



A Journey of Self- Realisation: Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

Koj Annu

Assistant Professor

Government College Yachuli

Abstract:

Multiculturalism and globalization as emerged as the new world order in the post-modern age where identities are multiplied and reduced ironically. Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989) narrates the journey of a widowed woman from a small village in Punjab, India to America. It is the story of search for one's true identity and transformation in the process of attaining it. This paper aims to study the traumatic experiences of an immigrant who renounces her old self and embraces the new life in a foreign land. Racial discrimination, alienation, dual identity and sexual abuse do not deter her indomitable spirit to reconstruct her life after her great ordeal.

Introduction

Bharati Mukherjee explores the struggles of immigrants living in America and Canada. Because of her numerous experiences she has had throughout life, she has been described as a writer who has lived through several phases of life. The main theme discussed in majority of her works is based on the condition of Asian immigrants in North America, particular attention has been given to the changes taking place in South Asian women in a new world. The notion of expatriate and immigrant is differentiated among other diasporic writers when it comes to Bharati Mukherjee. She considers herself as an immigrant and not an exiled. The word expatriate lays its emphasis on the cultural and traditional mores left behind and she dwells on the past about her country. Whereas immigration celebrates its presence in the new country and emphasis is laid on the cultural life. Mukherjee went through phases of transition in her immigration. She considered herself an exile in Canada. Where there was a constant longing of one's homeland. She struggled to maintain her twin identity. After she left Canada, she found solace in America as her home. This reflected in her character Jasmine. She is not an exiled but a first generation immigrant who has accepted her fate in America and she tries

enthusiastically despite all the hardships she goes through to assimilate. Unlike an expatriate who longs for the past and his country, Jasmine absorbs the new surrounding and longs to cut off any connection with India.

Jasmine (1989) is the story of an immigrant from a third world country, dredging her way from one disaster to another; born in a small village Hasnapur in the state of Punjab, India. Unlike a typical village girl, Jasmine harbours a desire for independence and respect for success. This novel is said to be autobiographical as she captures the struggle of Jasmine as an immigrant who struggle for her existence from place to place, it can be equated with her experience as a double expatriate from India to Canada and then to America. The story unravels the odyssey made by jasmine from Punjab to California via Florida, New York and Iowa. Hers is a quest of a rootless person stimulated with a depressing sense of isolation. Time and space transforms a person's identity. Jasmine's transformation began from Punjab till finally California, from Jyoti to Jasmine, Jas and Jane. At every step of her life Jasmine revolted against her fate which led her to a foreign country with forged papers, widowed and alone. She does not get mowed down by the unfaithful events that take place but emerge as a survivor. She becomes the owner of her change in destiny and explores infinite possibilities. There is a transition in Bharati Mukherjee's works. In her earlier works she reflects the harsh realities about assimilation in the first generation expatriates. With her acceptance of her immigration state in America she mellowed down. The characters in her later novels show an acceptance of their fate. They emerge as tough survivors from the tragedies. Likewise Jasmine is a fighter and survives all the struggles that she goes through in the foreign land. Her stare of an immigrant does not hinder her from making a niche for herself. Although her racial features is the mark of her difference but she takes less time than the other first generation expatriates in dissolving her culture and identity with the West.

The main reason behind Jasmine's immigration roots from the concept of brain-drain that was taking place during the post-colonial phase. Her husband's ambitious dreams to get an engineering degree from some obscure American Institute of Technology and have a better life in the city. The option of better education and job opportunities created apull from the developed nations among the unemployed population, and also the unavailability of job prospects that left frustrated. Prakash had big dreams to have a good life but he became a victim of the Khalsa Lions rebels and died on the very eve of his departure, leaving Jasmine alone. As a faithful wife Jasmine goes to America to fulfill the rituals of 'Sati', self immolating with her husband's suit in the campus of the engineering school. Being born in a feudal village in Punjab, she could not dream bigger than just the dream of moving out of the village. But her fate had greater plans for her. Her first encounter with America is her rape. The captain of the ship, Half-Face figures out that she is on her own, travelling to a foreign land for the first time. He rapes her in the ship. She chooses to live for herself and destroys the evil that inflicts so much pain and shame upon her. Upon reaching land Jasmine murders Half-Face and burns all of Prakash's things in a barrel behind the motel and sets off at night. It is symbolic of her performing 'Sati' and burning her old self in the fire to acquire a new life. She learns the American ways with the help of a Quaker lady who gives her

shelter until fixing her with a job as caregiver. Jasmine does not oppose transformation that comes her way instead she cooperates. During her stay at Flushing as the Punjabi ghetto in Queens with the Vadheras she realizes she wants to cut herself off from anything that's Indian. The Indian people including the Vadheras do not want to come out of the four walls of the artificially maintained Indianness in their small locality.

Her life is cocooned with the layers of an imposed Indian widow who should give up all pleasures of life. The freedom loving Jasmine is restrained by the boundaries of culture and identity. The Punjabi dwelling gives out the scenario of the first generation immigrants in America. The Punjabi community holds on to their Indianness with all their might and the locality has kept the Indian culture intact. Devinder Vandhera turns out to be a hair sorter rather than a professor, as her family was told in India. The life of an immigrant circles around the harsh reality of the immigrant living off ill paid jobs and the perpetual pursuit for a better life. Jasmine is sandwiched between this reality and her ambitious attitude towards life. She encounters another condition of illegal immigrants when she meets the taxi driver from Kabul who practiced as a doctor before he came to New York. Like other immigrants Jasmine oscillates between the desires to hold on to her past and also to forget it. She shuttles between her Americanization and the retention of her Indian identity. Jasmine acknowledges the Western idea of Work-Culture, the sense of respect given to menial workers. In a way she becomes more Americanized during her stay with Hayeses. She eagerly returns their love and support. She works part-time teaching Punjabi to University students and answering calls. She absorbs the American world forgetting her past, with great zeal gains a personality and becomes a confident individual. With the change of place and people around her Jasmine undergoes changes too. Jasmine's every step is her calculated step to Americanization and with each development there is a significant change in her personality. Her movement from Queens to Florida to Manhattan to Iowa and finally to California marks her transformation from Jasmine to Jazzy to Jase to Jane. Her escape from each place is not her cowardice but her zeal for running after life. This transition is a slow but steady immersion into the mainstream American culture. Duff, the adopted son becomes her support system as a fellow expatriate. They have struggled and come out as survivors. At the end of the novel when she decides to leave for California, Jasmine does not leave the man but the place for a new place and a new life. Throughout the three years in Iowa she had been like a faithful Indian wife to Duff Ripplemeyer. She performed all the duties as a wife and submitted herself to him but when she walks out with Taylor she is a different woman. With Bud her identity was like the exotic with Asian origin. Jasmine goes through isolation and loss of self as she could not share her past with Bud that resulted in a suffocating feeling and frustration. Duff made her feel like an outsider.

No matter what her experience are in blending with the American culture Jasmine comes in terms with her Indian roots in various instances. The fact that Duff was adopted perplexes her and her instinctive Indian self is disgusted with the thought of raising a child that one is not blood-related with. She does not understand Wylie's decision to leave Taylor. This testifies the fact that she does not comprehend the American ways, that she is a poor immigrant. She belongs to the third world where experiences are painful which contradicts the American

experience. Though she talks and dresses like an American she only trusts Asian doctors and Asian professionals. Outwardly Jasmine has adapted to the American culture and with every experience she instantly adds it to her character. But there is the tenacious Indianness that still lingers unconsciously in her personality. Being an immigrant was a liberating experience for Jasmine. Unlike other migrants who struggle with various common issues like rootlessness, alienation, racial discriminations and the feeling of the exiled, she undergoes a different change. Her escape from India to a different world which gave her a new life was accepted with no qualms though in the process she faced many hardships, but she was happy to acquire the American life. According to research the first generation migrants who are born in other countries than the ones they live are likely to migrate again permanently whether back to their homes or head to another country more than the native residents. This attitude of the first generation expatriates speaks something about them; they are willing to take risks and would like to migrate again and not choose to go back to their homelands.

The Gandhu café owners, Jasmine, Vadheras and few other immigrants, though they come under the umbrella of immigrants they all undergo different experiences as immigrants. They share the struggle in finding a place in the foreign land but their coping mechanism differs. The confrontation with immigration is partly based on the type of person they are and partly the situation they are out under. The Gandhi café in New York is the symbol of faithfulness to one's cultural identity. Though the owners acknowledge the foreign customer but they sneer at them behind their backs. The café is also the place where illegal immigrants are exploited. Their status of being illegal residents is taken advantage of. Despite the travailed conditions of the immigrants there is a constant flow of immigrants from all sections of the society coming from the third world who are pursuing the dream of making a life in the melting pot of America in New York. The ordeal of immigrants can be seen with a different angle in *Jasmine*. The protagonist Jasmine is the picture of an immigrant who is unlike other expatriates. She understands her situation and though she failed dreams with her husband cannot be fulfilled she gives a shot at life. In her, we see the construction of a character who discerns the existence in the foreign land can be possible through multiplicity of identity. Diasporic existence is not a singular rather it is based on multiplicity of living style. It becomes an issue sometimes as different consciousness of multiple identities contradicts each other. One has to surpass the controversy of the dual layer of identities that hovers in the conscience of an immigrant. Jasmine balances her identities and comes to terms with her status as an immigrant. Although Jasmine successfully accommodates herself in the foreign land with new morals and values her Indian instinct does not leave her. The accommodation of the western culture is legit in expatriates but the sensibility and the sentiments remains attached to one's origin counters the western culture. In *Jasmine* we see that she finds out the adoption of Duff by Hayeses couple, it was beyond her sensibility to do something like that and witnessing an adoption was a shock for her. Therefore, we can figure out the backward village conscience that Jasmine held regardless of the life changing experiences that she went through.

The question always remains that the effort to retain ones' own cultural identity is of paramount importance or the amalgamation with the host culture a better option. The lives of the first generation expatriates are under the pressure of the dual identities they carry along. They grapple with the loss and gain of different cultures and dwindle with their segregated consciousness. Their origin and past life cannot be erased so the feeling of rootlessness and dislocation lingers continuously.

Work Cited:

- Abrams, M.H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms and Literary Theories*. New Delhi, Harcourt India Private Limited, 2000.
- Ashcroft, Bill. Et al. *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. London, Routledge, 2006.
- Brah, Avtar. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. Oxford: Routledge, 1996.
- Gandhi, Leela. *Post-Colonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*. Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1998
- Ganeshan, Indira. *The Journey*. New York, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1990.
- Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Namesake*. New York, First Mariner Books, 2003.
- Narula, Devika Khanna. *South Asian Diaspora*. New Delhi, Creative Books, 2005.
- Nityanandam, Indira. Jhumpa Lahiri *The Tale of Diasporas*. New Delhi, Creating Books, 2005
- Parameshwaran, Uma. *Writing The Diaspora: Essays on Culture and Identity*. Jaipur, Rawat Publications, 2007.
- Pandey, Abha, Adesh Pal and Tapas Chakrabarti. *Indian Diasporic Literature*. New Delhi, 2008.
- Raina, M. L. "Home Homelessness and the Artifice of Memory." *Contemporary Diaspora Literature: Writing History, Culture, Self*. Ed. Manjit Inder Singh. New Delhi, Pencraft International, 2007.
- Rushdie, S. *Imaginary Homelands*. London: Granta Books, 1991
- Sharma, A. Kavita. *Interpreting Indian Diasporic Experience*. New Delhi, Creative Books, 2008.