



EXPLORING THE NUANCED DYNAMICS OF IDENTITY AND ALIENATION: A STUDY OF BHARTI MUKHERJEE'S JASMINE

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Abstract

Bharti Mukherjee's narratives depict diasporic identities undergoing endless transformations, exploring the fluidity of identity ideologies; however, a closer reading reveals a contradiction as her protagonist's grapple with the challenge of letting go of their traditional and cultural selves. This paper aims at rediscovering the novel "Jasmine" which intricately weaves a narrative within the realms of postcolonial identity, subjugation and feminist perspectives. Centred around Jasmine, a young village girl from Punjab, the story unfolds as she embarks on an undocumented journey to the United States, a path where her destiny undergoes a profound "rewriting." It is a story of dislocation and relocation as the title character continually sheds lives to move into other roles, moving further westward while constantly fleeing pieces of her past. The narrative offers a nuanced exploration of identity and societal constructs.

Key words: Immigrant, Identity Crisis, Transformation, Womanhood, Colonial Oppression.

Bharati Mukherjee, Indian-born American novelist and short-story writer holds a unique position as both a commercially successful and a vexed commentator of Indian Cultural distinctiveness within the pluralistic context. Mukherjee's work features not only cultural clashes but undercurrents of violence. She is an expatriate writer who is honoured as the 'Grande dame' of diasporic Indian English literature. As Clark Blaise puts it - "Bharati has become one of America's best known novelists and short-story writers" (Blaise and Mukherjee, 1995). She has developed a reputation for exploring the meeting of the Third World and the First World from the perspective of an immigrant to the North America, Canada, and USA. Her writings cover a vast canvas of diaspora issues such as dislocation, fragmentation, nostalgia for home, marginalization, racial hatred, cultural and gender hatred, racial conflicts, identity crisis, generation differences, transformation of subjectivities, emergence of new patterns of life with cross-cultural interaction and disintegration of family units etc. Bharati Mukherjee chooses herself to be addressed as an American writer of Bengali-Indian origin.

In an interview to the Massachusetts Review, Mukherjee states: "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 1989:654).

In Bharti Mukherjee's novel "Jasmine," the protagonist's cross-cultural journey unfolds as Jyoti from Hasnapur transforms into Jasmine, navigating a series of name changes that reflect her acculturation in American society. Born in Punjab, her quest for self-independence in the U.S. leads her through various identities—Jase, Jane, and more. The narrative explores Jasmine's struggle with an identity crisis and cultural conflicts, emphasizing her realization that true independence is found in inner peace rather than conforming to predefined cultural labels.

Mukherjee portrays Jasmine as a bold and independent character, facing alienation due to her unorthodox stance in a conservative society.

Jasmine, portrayed as intelligent and self-willed, defies societal expectations in Hasanpur, Punjab. A confrontation with an astrologer leaves her with a star-shaped scar, seen as a curse but embraced as her third eye. Rejecting village norms, she opposes her grandmother's choice and marries Prakash Vij in court. Perceiving America as synonymous with whiteness, her perspective shifts after examining a brochure from the Florida International Institute of Technology, where Prakash studies. Concerns arise about American women's sexuality, reflecting her initial lack of understanding of cultural complexities. Despite being considered a sexual figure, Jasmine remains a respectful wife, undergoing identity shifts that bridge the gap between Indian tradition and her evolving self. Jasmine's decision to immigrate to America after her husband's death reflects a profound transformation in her character. The commitment to fulfil her husband's dream signifies a shift from her traditional roots, illustrating how migration played a pivotal role in shaping her identity and purpose. She says, "Prakash had taken Jyoti and created Jasmine, and Jasmine would complete the mission of Prakash" (Jasmine 97). The quote suggests a continuity between her past and present, emphasizing the impact of her husband's influence on her evolving sense of self.

She decides to go to America to commit *sati*, burning herself along with her husband's suit at the site where he would have gone to the university. But fate has a few surprises in store for Jasmine. She travels by plane to Amsterdam and starts acknowledging her uprooted identity and her minority status in the big airport lounges. Transmigration begins:

We are the outcasts and deportees, strange pilgrims visiting outlandish shrines, landing at the end of tarmacs, ferried in old army trucks where we are roughly handled and taken to roped-off corners of waiting rooms where surly, barely wakened customs guards await their bribe. We are dressed in shreds of national costumes, out of season, the wilted plumage of intercontinental vagabondage. We ask only one thing: to be allowed to land; to pass through; to continue. (Jasmine 101)

The captain of the trawler, Half-face takes her to the local motel and rapes her who had "lost an eye and ear and most of his in a paddy field in Vietnam" (Jasmine 104). Jasmine takes revenge by murdering Half-Face. As she wanders in Florida and meets Lilian Gordan who assists undocumented female immigrants. She takes help from the daughter of Lilian Gordan and with the help of Lillian's daughter, Jasmine rescues a job as a nanny for Taylor and Wylie Hayes' daughter Duff. Jasmine gets the new name "Jane" by Taylor. This is the step of Jasmine's life which shows remarkable transformation in herself. She gets better treatment as a professional not as a servant. Jasmine continues to be nanny of Duff and comes to know about the interest of Taylor in her. But she recognizes a hot dog vendor Sukhwinder who eloped in terrorist attack. Being panicked for herself, she along with Taylor and Duff run away to Iowa.

Jasmine's journey unfolds with a new identity and venture, navigating the complexities of love and guilt. Despite the burden of Prakash's death and frustrations in Iowa, she embraces transformation, becoming Jane by Bud's side. Amidst a love-hate relationship with Karen, Du, Bud's adopted son, encourages her to follow her heart. Postcards from Taylor symbolize distant love until his arrival with Duff. Facing the reality of her feelings, Jasmine decides to leave Bud for a life with Taylor, rejecting astrological forecasts and embracing her own destiny. She takes a leap into the future, leaving behind the past without turning back. Jasmine's journey, vividly depicted in the novel, showcases the challenges faced by highly independent and self-opinionated women in a society resistant to such attributes. Despite societal norms, she finds a taste of freedom through educational opportunities, facing risks to attain autonomy. Moving to America with a forged passport, she experiences both gloomy and bright phases, yet remains undeterred, progressing with courage and viewing her life as a journey rather than conforming to societal constraints on women.

The novel Jasmine stands out in Diasporic literature, portraying the culturally diverse experiences of its protagonist. It sheds light on the West's perception of India's social strata, traditionally considered inferior, uneducated, unethical, and backward. Jasmine's quest for identity is primarily internal, as she adopts various roles—from a liberated Indian wife to a member of the seemingly idyllic Hayes family and a modern woman with a bank job and an adopted child with Bud. The narrative reflects her exploration of different facets of womanhood in diverse contexts.

According to Mukherjee 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" (Sen Gupta 1994). 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 and emergence out of subjugation. 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." (Jasmine 240). It suggests that the great effort of will on her part so that she can resolve the dilemma and make the right choice. Jasmine creates her destiny first with love and then with courage and determination. 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" (Jasmine 29).

Mukherjee operates the transformation of Jasmine's identity according to two varied discourses, the first relative to colonial oppression, and the second relative to patriarchal oppression. Jasmine uses the various tools provided by her male partners, adapts her identity to the role she is expected to fulfil, then destroys the master's house, moves on, and proceeds with her self-realization by acquiring new master's tools:

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 (Jasmine 197).

It sounds like Jasmine's journey in the novel involves a complex exploration of identity and the impact of cultural fusion on her sense of self. The interplay between Western ideas and traditional beliefs, coupled with the legacy of the British Raj, adds layers to her characters development. The struggle against being perceived as "Otherness" appears to be a central theme, with Mukherjee's women eventually finding their distinctive voices amidst the clash of cultures. Jasmine's introspective question, "Who I am" (Jasmine 197) and Karim's metaphorical reference to her as "tornado", suggest a continual struggle with identity, alienation and adaptability. The inquiry into the number of shapes and selves she possesses reflects the complexities of living as an expatriate in America. She defies the stereotype of weakness and emerges as a symbol of strength. Bharati Mukherjee skillfully portrays her as a survivor, embodying the struggles of immigrants from third-world countries adapting to a culturally different environment. Jasmine, a resilient character, challenges and rejects patriarchal norms, standing as an epitome of a modern and independent woman. Throughout the narrative, she actively constructs a new world, embracing fresh ideas, values, opinions, and beliefs, continuously distancing herself from her past. Her journey becomes a dynamic process of establishing a new cultural identity through the integration of evolving desires. The final positive acceptance indicates a resilient adaptation to the challenges she faced, highlighting the protagonist's ability to boldly confront adversity and eventually find a sense of belonging in her adopted homeland.

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