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Negotiating Indian Identity in a Globalized World: A Study of Bharati Mukherjee's Jasmine

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ABSTRACT: Bharati Mukherjee is a well-known Indian writer in the postcolonial era who has drawn attention to cultural issues and identity crises through her writings. This paper explores the themes of conciliation of Indian identity and the female spirit of liberation in her popular work *Jasmine*. It tries to examine the predicaments of Indian immigrants in America specifically focusing on the lives of female immigrants. The status of immigrants in the alien land, the cultural conflicts they face there, and the theme of alienation have been studied with a special reference to the female protagonist of Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine*. Migration is not only a physical relocation but also a psychological adaption to the new environment. It is a pursuit of their original identity in the new milieu rather than creating a new identity that can be adopted. This paper examines the adventurous life of *Jasmine*, the central character of the novel who migrates from her own country to the Western land, and how she finally wins over her destiny. Mukherjee has lucidly portrayed the real-life experiences of women immigrants in North America through the protagonist *Jasmine*. Identity crisis is the most discussed theme of contemporary literature and the major character of Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* is a typical representation of women immigrants and their challenges in the target land. In this novel, the writer tries to find a solution to the cross-cultural issues by encountering a series of adventurous engrossments that the protagonist passes through. This paper tries to shed light on the struggles and adversities of an Indian woman immigrant in the Western culture and her negotiation of Indian identity in this globalized erratic scenario.

KEYWORDS: Negotiation, Immigrants, Cultural conflicts, Identity crisis, Indianness

I. INTRODUCTION

Jasmine is the third novel of the renowned Indian writer Bharati Mukherjee, which has become popular due to the uniqueness of the title. The title denotes the central character of the novel who rises to a level unlike any ordinary woman being a daughter or a wife. The story revolves around the life of a young widow who moves from her homeland to America and her poignant experiences in the alien land. She faces an identity crisis at each stage of her journey and manages to evolve a new identity in the new place at each stage. Throughout her journey, she is able to manage with her own code of conduct that is created by herself in every different situation. The scenario of cross-cultural reality is dealt with by the author in this novel through a series of explorations that the protagonist of the novel passes through. The protagonist namely *Jasmine* and her crusade for transformation are dealt with in the novel in a symbolic way when she travels from India to California via many new places in her life such as Florida, New York, and Iowa. This crusade of the young widow is the symbol of displacement and her search for identity. The Indian identity is lost somewhere in the middle of her crusade and she tries to manage with some new identities that she herself created for her at different stages of the crusade. The distinct identity of an entire society is defined by the cultural values of the contemporary age that the society passes through. Every nation has its own homogeneous standards according to the people's myths and beliefs and their lifestyles that pass from generation to generation. Each individual is responsible for keeping the real identity ever in which he or she was born. When people migrate from one place to another due to personal reasons, they face identity crises and cultural conflicts. This can be reflected in different kinds of artistic works. Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* stands at the top line for its major themes such as dual identity and alienation etc. The novel is an excellent representation of Asian Americanization while the story advances between flashbacks of incompatible and conflicting descriptions of alien culture and settings.

The opening of the story lures the readers' attention as the village astrologer foretells the widowhood and exile of Jyoti, the protagonist of the novel. Jyoti belongs to a society where "the unfortunate wives fell into wells, they got run over by

trains, they burned to death heating milk on kerosene stoves” (Jasmine 41). Mukherjee examines the cultural ties, female oppression, and the female desire for liberation through an intellectual delineation of the American style of Indianness. The novel *Jasmine* tells the story of a poor girl born in Hasnapur, a small village in India, who faces several personal and cultural challenges in her life. In her childhood, though she was poor, she desired to get a good education as she was a bright student at her school. Despite her father’s protest, she could attain adequate education and only because of her good education, she is able to fight against her life challenges and survive. Jyoti was a young girl who was brought up in a traditional setting of a rural Indian location. Her childhood was characterized by adhering to rituals and customs that reflected the very constrained lifestyle of a woman in a normal Indian society. Her life was deeply influenced by the patriarchal norms of the society which decrees her real role in the rural society.

II. NEGOTIATION OF INDIANNESS

In her homeland, Jyoti’s identity is shaped by her family members including her grandparents who embody the cultural values of the rural Indian society. She was always stopped from stepping out of these values. Her limitations within her Indian rural life is described by Mukherjee in these lines,

“I was nothing, a village girl who was married at fourteen, widowed at seventeen, a village girl not going anywhere” (3).

However, her life encounters a huge turning point when she gets married to Prakash, which makes her find new opportunities beyond her limitations in the village. Prakash was a man who believed in self-motivation and individual development. He changes Jyoti’s name to Jasmine as a symbol of a new beginning. This change in her name marks the commencement of her identity transformation and represents the journey from a conventional character to someone who desires change with new experiences. Hence, Jyoti’s life shows the foundation of her identity- a life in the constraints of cultural expectations, still longing for liberty and transformation. Jyoti’s transformation from a village woman into a groundbreaking individual named Jasmine who is willing to embrace the change happened because of her husband Prakash who seeks the opportunity to break free from the limitations of the past and creates a new individuality for himself as well as Jyoti. Prakash is a person who likes to move to America, a place of liberty with more opportunities than in India that an ordinary man can acquire easily. In his opinion, America is a place where more social mobility is possible. With his modern attitude, he wants to attain the pinnacle of success and also encourages his wife to break the limitations imposed by the rural society of their home country. His belief in self-determination rather than fate influenced not only himself but also Jyoti as he wants her to be a part of the journey of transformation. Prakash’s attitude was not similar to the men of his age and his values followed those of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. Jyoti’s transformation into Jasmine would not have been possible without the guidance of her husband though she was born into a conventional society,

“Born to a society where the social expectations are a kind of submission, an expectation of ignorance” (204).

The life of Jyoti faces a new twist when her husband is killed in a bomb blast. He is not able to survive after the communal violence spread throughout the city. After his death, Jyoti develops an attitude of strong desire and determination. Her decision to go to America alone was not to live with her desires rather she wanted to perform “Sati” at the university where her husband had planned to do his higher studies. Rupel F. Timothy’s opinion regarding this is, “They accepted the inevitability of the situation ... thus discovering that they liked their natures each other ... this configuration of desire caused the conflicts and the threat for violence occluded” (Timothy 1995).

The horrible plan of committing “Sati” made Jasmine decide to travel to America yet she feels insecure about her future in America as it is unfamiliar to her,

“What country? What continent? We pass through wars, through players. I am hungry for news ... languages that I cannot read” (Jasmine 101).

Jasmine goes through many crucial situations in the beginning and these moments are the prime triggering factors for her successful transformation, and the formation of the spirit of existence.

“After the incident of rape by the trawler, Jasmine starts afresh. She meets Lilian Gordon ... wasn’t a missionary dispensing new visions ... lives of absolute ordinariness that we ached for” (131).

Jyoti who transformed into Jasmine started attaining self-confidence and decided to act like an American. With the help of Gordon, she shifted over to New York in search of a suitable job for her survival. Through her adventurous life journey, Mukherjee tries to explore American individualism and women’s liberation in the United States. Jasmine’s identity reforms a new birth in the new place and Mukherjee delineated her life as a metaphor for the ever-changing life

of a human being. Being an American, Jasmine begins experiencing liberty in her life and she gets connected with an Indian professor, Devinder Vadhera who helped her husband to get admission to the university. However, finding no enjoyment with Vadheras, she leaves them and gets connected with Kate who supports her to become more independent. Kate finds a new job for her and she is renamed again in that workplace which she likes a lot.

“Jase was a woman who lived for today, the woman Prakash wanted me to be... a woman who lived for the future” (176).

Gradually, Jasmine absorbs all the American fantasies and forgets about her mission, and at last, she loses her Indian identity completely. She accepts that,

“Jyoti was a sati goddess; she had burned herself in a trash-can-funeral pyre behind a motel in Florida. Jasmine started living her own life ... Jase went to movies and lived for today” (176).

Jasmine is known by different names in different places in America. Uprooted from her native land, she completely forgets her traditional values and loses her identity in the new land where she absorbs herself into a new system as an immigrant. According to Pushpa N. Parekh’s study,

“Jasmine tries to adhere to her traditional beliefs but her ... she starts to explore the new avenues that are opened to her in the new modern society” (Parekh 1998).

Bharati Mukherjee uses a unique feature of fluidity in her work *Jasmine* to explore the protagonist’s identity as an immigrant. The novel highlights the way how migrant people are forced to adapt to the new environment in the alien land even though they need to stick to their traditional cultural values. Jasmine’s journey from her rural village of Punjab in India to the modern land of America transforms her in response to various circumstances she faces in America. Jasmine adopts the name Jase when she starts her life in New York in association with the modern American named Taylor. When she moves to Iowa, her identity contrasts with the previous one and she becomes Jane in Iowa. Each transformation of Jyoti, a rural girl from Punjab represents a negotiation between her Indianness and the environment that changes her personality that integrates into modern American society. It is her fluidity that navigates the transformation from one version to another while she learns the autonomy and adaptability of a vibrant new society. Jasmine’s fluidity is a source of both resilience and chaos that allows her to survive yet leads to a transformation that never completely fits one system or the other. Her words prove how she justifies her flexible identity, “I changed identities as quickly as I could manage it, adapting to the circumstances as they came” (198).

Mukherjee tries to prove her notion of transformation through the protagonist of the novel. According to her, transformation is associated with the death of the former individuality. The protagonist throughout the story changes her name and the men associated with each name have a major role in the transformation.

“I have had a husband for each of the women I have been, Prakash for Jasmine, Taylor for Jase, Bud for Jane ... half face for Kali” (197).

The change in the name of the protagonist becomes a metaphor for the process of negotiation of identity, uprooting, and re-rooting. Jasmine is the representation of migrant women who encounter a journey of self-denial and self-realization. The writer tries to delineate the adversities of a young widow for her survival in a land with conventional customs. She, herself finds pleasure in the new world by transforming and adjusting to the new environment. She realizes the need for transformation while she tries to negotiate her identity.

“I changed because I wanted to. To bunker oneself inside nostalgia, to sheathe the heart in a bulletproof vest was to be a coward” (185).

Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* deals with the concept that the negotiation of one’s identity forms an amalgamation of strange experiences of the immigrant where the cultural identity is unsolidified and often unstable. The Indianness in Jasmine’s life is something she holds on to even in the modernity that she has adjusted to in the new land of America. Her teenage life in the rural village of Punjab embodies the conventional cultural values of the country and she was deeply ingrained in Indian customs in her initial stage.

“In the story of a widow’s life, death comes early” (6).

Though she starts her life with these rigid Indian beliefs and customs, American society and American relationships make her shed apart her Indianness to adapt to the new environment. Mukherjee explores the idea that each encounter in Jasmine’s life is influenced by the environment where she lives and how she negotiates her social and cultural

inheritance in that environment. However, Jasmine was willing to adapt to the new situations and to transform with a new identity though she faces internal conflicts and negotiates between her past and present experiences.

III. CONCLUSION

The perpetual process of migration from a society that gives more value to the conventional culture to a modern society is delineated through the life of Jasmine. Her life faces numerous challenges that are common to diasporic communities, while she travels through a space characterized by ambiguity and negotiation of identity in which nothing remains the same. She finds America as a paradigm of unity and cohesion, where her new residence creates a new identity for her. Bharati Mukherjee justifies her view that the relationship between the environment and the change of identity are parallel and at the same time they are interlinked each other. Jasmine is not able to negotiate a single identity as she changes her personality and name according to the place and people she is connected with. She is always ready to adapt to the situations at various levels of her life. Mukherjee portrays the sense of replacement throughout the novel whereas she tries to negotiate the Indian identity of Jasmine even when she comes to America with a strange purpose. Jasmine is given various names in the novel – Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase, and Jane but finally, her choice is to live with the fullest liberty as an independent woman. Her bold choice of life gives her a new definition of her inner self. When she realizes the transformation of her personality and the multiplicity of her consciousness, she, herself articulates her various identities throughout the story. The novel is an embodiment of the feelings of displacement and it proves the fact that this feeling can be overcome by the desire to settle down by concentrating on the present. Mukherjee illustrates the process of identity formation which is not that easy but rather a series of negotiations and revisions, through the afflictions of Jasmine in the new world. The life of Jasmine is a typical example of the struggles of the identity crisis of an immigrant. Through the story of Jasmine, Mukherjee confers a narrative transformation, empowerment, and endurance capturing the necessity of constantly redefining oneself. Jasmine tries to balance between the past and the present, between tradition and modernity since the beginning of the story and finally, she is not able to hold on to her Indianness or give up completely rather it becomes a part of her life that evolves in various places where she moves in America. She constantly negotiates her Indianness as she navigates the cultural landscape of the modern world in America. Bharati Mukherjee, in *Jasmine*, tries to illustrate the concept that one's identity is a fluid notion that varies in response to the living environment. The protagonist in the novel *Jasmine* continues her journey of seeking her identity with a strong desire to chase her dreams in the future that honours both the past and the present.

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