

Search for Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

Dnyansheel Ramakrishna Khanderao, Assistant Professor, Department of English,
Sitabai Arts College, Akola .

Received: 23/11/2012

Reviewed: 26/11/2012

Accepted: 29/11/2012

Research Paper in English

Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee being the writer of modern times, has depicted in her fiction the problems faced by Indian and other third-world immigrants who attempt to assimilate into American life style. She focuses upon sensitive protagonists who lack a stable sense of personal and cultural identity .She does not impose readymade solutions to the problems faced by immigrant Asian women. She prefers showing them acquiring the power in order to control their fates. She offers role models for several immigrant women.

As Alam Fakrul writes: "Once literature begins to serve as a forum illuminating female experience, it can assist in humanizing and equilibrating the culture, value system, which has served predominantly male interests. A literary work is capable of providing role models, instill a positive sense of feminine identity by portraying women who are self actualizing, whose identities are not dependant on men".¹

Mukherjee's depiction of women and their different relationships portrays the dominance of patriarchal practices in

traditional society. They are typical representatives of young woman particularly of The Third World countries who cherish the dream of emigrating to America and aspire to settle there permanently. Bharati Mukherjee lived in India, Europe, the United States, and Canada. Migrating to these countries that are so different from her place of birth enabled her to write very powerful novels on immigrant experiences.

Mukherjee's celebrated novel '*Jasmine*' explores the story of a fearless girl through her immigrant experiences in the United States. Her struggle symbolizes

An International Refereed & Indexed Journal in Arts, Commerce & Education

the restless quest of a rootless person. The life story of Jasmine which takes her from India to America where she assumes a variety of identities . She transforms herself with courage and confidence. She undertakes a series of adventures during her journey from Punjab to California via, Florida, New York and Iowa. Her journey leads Jasmine through many transformations Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase and Jane. Jyoti is born into a traditional family of Punjab, eighteen years after the partition riots. She is bold, intelligent and fighter. She is a non-conformist, a rebel who questions the prophecies of the astrologer about her widowhood and exile: in the harshest terms: “You’re a crazy old man. You don’t know what my future holds”.² this irritates the fortune-teller and he chunks hard on her head and she falls on the ground getting a star-shaped scar on her forehead. This scar is seen as a curse to her but she treats it as her third eye. She does not believe in the prevalent conviction that village girls are like cattle. She refuses to marry the widower selected by her grandmother and marries Prakash Vijn in a court of law.

The cursed village girl in Jyoti becomes Jasmine a wife of modern man. This christening means much to her: “He

gave me a new name: Jasmine. He said: “You are small and sweet and heady. My Jasmine You’ll quicken the whole world with your perfume”.³they start dreaming about their life in America as it was Prakash’s wish to secure admission in some obscure American Institute of Technology. Jasmine, a wife of ambitious and bright young man, becomes a widow within two years as Prakash falls a prey to the Khalsa Lions the rebels demanding a separate land of Khalistan for Sikhs. The newly emerging Jasmine refuses to spend the rest of her life into widow’s weeds. It was Prakash’s ambition to go to the United States where his teacher Mr. Vadhera had migrated. In order to make this dream come true, Jasmine leaves for America on forged papers. For ‘*Jasmine*’ Samir Dayal asserts that Bharati Mukherjee’s fictional world is steeped in violence : “The functionality of violence in Mukherjee’s recent novel *Jasmine* is complex and ambivalent, as it is her earlier *The Tiger’s Daughter*, *Wife*, and even in her non-fictional *Days and Nights in Calcutta*. That complexity and that ambivalence, it may be argued, coincide with the contradiction of post-colonial subject formation.... The novel is an account of

An International Refereed & Indexed Journal in Arts, Commerce & Education

Jasmine's coming into her own as a woman, killing in order to live."⁴

Prakash Vijh, the first man in her life is an engineer with whom Jyoti, the Punjabi peasant girl falls in love and eventually marries. Besides Prakash, she comes close to Taylor and Bud Ripplemeyer both men belonging to America. The man-woman relationship projected in Jasmine's bond with each of these men speak of her gradual transformation from the rural Jyoti to a modern urbanized immigrant Jazzy, Jase and finally to Jane Ripplemeyer. Jasmine's post-marital connections are actually the phases of her self-evolution. For Jasmine the 'self' is more important and when she finds it getting dwindled under the pressure of the interpersonal relationship she simply breaks off without any sense of guilt. Jasmine is not satisfied merely remaining a widowed wife of Prakash after his brutal death by the terrorists' attack. She lets the flame of change, transplanted in her by Prakash ignite into a fully fledged quest for self.

Right from her childhood she longs for a special existence and had the conviction that she was special, beautiful and intelligent. She longs to flee from the

dirty, mean chores that women are expected to perform as a part of their duty. Her desire is to be "a lotus blooming in the middle of this filth..."⁵ Incidents like her combat with the rabid dog, assert her uniqueness of personality and strength of character. She waits for a suitable break to escape Hasnapur, where she saw no change of growth. When Prakash comes in contact with Jyoti's family; Jyoti and Prakash are naturally drawn towards each other because of common tastes and likings. Jyoti's family considers him a fit groom for her. Thus they get married. Theirs is a civil marriage and a traditional Hindu one. It signifies their first leap into the non-conventional world into which they enter. Both their name stand for 'light'. He offers her a while new concept of freedom and identity. Prakash proves to be the ideal husband any Indian woman would yearn for. It is he who actually transforms Jyoti into Jasmine, the sweet smelling flower. With Prakash Vijh Jasmine is brought to the threshold of heavenly happiness. He moulds and redefines her.

To fulfill the dream of Prakash she steps ahead in America in search of new horizons. The blissful marital relationship with Prakash has a positive impact on her.

An International Refereed & Indexed Journal in Arts, Commerce & Education

In a short period of nine years Jasmine is reborn several times during her encounter with various life struggles with each incarnation she is turned wiser. For instance, when she combats Half-Face : “For the first time in my life I understood what evil was about. It was about not being human. Half-Face was from an underworld of evil.”⁶ Bharati Mukherjee clearly indicates her recognition in the United States academic circles for her challenge to mainstream American literary cultural productions. She has well articulated this challenge in her essay called ‘Immigrant writing : Give Us Your Maximalists’ she claims that “both inside and outside America, American fiction, has become synonymous with the main stream, big advance, well prompted novel of story collection and that American fiction, clever, unmannered brittle has lost the power to transform the word’s imagination”⁷

According to Mukherjee the America offers the opportunity to dream big and to pull it off, actions that are not possible in a traditional society. Immigrants lead dangerous live because they cannot take shelter in traditional values and do not know the rules of the dominant culture. What Bharati

Mukherjee gives us, according to Sen Gupta, “is a universal vision bathed in the general sunshine of love and compassion which captures the essence of both Indian and American heritage.”⁸

The liberated Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase and Jane look like a possibility for every exuberant immigrant. But in this flurry of change and action is the conflict and confession of the whole cross-cultural business. The very essence of Jasmine resides in the concept of endless possibility. Her confrontation with death when Prakash, her husband, meets with violent assassination at the hands of terrorists, murder of the person who rapes her, the expecting of the child of a crippled man finally leaving him for Taylor that change and adaptability is the key to survival . We find Jasmine growing very confident in her powers to shape a new identity. Her decision to leave crippled Bud; walking out with Taylor shows her asserting herself. In America she knows nothing that lasts forever. Jasmine’s attempt to reshape destiny helps her to reconstruct her mission. . Her confession, “I am caught between the promise of Americas and the old world dutifulness”.⁹ it suggests that the great effort of will on her part so that she can

An International Refereed & Indexed Journal in Arts, Commerce & Education

resolve the dilemma and make the right choice. Jasmine creates her destiny first with love and then with courage and cunning. What changes her course is not the dignity and freedom available in her new land, but infinite opportunities to strike ahead. The motto of the novel is clear: “there are no harmless, compassionate ways to make oneself. We murder who we were, so we can rebirth ourselves in the image of dreams.”¹⁰

The traditional woman, Jyoti, now Jasmine, showed the signs of feminism in her. Her heroic encounter begins when a young and attractive Jasmine arrives alone on alien shores. The captain of the ship, an ugly fellow, Half-face takes her to a remote motel of Florida and raps her. Again Jasmine is seen in an apartment on Claremont Avenue with Taylor and Wylie Hayes as a Caretaker. Taylor gives her a new name, Jase'. She has experienced the best moments of stay in America with Taylor. She thinks that she has got home and she will be no longer be haunted by rootlessness. But she has to leave Taylor because she has seen Sukhwinder, the killer of her husband and runs for life to Iowa. In Iowa she meets with Bud. He not only gives her a new life but also a new name- Jane.

The Protagonist's transformations is an attempt to remake an existence which threatened to end even before it had begun. Her migration has brought great changes in her life. Ultimately she comes to know that she is an outsider in America. Mukherjee does not present stereo-typed characters. Though she belongs to the upper class, high caste, English-educated minority in India, her characters exude raw power and energy. They face the dilemma between the American Culture and the traditional Indian Culture. Mukherjee confesses some of her experiences in her essay on “American Dreamer”. ‘In this age of diaspora, one's biological identity may not be one's identity. Erosions and accretions come with the act of emigration. The experience of culting myself off from a biological homeland and selting in an adopted homeland that is not always welcoming to its dark complexioned citizens has tested me as a person and made me the writer I am today’.¹¹

Reference:

1. Fakrul ,Alam, *Bharati Mukherjee* (New York : Twayne Publishers),1996 p.45.
2. Mukherjee, Bharati.*Jasmine*.New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1989. P.3

An International Refereed & Indexed Journal in Arts, Commerce & Education

3. Ibid, p. *Book Review*, 1988 28. Aug.1988
4. Samir Dayal “Creating, preserving, destroying: Violence in Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*”.In Nelson Emmanuel S., ed. *Bharati Mukherjee: Critical perspectives*. p.65.
5. Bharati Mukherjee, *Jasmine* p.50.
6. Ibid, p.116
7. Bharati Mukherjee, “Immigrant Writing : Give us Your Maximalists”, *NewYork Times*
8. Sen Gupta, “The Broken Pitcher and the ThirdEye : Indian Sensibility in BharatiMukherjee’s *Jasmine*”, *Indianization of Each Language & Literature*. Ed. R.S. Pathak. (NewDelhi: Bahri Publication,1994) p.181.
9. Bharati Mukherjee, *Jasmine* p.240
10. Ibid. p.29
11. Bharati Mukherjee, *American Dreamer*