identity transformation for Jasmine occurs when Lillian calls her Jazzy—a more apt and hipper American name. Lillian helps Jazzy get to New York to meet with Professor Vadhera. Kate Gordon- the daughter of Lillian, who works as a photographer in the city. Jasmine lives with Professor Vadhera, for five months, whom she calls Professorji. Later Professor Vadhera manages to get her a green card, for fifty thousand rupees, or three thousand dollars. Here the story moves forward as Jasmine begins working for Wylie and Taylor Hayes, the friends of Kate Gordon. Then with them, She moves in Manhattan to take care of their adopted daughter, Duff. The identity of her again changed, as Taylor calls her "Jase." Another twist comes when Wylie leaves Taylor, but Jase continues to take care of Duff. One day, Jase spots Sukhwinder, the man that killed Prakash; while Jase, Taylor and Duff are at the park, she decides to fly New York for Iowa because Duff's birth mother lives in Iowa.

Jasmine was indulged in the day-dreaming about her future life in America with Prakash. Unfortunately for Jasmine this dream, full of happiness, does not last long. The astrologer's prophecy comes true and terrorists kill Prakash on the eve of the young couple's scheduled departure for the west. At once all the dreams of Jasmine shattered in a moment. Her life was totally changed through this blow of the destiny. But she was a born fighter hence she didn't lose hope and decided to set out to fulfil the mission of her husband. Jasmine ultimately plans to visit the supposed institute where Prakash had to get admitted and she plans to burn herself a "Sati" at the campus of that engineering institute in Florida. She flaunts all conventional taboos of widowhood and starts on the path of achieving the mission, to America. She leaves for America on forged papers knowing not what future holds in store for her. For her, immigration comes as a serious challenge in her life because she is to migrate as *a village girl going alone to America without job, husband or papers (Jasmine 97)*. On her journey to America, she faces some of the harsh realities of life. The second phase of Jasmine's life begins after her migration to America. For her the shelter in America was a device to escape the shadows of the past, the process to ensure a renewed identity, to fulfil the dream of her late husband. In America, after her landing, she was received by the captain of the ship known as Half Face. He tried to seduce her for being

an ignorant woman. She pathetically begs to him, “my husband was killed, please don’t do anything to me” (*Jasmine*102). The horror of rape infuriates her, and out of rage she sliced her tongue and with blood dripping tongue, she stabbed Half Face. The murder of Half Face is a mode of revenge no doubt, but it is also a method of justice. In fact, it is the first endeavour of Jasmine to maintain her feminine identity as an Indian widow. In this rape encounter she experiences in herself the strength and fury of Goddess Kali – the sucker of evil men’s blood after the horrible memories of rape and murder. Her second encounter with Lillian Gordon in California adds new dimensions to her identity. The maternal care of Lillian gives a new strength and purpose in the life of Jasmine. She calls her “Jazz” and such a loving and informal address encourages her to resume a new spring in her life. In her restless vagrancy from one place to another, Jasmine betrays her gripping alienation and disharmony with the American society. Her Indianness seems to emerge to the surface as Indira Bhatt comments:

Even Jyoti to Jasmine, to Jase and Jane may appear to be real transformations of the personality of the protagonist; From Hasnapur to Jullundhar to Florida, Manhattan, Iowa may appear to be moving from old world values to the brave new world. (Bhatt, Indira 179)

Jasmine constantly reinvents herself in order to suit her surroundings. Every time she changes her name, the change in name indicates the change in her identity. In the story, the protagonist of the novel is called by different names – Jyoti, Jasmine, Jazzy, Nirmala’s cousin sister, Day-mummy, Jase, Ma and Jane. Faced with a loss of identity at each stage, Jasmine manages to evolve a new identity at the end. She is in the struggle to preserve her identity as a woman and as a sensitive individual. Her voyage in the different cultural spaces with her shifting identities, connecting within it the quest to realize her perfect individuality irrespective of geographical locations in order of patriarchy, is the central motif in the life of Jasmine. She nowhere makes a compromise with her own self as a woman and as an Indian. In her interview with Bill Moyer, Bharati Mukherjee expresses her faith in this metaphorical theme of Indianness:

If Conrad had the Heart of Darkness, I’m exploring the heart of light through Jasmine. (Roy, Anindyo 136)

The story of this novel depicts that an immigrant’s life is in fact a series of reincarnations. She lives through several lives in a single life-time. This truth explains the condition of the

novelist as well as that of Jasmine. Mukherjee, by subjecting her heroine to multiple codes of society and geographical locales seems to send the message that if one has to assimilate oneself to the mainstream culture of the adopted land, one should forget one's past. Hannah Easton is Mukherjee's model of a 'translated' self. Here, The West meets the East and the New World falls in love with the Old World. In 'Jasmine' the protagonist travels from the East to the West, undergoes a series of transformations and gets assimilated into the American culture. But Hannah Easton, the citizen of the New World, undergoes the process of 'translation' in her journey from the West to the East.

The fictional world of Bharati Mukherjee, presents a pathetic picture of the various experiences of women immigrants, their cultural and psychological conflicts, struggles, traumas, trials and tribulations and the heavy price some of them had to pay in their efforts to become successful immigrants in America. The analysis of Bharati Mukherjee's fictional world from a cultural and psychological perspective demonstrates that she has addressed herself to all the issues associated with expatriate experience. By choosing her protagonists from all parts of the world, she has attempted to explore the identity crisis and inner struggle. With her evolving creative vision, the canvas of her thematic concern enlarges and the complexity of cultural assimilation acquires a new dimension. The loveliness of Mukherjee's fiction lies in its being informed by her personal experiences. A stunning sense of identification with her character, lends her novels a fragrance, rarely found among expatriate writers. It is clearly observed that because of the discrimination of culture, Bharati Mukherjee's, women characters become victims of cultural and psychological conflicts. In spite of all the unpleasant shadows, she is hopeful for a harmonious assimilation. She has the sensibility to set harmony between the mainstream majority and the immigrant minority. Presently, cultural alienation is a global phenomenon. A feeling of depression and frustration occurs to a man because of the tremendous difference between two ways of life. This could be called "Culture Shock" when a person leaves his own culture and enters another; his old values come into conflicts with the new one he finds. Bharati Mukherjee's major literary works have highlighted the immigrant anxiety. She invariably focuses upon sensitive women protagonists who lack firm sense of cultural identity and are natural victims of racism, sexism and numerous forms of social oppression. A thorough of her novel describes that her main theme has been the life of South Asian immigrants in USA and Canada and the problem of assimilation. Her creative world is inhabited by people of various

religious faiths, diverse ethnicities and different cultural predilections. In her novels, she has successfully tried to deal with all the issues, problems and anxieties of Asian expatriates.

The depiction of cultural clash causing cultural and psychological conflicts is one of the significant themes of modern literature that is and it is nicely depicted by Bharati Mukherjee. The subject has no doubt assumed great significance in the present world of globalization. Cross-cultural confrontation has received a pronounced impetus since the emergence of the modernist movement in the very opening of the 20th century. The globalization of world economy can be looked upon as a natural offshoot of multiculturalism and intercultural interaction. Since Bharati Mukherjee has been widely acknowledged as “Voice” of expatriate-immigrant sensibility, hence the subject has assumed national and international status. Through *Jasmine*, Bharati Mukherjee encapsulates many aspects of the immigrant’s experiences in America. The process of transformations as Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase and Jane is figuratively centred in the death of one’s own self and the birth of new identity. Jasmine constantly reinvents herself in order to suit her surroundings. Whenever she changes her name, the change in name indicates the change in her own identity. In the novel *Jasmine* is a reminder to non-progressive societies which inhibit women Jasmine is a defiled widow. Jasmine has her own sense of morality which is quite different from conventional notion of morality. Here, Jasmine no longer belongs to the Indian sub-continent but to the whole world. Undoubtedly, Jasmine’s ongoing journey highlights her rootless position and her and her endless quest for identity. Amarjeet Singh rightly asserts:

Bharati Mukherjee in Jasmine, seems to use symbolism purposely to underscore the thematic concern of clash of cultures which results in confusion and chaos. The old stable societies crumble under the height of new technologies engendering violence and discontent. An individual can neither attain personal interaction nor maintain harmonious relationship with others and often gets crushed under the juggernaut of impersonal forces. (Singh, 169)

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