



BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S *JASMINE*: A NARRATIVE OF 'AFFIRMATION' AND 'ASSIMILATION'

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ABSTRACT

Individuality of a person creates his identity, which is created or emerges, as a result of its relationship to other positions and roles in society. The act of migrating significantly influences and challenges a person's identity. Identities are constituted and re-constituted due to a number of factors broadly encompassed by the structures of place time and culture. Identities are fluid and shifting and with the changes in time and place individual sense of self is affected.

Bharati Mukherjee has been highly acclaimed as a writer of expatriate – immigrant sensibility. In her novels she honestly puts forth her different phases of life – from 'alienation' in India and then in Canada to 'assimilation' in USA. This paper aims to explore Bharati Mukherjee's vision of evolving identity through her novel *Jasmine*. Throughout the novel she concentrates on the 'adaptability' of the protagonist. With the progression of the novel Mukherjee conveys a message that the survival of an immigrant among changing situation is possible only through being committed to new culture by instilling 'affirmation' and 'assimilation' in his attitude.

Keywords: Identity crisis; Transformation of self; Adaptability to the changes; Jasmine-a rebel, an adaptor, survivor.

INTRODUCTION

There is no need to introduce the words like 'Exiled', 'Diaspora', 'Expatriate' and 'Immigrant' in post-colonial literature. All these terms are contextual. Today, we can observe that the Indian Diaspora has evolved out from multiplicity of histories, variety of culture, tradition and now is bond with a strong will to survive. Indian Diaspora prevailing world-wide survives between 'home of origin' and 'world of adoption'. When this community resists the change for the sake of maintaining its native culture, it remains as an expatriate living in alienation. On the other hand, when the diasporic individual leaves behind all the obstacles coming in the process of 'assimilation', he, in real terms, becomes an 'immigrant' fired by the will to bond to the 'world of adoption'.

The term 'alienation' by **Karl Marx** has been revitalized in the mid-20th century with the progression of migration to America. In the social sciences, 'Assimilation' is the process whereby a minority group gradually adopts the customs and attitudes of the prevailing culture.

Bharati Mukherjee, an Indian born American novelist, is an outstanding pioneer of innovative practices in literature. She lives her life with distinctly different experiences she has had throughout her life. Because of this reason, she has been described as a writer who has lived through several phases of life. At first she lives as a colonial, then national subject in India. After that she led a life of exile as a post-colonial Indian in Canada. Then she shifted into a celebratory mode as an immigrant and finally a citizen in the United States. She considers her work as a celebration for her emotions that she brings out of her heart. Her main theme throughout her writing discusses the condition of Asian immigrants in North America with particular attention to the changes taking place in South Asian women in a new world.

Bharati Mukherjee considers her immigrants 'Maximalists' as those who are confident, sophisticated and balanced and not eager to melt into an American mainstream. On the other hand she writes about those immigrants who visibly expand the margins of what we may call "the American experience." These new immigrant Americans are neither nostalgic for their personal past nor afraid of unfamiliar present. Their main strategy is assimilation, affirmation and adaptation without surrender. She shows all her immigrant characters as survivors against the brutalities and violence surrounding them who are often victimized by various forms of social oppression.

Discussing about Bharati Mukherjee's poetics of cultural identity there is a point to specify about her that she describes her narratives as stories of broken-identities and discarded languages but at the same time she projects her female protagonists as fired by the "will to bond (themselves) to a new community". (Mukherjee, *Introduction to Darkness*, xv.) Unlike other Indian female writers like Anita Desai and Kamala Markandaya, Bharati Mukherjee lends her immigrants a new challenging outlook to emerge out of their cocoons of defense into the openness of assertion of belonging. Her immigrant is ever-ready to be altered "into something new, into a new set of possibilities." (Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, 16)

Bharati Mukherjee desires for 'cultural fusion' in the new dwellings, which in fact, is her own inner revelation of the voyage in her novel *Jasmine*. In the novel she visualized 'life-affirming' attitude as the only way to survive among hostile circumstances and 'assimilation' as an 'end-product', which implies that the survival is possible only through 'total confirming to a national culture'. In this way she rejects traditional narratives that privilege the myth of the single origin.

Bharati Mukherjee's vision about immigrants becomes more clear when Jasmine is presented as the best example of 'fusion' while 'Tara' in *The Tiger's Daughter* and 'Dimple' in *Wife* remain isolated and rootless aliens because of their hatred towards their native culture and as well as the culture of the adopted land. Along with her immigration to America Bharati Mukherjee understood the fact that without being assimilated to the culture of the adopted land survival of an immigrant is difficult. But at same time in her view, life-affirmation and assimilation to alien culture do not favour oblivion of the native culture. Consequently, to give a form to her vision Bharati Mukherjee willingly configured Jasmine as a protagonist enjoying the assimilated status

of immigration by a sheer will to bond herself to her adopted land. This story is all about an Indian refugee who is empowered by the trials of assimilation. In this process of assimilation the immigrant protagonist 'uproots' and 're-roots' herself. Jasmine is treated as an exotic newcomer disturbing moral equilibrium of the society though her desire of independence and freedom makes her struggle with prejudices. Therefore, she is forced to change her core moral and ethnic principles and values to be welcomed to a new country. However, with the novel progression we see that she manages to become absorbed into new culture and to become true American.

Jasmine is the heroic story of a poor young and ambitious Punjabi woman who migrates from Hasanpur to the USA. The novel is a detailed account of the protagonist's journey from unfamiliarity to familiarity from rootlessness to re-rooting from "unhousement" to "re-housement." (Blaise, *Resident Alien*) Bharati Mukherjee is of strong view that the lives of the immigrants passes through a series of transformation, "Unhousement is the breaking away from the culture in which one was born----Re-housement is the re-rooting of oneself in a new culture. This required transformation of the self."(Hancock, *An Interview with Bharati Mukherjee*. 30-44). In the novel the protagonist Jasmine takes several births namely- Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase and Jane. She lives centuries of history in a life-time. In each birth there is a mixed feeling of fear, anger, bitterness and confusion, yet every stage is a discovery of self.

Jasmine's metamorphosis with its shocking upheavals and its slow evolutionary steps illuminates the making of an American mind but even more powerfully, her story depicts the shifting contours of America being transformed by her and others like her-----our new neighbors, friends and lovers. In *Jasmine* Bharati Mukherjee has created a heroine as exotic and unexpected as the many worlds in which she lives.

The life of the heroine of the novel *Jasmine* in fact corresponds with the novelist itself. Bharati Mukherjee admits that the life of an immigrant involves a series of reincarnations and transformations, "the immigrants in my stories go through extreme transformation in America and at the same time they alter the country's appearance and psychological make up." (Carb, *An Interview with Bharati Mukherjee*. 645-654) Jasmine passes through a series of incarnation similar to Bharati Mukherjee's plight. Jyoti's transformation into Jane can be divided into three phases: the first phase begins from Hasanpur and ends with her stepping out of Flushing in America, the second begins with her living in the Taylor Household and the third phase covers her life with the Ripplemeyers in Baden, Iowa country.

The first phase of the novel begins with an astrologer's prediction that Jyoti would become a widow and would be in exile. But Jyoti ends it by whispering to the astrologer in a vision, "Watch me reposition stars." (Mukherjee, *Jasmine*.240) Being a rebel against blind beliefs and superstition at every step, Jyoti revolts against her fate. She exhibits the force of her belief when she refuses to the widower selected by her grandmother and eventually ends up marrying Prakash Vjih in a court of law.

Jyoti, the cursed girl of a village reinvents herself after marriage as Jasmine, a city woman and wife of a modern man Prakash. Prakash has an ardent wish to get admission in some obscure American Institute of technology. They start dreaming about their life in America but luck does not favor him and Prakash falls as a prey to the Khalsa Lions, the rebels. Even after this big shock Jasmine rises as a survivor with a will not to surrender to her destined fate in Punjab. She becomes stronger morally and decided to travel America because her husband had planned this trip originally. Firstly she wants to commit widow's ritual immolation, but later being raped she decided to fight for better future. Instead of committing suicide, Jasmine turns on her violator and kills him showing that she is able to fight for her life. This act of violence is that of the frontier outlaw who takes retribution into his own hands.

In Indian context it generally happens that a woman, after being raped, kills herself to avoid criticism of the society. But Bharati Mukherjee delineated Jasmine with heroic courage to kill the rapist as to avenge herself. In killing Half-face Jasmine experiments a life-affirming transformation. The sign used here is 'Adoptive' thing, which is her new identity. After killing Half-face who rapes her, she thinks that her mind (or her previous identity) has already perished. There is no more Jyoti (her former name) in her. After that day America is her big real school.

In the way of her journey, Jasmine meets with Lilian Gordon, a kind Quaker lady who acts as a savior of the undocumented in America. Under Mrs. Gordon's cares she abandons her Hasanpur clothes and modesty. She learns to adapt herself to the new environment and responds positively to the speed of transformation. But at the same time she feels the pain, fear, anger and bitterness of a rootless person, "like a stone hurling through diaphanous mist, unable to grab hold." (113-139)

Here in the novel Bharati Mukherjee brings a contrast between submission of Jasmine to the changes and resistance of the Prakash's teacher, Davinder Vadhera and his family with whom Jasmine lives from sometime at Flushing in America. Jasmine has a mono-cultural and mono-chromatic view of the American society, and responds promptly to the behavioural patterns of America rather than the ethnic community of Indians. On meeting her husband's former teacher Davendra Vadhera with "artificially maintained Indianness"(145) Jasmine realises the naked reality and wants to run away from the "Fortress of Punjabianness." (148) In contrast to the inhabitants of Flushing, Jasmine believes, "to bunker oneself inside nostalgia, to sheath the heart in a bullet proof vest was to be a coward." (185) Here Bharati Mukherjee highlights the risk of insularity of the Indian community in America who desperately weaves cocoons of nostalgia around themselves.

The second phase of Jasmine's transformation takes place in Taylor household. For two years she takes on the role of a baby sitter for duff, the daughter of a Columbia university professor Taylor and his wife Wylie on ninety five dollars a week. In this incarnation, she is 'Jase', the prowling adventurer with new money and new clothes. She thinks that she has got an established

home and now she will no longer be haunted by rootlessness, “I had landed and is getting rooted.”(179)

But still her destination is not reached at and she is forced to run from New York. She sights the assassin of her husband Sukhwinder, and runs for life to Iowa. But her escape is not a sign of cowardice, it is life-affirming.

The third phase of her transformation begins with Jasmine’s chance-meeting with mother Ripplemayer, the Iowa counterpart of Lillian Gordon. She helps Jasmine getting a job in her son Bud’s bank and after six-months she is the live-in-companion of Bud Ripplemayer. He not only gives her a new life but also a new name- ‘Jane’.

Jasmine’s every step is a calculated one into her Americanization and with each development a vital change is marked in her personality. Jasmine’s flight to Iowa and her renaming as Jane is indicative of a slow but steady progression into the mainstream American-culture. Here we encounter a changed Jasmine- one who had murdered Half-face for violating her chastity now not only willingly embraces the company of an American without marriage but also is carrying his child in her womb. We are surprised at her act since every idea revolts at this form of Indian widow. But we should never forget that she is a rebel who revolts at every step against the path drawn for her. She is an adapter as well as a survivor. Jasmine is happy with Bud at Iowa and plans to marry him. At this time Taylor returns to take her to California where the new world, the promise of America is eagerly awaiting her. Now Jasmine is in conflict, she has to choose between two men. One is the man whom she decides to spend the rest of her life with, and the other one is the one that she truly loves. Finally she overcomes her conflict and decides to be with the one she loves and moves to California, “greedy with wants and reckless from hope.”(241)

By subjecting her heroine to multiple codes of Society and geographical locales Bharati Mukherjee seems to send a message that if one wants to assimilate oneself to the mainstream culture of the adopted land, one should subside one’s past. Mukherjee’s point of view about assimilation with new culture (new surroundings) becomes more evident when the protagonist’s name changes with her shifts in places of residence. It becomes metaphors for an immigrant woman’s process of uprooting and re-rooting.

In the novel Ms. Mukherjee celebrates this drifts from one continent to the other, from one country to the other, from one identity to another, for it is a world without a fixed gravity. In other words, Mukherjee celebrates the shifting identities in dealing with this novel. While Tara in ‘*The Tiger’s Daughter*’ shows an expatriate’s sensibility, sense of exile and rootlessness, Dimple Dasgupta in ‘*Wife*’ appears as a victim of conflicting cultures, Jasmine quite different from these two heroines of Mukherjee’s novels represents assimilation of the alien culture more. A Jyoti becomes a Jasmine, a Jase, a Jane and what she becomes next remains uncertain because it is not a world of fixities and certainties, “In America nothing lasts -----it would not disintegrate.”(181)

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