

A Study Of Identity Pursual In Bharati Mukerjee's Novel: Jasmine

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Abstract:

The paper entitled 'A study of Identity pursual in Bharti Mukherjee's novel- Jasmine. The novel is a saga of a young girl Jyoti hailing all the way from Hasnapur,(Punjab) to USA giving priority to her dead husband Prakash's desire to visit the country. The atrocities faced by her widowed mother and she herself being a widow, prompts her to flee her native place in search of an emancipated life. To her surprise, this emigration makes her confront different types of people who are responsible for metamorphosis of her identity. Survival in a new country demands assimilation, adaption and adjustment; she acculturates herself with identities which come across while she is in this new dominion.

Mukerjee exhibits superb skill and psychologically makes an analysis of empowered Jasmine with the cultural background of India as well as US. Just like a flower scatters its fragrance in the atmosphere and gets mingled in it, in the similar way, Jasmine with her scents of adaption and adjustments assimilates and acculturates herself in the new environment. In this expedition nostalgia and homesickness contribute to the autobiographical portrayal of the character which is noteworthy.

The paper tries to gauge diasporic elements- empowerment, nostalgia and establishment of one in a new world and the way they work to bring out the pattern of 'Order-Disorder-Order'

Keywords: metamorphosis, nostalgia, assimilation.emancipation, Order-diorder-Order.

"Your power to choose your direction of your life allows you to reinvent yourself, to change your future, and to powerfully influence the rest of creation." —

Stephen Covey

There is no literature of any language left in the world which remains untouched by the theory of Diaspora. Expatriate or Diasporic Literature is the synonym of this literature. If a conceptual analysis is made then all the literary works authored by writers outside their native country can

be brought under this genre of writing, but these literary pieces are highly associated with scent of native culture and background. The literature displays alienation, displacement existential rootlessness, nostalgia and quest for identity owing to migration and expatriation. The reason for migration can be financial, social; political commercial, missionary, employment or livelihood, expatriation. Writers also concentrate on issues on experiences related to assimilation and dissimilation of cultures. Uma Parameswaran has very well defined it as follows:

[...] first is one of nostalgia for the homeland left behind mingled with fear in a strange land. The second is a phase in which one is busy adjusting to the new environment that there is little creative output. The third phase is the shaping of diaspora existence by involving themselves ethno cultural issues. The fourth is when they have arrived and start participating in the larger world of politics and national issues. (Parmeswaran, 165)

Bharati Mukherjee who is known for 1989 novel *Jasmine*, has to her credit eight novels, four short story collections, three works of nonfiction and a memoir (co-written with her husband). The novel, *Jasmine*, is a saga of an impoverished woman influenced by postcolonial and post partition situation of the country who migrates to America only to find conflict and hardship with the intention of redefining herself. It is not that she is not confronted by any adverse situations while going about reinventing but with devout positive attitude the protagonist does things that feel risky, uncomfortable, and occasionally bad. In her fiction, Mukherjee explores the experience and dilemmas of being an immigrant and the culture shock and alienation it entails.

The present paper entitled ‘A study of pursuit of identity in Bharati Mukherjee’s novel- *Jasmine*’ details about how meticulously the protagonist *Jasmine* escapes from traditional and conventional India to US and imbibes one role after another in pursuit of finding solace and contentment in her marooned and grim life. She feels the need to discover herself to make her every day life to be wonderful, fascinating, interesting, and creative and fulfilled, as it is aptly averred by Eckhart Tolle

[...] your sense of self, your identity, is derived from your thinking mind - in other words, what your mind tells you about yourself: the storyline of you, the memories, the expectations, all the thoughts that go through your head continuously and the emotions that reflect those thoughts. All those things make up your sense of self.

Bharati Mukherjee migrated from Calcutta now known as Kolkatta(India) to Canada then to USA. The novelist’s life was also a bundle of sweet and sour experiences of being an immigrant. Adopting a non linear mode of narration and being gifted with the sensibility of an immigrant, the writer does justice to the character of widowed *Jasmine* who dreams of empowerment in the American dominion. In this pursuit of her rediscovery she assimilates a host of names (*Jyoti*, *Jasmine*, *Jane* and *Jazz*) and does justice to each one of them. The novel opens in Iowa where the protagonist resides with *Riplemeyers* and *Du*, the adopted son of *Bud*. *Du* is basically from Vietnam who stands as a foil to her. The boy maintains his affinity to what is originally Vietnamese. It is the mother *Riplemeyer* who helps her secure a job in her son *Bud*’s bank as a teller girl. While her stay with the *Riplemeyers* she is addressed by the name-*Jane*. To here ill fate ,*Bud* becomes crippled owing to bomb blast and *Jane* takes up the responsibility of taking

care of the physically challenged Bud; becomes his live in companion and becomes pregnant without getting into marital contract. He continuously insists her for courtship before the birth of the baby, which is not taken seriously by her. Jasmine always remembers the astrologer's prophecy and holds herself responsible for the sad demise of Prakash and Bud's enfeeblement and compares herself to a tornado blowing in their lives. It is at this juncture that she resorts to flashback of her life in Hasnpur in Haryana (India) US and Canada and thread by thread unweaves the saga of her adventurous journey of empowerment She recollects the symbolic incident of her killing of a mad dog which marks the heralding of her liberation and emancipation She is reluctant to accept the prophecy of an astrologer: 'I don't believe you.' (Mukerjee.3), who foretells her widowhood and exile which forms the rudimentary thread of the story of her destined journey from India to USA, in search of a better life and opportunities.

After eighteen years of partition Jyoti the protagonist of the novel is born and the trauma of partition is very well put forth by her family members as they nostalgically remember:

[...] where we had lived for centuries and flinging us to a village of flaky mud huts[...]Life shouldn't have turned out the way. I've never been to Lahore but the loss survives in the instant replay of family story. Lahore smokes forever my parents flee... (Mukherjee, 41)

A female with undeterred mind and courage who hails from Hasnpur, is the fourth among her nine siblings, is brought up amidst restrictions and taboos. Her father and grandmother who have traditional mindset stand as obstructions for anything which has its origin from modernity. Both of them share a singleton aim to sack Jyoti for marriage. No doubt, her mother faces repulsion from her father and grandmother but she successfully carves out a base for her daughter's emancipation. It is her mother who stands as a pillar of encouragement for her successful completion of her formal education in school and she is the one who identifies the scholarly Jyoti and wanted her as she remembers:

"to spare me the pain of a dowry less bride. My mother wanted a happy life for me [...] I survived the sniping. My grandmother may have named me Jyoti[...].Light, but in surviving I was already Jane, a fighter and adapter" (Mukherjee.40)

and rebukes the fate of a girl:"God's cruel, my mother complained to waste brains on girls."(Mukherjee.40)

As her name suggests she is a symbol of enlightenment with an unending desire to acquire knowledge and to establish herself as a doctor: "[...] to scrape off cataract, fit plastic legs on stumps, work miracles."(Mukherjee.51).This infuriates her grandmother and father who are upset with her mother who supports her ambitious whims and desires. Their outrage can be pulsed when they burst out:"Blame the mother. Insanity has to come from somewhere. It's the mother who is mad. The girl is mad. Her mother is mad. The whole country is mad" (Mukherjee, 51).

After her father's sad demise, at a tender age of seventeen, Jyoti marries twenty four year youth Prakash Vij who: [...] has a special talent for fixing television, VCRs computer [...] confident professional in starched white, lifting microchips with wire forceps. (66-67)She shows her utmost courage and bravery by thwarting the traditional concept of arranged marriage and belief

in horoscope; and exhibits her open mindedness by getting into registered marriage, as she recollects:

I wore Mataji's red and gold wedding sari, which was only slightly damaged by mold, and in my hair the sweetest smelling jasmynes. Ours was a no dowry, no guests Registry Office wedding in a town a 250 rupee taxi ride south of Hasnapur. (Mukherjee, Jasmine, 75).

She with pride remembers her self made husband and contrasts him with Vimla's greedy husband:

Prakash had a secondhand Bajaj scooter which he'd fixed up himself. I was lucky. Vimal's avaricious husband-to-be with the perfect horoscope was demanding a red Maruti car [...]. (Mukherjee, Jasmine, 80)

During her initial married life days she puts forward her desire to be a mother, which is very rationally kept aside by the rational Prakash whose mind is perennially haunted by a desire to have better life. "I want for us to go away and have a real life." (81) It is he who ignites the desire in Jyoti (Jasmine) to move to US in pursuit of bright and glaring life, and he is confident as he says "You are small and sweet and heady my Jasmine. You'll quicken the whole world with your perfume" (Mukherjee, 77). Even Jasmine gives her consent: "If we could just get away from India, then all fates would be cancelled. We'd start with new fates, new stars. We could say or be anything we wanted. We'd be on the other side of the earth, out of God's sight." (Mukherjee, Jasmine, 85). He encourages Jasmine to brush up on her English by reading electronics magazines and manuals, as he dreams that electronics is the wave of the future, even in India. Prakash makes Jasmine visualise: electronics store that they both would run equally. She takes all these guidelines from her husband very meticulously. Before they could materialize their aims and ambition and their voyage to U.S. Prakash succumbs to the injuries caused owing to a bomb blast. Portrayal of unrest and violence is part of any diasporic literature. The writer describes the unrest created by Khalsa Lions who:

hung out, hacking branches thick as staffs to beat people and knock them off their bikes and scooters. Sometimes they'd cut down whole tress and drag them across the only road, forcing motor traffic to stop. Then they'd threaten the passengers, sometimes robbing them. (Mukherjee, 54).

The untimely death of her husband leads to a void in her married life. Seeing her mother's pathetic condition after her father's death she decides to select a life of her own, away from the atrocities of widowhood which she considers as a curse. She recollects:

When Pitaji [father] died my mother tried to throw herself on his funeral pyre. When we wouldn't let her, she shaved her head with a razor wrapped her body in coarse cloth and sat all day in a corner. (Mukherjee, 61)

She flees the country seeing the horrid plight of her widowed mother and the trauma which she has undergone. Very prudently, Jasmine contemplates and comes out with her plan to give justice to her Identity:

We had created life Prakash had taken Jyoti and created Jasmine, and Jasmine would complete the mission of Prakash. Viji & Wife. A vision had formed. There were thousands of useless rupees in our account. He had his Florida Acceptance and his American Visa. I turned everything over to my brother, along with my plan. They were stupefied. A village girl, going alone to America, without job, husband or papers [...] a matter of duty and honor. (Mukherjee, Jasmine, 99).

The optimistic attitude which she owns is commendable and it is this which helps carve a self-reliant female out of her which carries her as storm fighting the social taboos to see the dawn of her empowerment in the western dominion, in this pursuit she confesses : ' Jyoti, Jasmine. I shuttle between identities.' (Mukherjee, Jasmine, 77).

The novel is known for its punctiliously maintained pattern- 'Order disorder Order' and from the point of view of a traditional mindset, the shifting of Jasmine from the Indian subcontinent to the United States symbolizes distorting of Order set by the feudal society but the self-empowering and redefining sensibility make her determined to go ahead with her ambition ignoring such a social pattern

An analysis of diaspora literature expresses, how with the movement of persons the aggregate of a whole nation to which he or she belonged, is carried with them. Dislocation leads to cross-cultural encounters that have always affected the lives of immigrants with is a possibility of rejection, confusion and tension owing to such cultural intermingling. Similarly, Jasmine's life does not appear smooth as she steps into the American dominion. On her first night in America, Half-Face rapes her in the Flamingo court motel in Florida. Her inflicted feminine identity prompts her to rip his neck. It is worth mentioning that Bharati Mukherjee who was a devotee of Goddess Kali, portrays impressively Jasmine as an incarnation of the mythical goddess who kills the captain who is an epitome of evil. His killing is symbolic of victory of good over evil. With a firm belief she continues her journey further with a sense of optimism and confidence to pursue her goal of better living indirectly a search for another identity.

The novel holds autobiographical elements which can be traced from the sensibilities and views of Jasmine who is portrayed by Bharati Mukherjee as her mouth piece. An analysis of the novel proves their open-mindedness which prompts them to establish themselves free from stereotype sensibilities of Indian womanhood. Further they find the relevance of assimilation of culture of visiting country as source of liberation which is aptly put in words by Mukherjee :

"I have to put down roots where I decide to stay. It wasn't enough for me to be an expatriate Indian in Canada. If I can't feel that I can make social, political and emotional commitments to a place, I have to find another place."

According to the studies of **Positive Psychology**, *flow* is achieved: ' when the challenge of the situation meets one's personal abilities.' The noticeable aspect of the essay of this identity search journey is that Jasmine immerses and blends herself in the selected role perfectly, maintaining the flow with her surcharged personal ability of concentration and counterattacking challenges. In fact it is this element of flow that holds the interest of the novel. In the series of journey of identity hunt, her next acquaintance is Lillian Gordon from Florida who is a kind Quaker lady who offers her refuge and names her Jazzy. The host takes up the responsibility of teaching her

American etiquettes. She gives Jasmine her daughter's T-shirts sweaters, cords and loafers. Jasmine finds this stark transformation to be a matter of surprise: "Jazzy in a T-shirt, tight cords, and running shoes. I couldn't tell with the Hasnapuri side I'd also abandoned my Hasnapuri modesty."(Mukerjee, Jasmine.133). Unfortunately, Lillian Gordon is arrested for harboring and assisting illegal immigrants, and Jasmine finds herself alone in her journey of independence so from Florida she makes her way to New York and stays with Professor Vadhera's family. Professor Vadhera :'' had taught Prakash his first year in the technical college, and that he'd lent Prakash money for books, college fees, examination fees, tiffin ,bus fare, everything ,out of his own less than nothing instructor –level –salary, so Prakash could stay in school.(Mukerjee,Jasmine,83)

Though the characters are drifted away from their motherland yet they never forget to keep alive the influences of indigenous customs and traditions on them. Professor Vadhera's family has created already a mini India in Queens. During her stay at the professor's residence, his wife gifts her plain saris and salwar kamiz which she finds it uncomfortable to wear: "I wanted to distance myself from everything Indian, everything like Jyoti. To them I was a widow who should show proper modesty of appearance and attitude."(Mukerjee 145).

Finding the traditional practise to be suffocating, the open minded protagonist decides to leave Vadheras and reaches Manhattan to serve as caretaker for Duff, the adopted daughter of Taylor and Wylie Hayese's. Among Taylors she is known as Jase. She resorts to total self transformation by dressing as people in Western countries do so she:"bought herself spangled heels and silk chartreuse pant."(Mukherjee, 176).By attiring the western clothes in New York city Bharati Mukerjee and Jasmine both free them from stereotypes womanhood. As Pushpa N Parekh observes:

From the beginning, Jyoti rebels against her cultural inscriptions. Jasmine frantically moves to break the shackle of a jinxed future, showing all signs of postcolonial dread of secondariness and tries to move away from the past at all costs, including the cost of a stable identity

Later, she is absorbed in a job involving attending phone calls in Mathematics Department at Columbia University. Wylie's abandoning of her husband for an Economist Stuart Eschelman, creates a void in Taylor's life. Jase tries to seek familial comfort with Duff and Taylor; and the same thing is being expected by Taylor:"Taylor loved me and needed me, needed me even more now that there was Stuart."(Mukherjee, Jasmine, 182). Jyoti remembers her journey of identity that she had a husband for each of the women – 'Prakash for Jasmine, Taylor for Jase,Bud for Jane, Half Face for Kali.'(Mukherjee, Jasmine, 192.). Before she could fill this void and fully bloom into Jase, she leaves Taylor when she confronts Prakash's killer, Sukhwinder in a Park, a pro Pakistan who called:" all Hindu women whores, all Hindu men rapists. The sari is the sign of the prostitute [...] Hindus are bent on genocide of Sikh nation." (Mukherjee, Jasmine, 65).As Jasmine remembers that it was at this climacteric situation that she escapes to Canada and meets mother Riplemeyers. Then one day she receives a letter from Taylor who wishes to join her again .The twist in the chronicle of her life ushers when she visualizes her life with Taylor and his daughter. To her luck, when they arrive she without a second thought joins them to extend

her amorous journey. It is probable that this decision of hers was a pre-decided one that is why turned down Bud's marriage offer. In this pursuit she turns out to be a complex character, leaving the readers with surprising questions-Will she be happy hereafter? Or Is she entangled in an eternal tracking of identity? In this pursuit who is her next target?

A life that pursues engagement, involvement and absorption in work, intimate relations and leisure is an engaged life. Jasmine has spent an engaged life to her full. A close analysis tells the readers that though she is charged of creating the chaotic situation which makes its way by her amorous ambition never deters her but with renewed confidence and determination she goes ahead with the hope of bringing out order out of chaos by re-inventing her, with a firm belief as upheld by Russell: "Your life will be a blessed and balanced experience if you first honor your identity and priority."

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