

A quest for real identity in Jasmine

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Abstract

The Predicament of the fate of the females in cross cultural spaces has been a major component of the literature produced by writers, surviving in the conflicting pulls of "home" and "homelessness", passing through the voyage of migration to assimilation.

Bharti Mukherjee fictional world is an account of women experiences in different cultural spaces, seeking a common conclusion that the realization of being a women and the unconditional surrender of a women to the tributes of femininity are the integral part of feminine psyche. She exposes women's silence resistance, oppression against the order of patriarchy, horror of rape, the phobia of pregnancy the craving for male companionship, as the experiences common both to native heritage and the cultural surrounding of the country of their migration.

Keywords: jasmine, predicament, fate, cultural spaces

Introduction

Bharti Mukherjee explores and highlight the attitudes of women. She presents women's quest for identity, real life conflicts, marital tensions, the lack of communication between people, especially husband and wife. All this results in unhappiness and presents human fulfillments. B.M.U. advocates women's straggle for freedom and self-realization in the fiction. Her heroines always try to realize their selfhood, happiness and fight against injustice. In fact fighting against injustice is a recurrent idea in Mukherjee's novels. The women all over the world have remained under the male force. They have to face the sense of insecurity, the sexual harassment and violence which are similar in the advanced as well as in the developing countries.

In the male dominated society a women has been the victim of male hypocrisy, violence and exploitation since the earliest times. Indian woman is the victim of the husband's subtle and inhuman formed exploitation a sort of beating where "flood could not freely narrate or openly discuss these experiences.

In the postmodern world, where identities are both reduced and multiplied ironically, concepts such as globalization and multiculturalism have emerged to define the world order. While the world is shrinking into a global village where differences meet into similarities, cultures and groups outside the dominant ideology find out ways to put forward their diversity on the other had so much confusing on the topic brings identity crisis forth which can be summarized as a difficulty of finding a fixed place for oneself.

Identity has personal and social dimension both of which has the potential of becoming more and more complex and wealthy thanks to the interactive relationships of one Post Modern world. One the other hand the trend of globalization, which is shaped by the dominant powers, creates a standard identity within which none of the differences are welcome.

Bharti Mukherjee deals with the themes related to Indian women particularly the problem of cross cultural arises and

ultimate search for identity. She also depicts the cultural clash between the East and West. In the novel Jasmine Bharti Mukherjee take up the theme of search for identity. She writes how the female protagonist tries to take the problem of loss of culture and endeavors to assume a new identity in the U.S. The protagonist Jasmine leaves her country to fulfill her wishes. On reaching the U.S., she being to search for self-independence. She struggles hard to achieve it and at last she realizes that self-independence is not to be an Indian or American but to be at peace with herself.

Sumita Roy aptly remarks that "Consequently, to read Bharti Mukherjee's Jasmine novel is in fact, saga of suffering or immigrant women in an alien culture, yet, it is journey towards the fulfillment of, wishes what she cherished in her heart."

Bharti Mukherjee women characters Jyoti, Jasmine, Jane, Jase. The protagonist of the novel. She is called different names throughout her forming from India to low, each name signifying pivotal moments in the life.

In the novel Jasmine, the protagonist Jasmine appears as an innocent village girl, unaware of the traditional ways of the world but is sufficiently conscious of her own desires and choices. Her life begins in a small village of Hasnapur, Punjab, and ends in Iowa and in this odyssey, she passes through various geographical locations and the flux of cultural identities and in this transition, she justifies herself in each and every role and sustains her basic identity of being an Indian women. In defence of Jasmine's character, Bharati Mukherjee presents a confessional note:

The kinds of women I write about.....are those who are adaptable we've, all be raised to please, been trained to be adaptable as wives and that adoptability is working to women's advantage when we came over as immigrant. (Conned *et al.*, 19)

Different locations assign her different roles-wife, daughter, caretaker, beloved and competent professional but at every stage she is conscious to achieve an identity of her own,

along with her consciousness of her being an Indian women. The synthesis of cultural awareness, feminist sensibility and the assertion of individuality add a new dimension to the feminist consciousness scattered in the novels of Bharati Mukherjee. She is neither a "rebel" as it has been criticised by Bharati Mukherjee herself, nor an oppressed subject but a women with her independent vision, sharing the best both of native tradition and the occult of hi-tech of the West. It is said:

Jasmine's liner monologues and silent reflections capture her deliberations on cultural difference and on immigrant women's emotional adherence to her traditional beliefs while intellectually exploring the new avenues opened to her by the modern value system.

Jasmine was born and brought up in a traditional family "of Punjab, where women were conditioned to maintain the perpetual silence against the order of patriarchy where the only purpose of girl's life was to find out "cut-rate" husbands. The inferiority groups, her psyche born out of two complexes-her existence as a woman and her subaltern status for being a "village girl". She makes a candid confession, "that big-city men prefer us village girls because we are brought up to be caring and have no minds of our own. Village girls are like cattle, whichever way you lead them, that is the way they will go" (39). The rooted images of subjugated status are the manifestation of the disgust for the gender bias existing at the core of India cultural colonialism. Her ability to write the "Best English Composition" was of no worth in India family. Her grandmother finally located a possible groom, a widower with three children to take her off. Jasmine in spite of her traditional upbringing nourishes her own dreams of life. She expresses her first independent thinking, "I want to be a doctor and set up my own clinic in a big town" (45) but her high ambitions were treated only as her madness. "The girl is mad. Her mother is mad. The whole country is mad. Kali-yuga has already come" (45). After the death of her father, she was stupefied, looking at the humiliation of her mother who tried to throw herself on the funeral pyre, shaved her head and wrapped her body in coarse cloth.

Jasmine enters new dimensions of relationships and cultural diversities with a specific set of mind inherited from her conventional family. She comes in contact with Prakash, a confident professional who has a dynamic vision of life. The confidence and dynamism, stirred by Prakash, brings a better acceptance of life but it was of no avail to her to exempt her from the guilt of being a girl for "no dowry and no guests". In the company of Prakash, all the time she was in grip of the fear of 'exile' and 'widowhood'. The cultural constraints that constitute her psyche let her not to dissolve her identity in the unconventional progressive ways of Prakash. He wanted her to call him by his first name but Jasmine's cultural code does not promote her to do so. The endeavors of Prakash to modify her life according to his own fantasies, neglecting her cultural roots, was another mode of conquest of male domination, affording no scope to express herself. His ultimate decision to change her name from 'Jyoti' to 'Jasmine', was the first challenge to her self-respect and self-identity. Prakash appreciates her by saying, "You are small and sect and heady" but remains ignorant of the terrible flow of emotions going on the confession: "he wanted to break down the Jyoti, I'd been in Hasanpur and make me a kind of city woman. To break of the past, he gave me a new name: Jasmine" (70). In Jasmine's case, the

truth is to be admitted that even before entering the trans-cultural spaces and encountering the trauma of immigration, her integrated psyche was shattered, "Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttled between -identities" (70). Prakash not only controls her external life but also the private matters related with the experiences of being a female. She has a longing to conceive a child but the decision regarding the pregnancy was not her choice but the prerogative of Prakash. The 'rebel' starts taking place within her innerself. How resentment is evident in her confession, "you think hi-tech solves every problem. What does hi-tech say about a woman's need to be a mother/" (70) Jasmine clamors for the love and company of Prakash but buried her desires in perpetual silence. "I missed him, but I didn't feel abandoned" (72). In both the extremes of the ideologies of Prakash, she finds herself lost in the web of illusions. She recalls the words of her mother who used to say that a husband has layers like an onion. Prakash is excited on the idea of a 'real-life', the fantasy of migration to America, a land of hi-tech culture. His dreams do not correspond with the choices of Jasmine. He contemptuously snubs Jasmine, "Caring only about pregnancies". All the time Prakash imposes his own authority, "Don't crawl back to Hasanpur and Feudalism. That Jyoti is dead" (87). Such an helplessness of Jasmine is the manifestation of the persistent conflict within the mind of a woman-the conflict of her own individuality and the calls of femininity. In a sudden attack of Khalsa Lion, Prakash is killed and Jasmine is left lonely, desolate and an unfortunate widow. In her associations with Prakash, Jasmine represents genuine human emotions. In her conflict, there is a combination of traditional mother who has an inherent urge to sustain her womanhood but is a 'rebel' against the conventions that restrain the realization of the individuality of women.

Consequently, Jasmine's journey, from India to America, stands for her moving away from the pressures of her homeland. Each time she 'moves towards the west which is the symbol for her increasing American identity. As Yadav points:

"Jyoti, Jasmine, Jane, Jase, each of her different identities, took place in a different space, i.e. India, Florida, and New York, Iowa. Such a character who embraces wanderings is attempting to destroy traditional ways of conceiving female identity. She is marginalized by both gender and race and changes herself according to her surroundings which are characterized by an ever-changing uncertainty just as Jasmine herself is. Her continuous movement and vagueness in which nothing was rooted anymore and everything was in motion, makes her a diasporic individual" (2011:4).

During her journey, she is the object of male domination starting within her family and going on with the men in her life. She is exposed to violence, rape, desire and lust all by men. Every time she runs away, she comes across with another man to control her life. Thus, she is unable to break the circle that prevents her finding her own identity totally. Finally, she chooses Taylor instead of Bud, which is the necessary step to break the circle. She describes her feelings towards Taylor in these words:

"The love I felt for Taylor that first day had nothing to do with sex. I fell in love with his world, its ease, its careless confidence and graceful self-absorption. I wanted to become the person they thought they saw: humorous, intelligent, refined, and affectionate. Not illegal, not murderer, not widowed, raped, destitute, Fear ful." (Mukherjee, 1991:151)

Jasmine claims "not choosing between men" but between "the promise of America and old-world-dutifulness" (Mukherjee, 1991: 213-214). However, "the juxtaposition of "the promise of America" and "old-world dutifulness" immediately places the west on the side of excitement and change, and betrays India's reality to be an "older," more stable one. In this "older" culture, duty and honour are valued but there are no promises held out to the individual, while America privileges individual desires over domestic and communal obligations" (Aneja, 1993:78).

Although she creates a new identity for herself not because Taylor wants this time but because she wants it herself, her choice of leaving the father of her unborn child is far from her devoted love once for Prakash which proves her liberated, American identity. In contrast to her innocence with Prakash, she finally has self-awareness through her experiences with men in America. She discovers her various identities by saying: "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." (Mukherjee, 1991: 175). As Hoppe suggests "Jasmine's postcolonial, ethnic characters are carving out new spaces for themselves from among a constellation of available cultural narratives, never remaining bound by any one, and always fluidly negotiating the boundaries of their past, present, and futures" (1999:154) to finally reach the unity under the head title of being American which brings her conformity.

To sum up, Jasmine starts her journey as an Indian girl surrounded by tradition. She experiences both happiness and grief in every step she takes towards her final situation. She fights against not only the male dominance both in India and in the States but also the hostility between her Eastern and Western characteristics with the hope of total freedom and unity in herself. Though she eventually seems to have whole control over her life, she is too much far away from where she started and what she desired. In other words, in order to survive as a woman from a third world country under the pressure of the male-centred Western culture, Jasmine sacrifices a lot proving the power of globalization mentioned at the beginning. The dominant values of the global world force Jasmine to conciliate all the elements of her multicultural identity. However, this conciliation does not mean the celebration of the wealth of her identity but unfortunately it is the victory of globalization which pushes her into a standard identity. The only but the most significant promise of globalization for Jasmine is its conformity which means she can have a place on the world as an American rather than being an outsider in every condition, which is too tiring as her story proves.

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