
Search for Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine***Dr. O. Kumara Swami**

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Abstract:

Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* is a story of a young Indian woman in the United States who, trying to familiarize to the American way of life to be able to survive, changes identities several times. Bharati Mukherjee, "the clear eyed but affectionate immigrant in American society,"¹ has become celebrity for her distinctive approach to expatriate hood as a metaphysical experience of exile and as an agent of attitudinal change, both in the minority and majority cultures. Her concern exceeds the run-of-the-mill-issues of culture shock and adjustment problems. Searching for and describing a new uniqueness is a central question for settlers living in a distant land. The study reveals that Bharati Mukherjee's innovative technique of alternately highlighting one or the other of the 'change' in her heroine's identity- Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase, Jane. Jasmine's image seems to be a personification of Bharati Mukherjee's concept of Americanness as an out-look on life. The fragmentation of life suggests by the dominant narrative voice's underscoring, not an unequal importance given to Jasmine when compared to the other characters, but of her total isolation as "a strange pilgrim in an outlandish shrine." Thus, synchronous with her self-actualization Jasmine becomes truly Americanized, not just in peripheral social or cultural mores but in a primal "intercity of spirit, "and dines peace neither in India, nor America, but in the 'American dream.' This paper tried to explore on how she struggled throughout her life to reinvent the coherent self by her constant effort to assimilate to the alien culture and setting.

Keywords: Change, identity, immigrant, patience, violence**Introduction**

For the first phase, born as Jyothi to a man driven from his affluent house in Lahore to a life of ignominious poverty in the remote Punjab village Hasnapur during the partition's riots, Jasmine has early acquaintance with the heart-wrenching agony of people uprooted from their homesteads. Resigned to her supposedly inferior status in society for the sin of being born a girl, and constantly made aware of her misfortune as a dowry less daughter, Jyothi has an uneventful childhood. Two incidents figure prominently in Jasmine's memory of Hasnapur. One is to kill a mad dog rushing to attack her and the other is her receiving a star-like wound on her forehead while she tripped and fell to run away from an irate astrologer who predicted an early widowhood for her. The permanent scar left on her forehead by this wound, her third eye as she loved to refer to it, is in a way an indication of the continued hold the astrologer's words exercise on her even after her breaking from Indian

roots and settling in the USA. Her wanting to learn English is dimly perceived by everyone as her “wanting the world.”

Marriage to Prakash brings about a total change in her mindset. The ‘newness is of life in Jullundur, beginning with the change of her name to Jasmine, makes her realize that ‘motherhood’ need not to be her sole destiny. Enthused by Prakash’s plans of eventually settling into a much better life-style in America with their own business concern, she starts assisting him in the repair of electronic goods by way of supplementing their meager income.

Prakash’s untimely death at the hands of fundamentalists—the self-styled “Khalsa lions” spreading terror in the region by their acts of senseless violence—leaves her grief stricken and frustrated with ineffectual anger. Rebelling against the idea of spending the rest of her life as a destitute widow at Hasnapur, she prevails on her brothers to arrange for her transport to America on a forged passport; her plan of committing ‘suttee’ after reaching the campus where Prakash wanted to enroll is a gesture of protest, a despairing girl’s desperate bid to ‘do’ something to express her anger at Fate’s cruel thwarting of her husband’s diaspora dreams. If it just a giving up on life, she could have committed suicide in Hasnapur itself. Her intense nature means idealistic expression and at this stage in her life, ‘suttee’ was the only sublime action she hazardous trip abroad is a measure of her innate affinity to the American ideal of fearless enterprise. Jasmine’s image seems to be a personification of Bharati Mukherjee’s concept of Americanness as an out-look on life. As cite by Daniyar, “Some people were meant to be American even if they never leave their village in Punjab. At heart they are American. It is a desire for more, more, more”⁴

The desire to hold her own against the blind forces of destiny urges her to leave India, but unfortunately her American experience begins on a jarring note—her brutal rape by the deformed captain half-face, in whose ship she is smuggled into America. The dismal view of the Florida swamps that she gets on her first entry into America, “Enswathe: plastic bottles, floating oranges, boards, white and green plastic bottles sacks tied shut but picked open by birds and pulled apart but crabs,” seems to be an appropriate backdrop to the horrible fate awaiting her. Incensed by the outrage she becomes a veritable “Kali,” knifes him to death, sets the building on fire, and walks out, distraught, dead tired, with no destination in mind.

Her hospitality and gear advice “Let the past make you wary. But do not let it deform you.” help her recoup physically and mentally and with her help she sets out to meet professor Vahera, the gentleman who was instrumental in Prakash’s securing omission in an engineering course. Ejected by the discovery that the professor is eking out a living not by teaching but by trading in human hair, and irked by the diligently guarded ‘ethnicity’ in that household including the austerities of widowhood she is expected to observe, she desires, “If we could just get away from India then al fates would be canceled. We would start with new fates new stars. We could say or be anything we wanted. We’ be on the other side of earth, out of God’s sight,” is too deeply etched on Jasmine’s mind to allow her to agree to getting engulfed by insularity and she leaves the place to live on her own. This move is itself an indication that self-actualization is already taking shape in her life and it was made possible

by acculturation to the America way of thinking along with the American way of dressing. With the actualization of the desire for independence the door is shut to the passive resignation extolled by her grandmother since individual effort means nothing.” Mukherjee herself, is not against Indian culture but against its ‘retentiveness,’ its “way of partially comprehending the world.”⁵ After a short period of hand-to-mouth existence Jasmine gets the chance to work as ‘caregiver’ to Duff, the little daughter of Wylie and Taylor. Jasmine enjoys her new financial independence as well as the affectionate treatment she is shown by her employers, Taylor in particular. Wylie’s falling out of love with Taylor and her decision to live with another man shocks Jasmine at first. But soon, a bond of intimacy develops between her and Taylor.

Jasmine’s calm acceptance of both—the change in her own scale of values and the largest of Taylor in remaining above racial and culture barriers—is writhing-nothing:

“Taylor did not want to change me. He did not want to scour and sanitize the foreignness... I changed because I wanted to. To bunker oneself inside nostalgia to sheath the heart in a bulletproof vest, was to be a coward. On Claremont Avenue, in the Hayes’s big, clean, brightly lit apartment I bloomed from a different alien with forge documents into adventurous Jase.”

This idyllic life comes to sudden halt when her accidental sighting of Sukha, the terrorist who killed her husband makes her flee from that place. Her main reason for running away is the fear that her presence in their household may jeopardize the safety to Taylor and Duff.

While in Iowa, a providential meeting with Mrs. Rippe Meyer, whose kind offer of finding employment for Jane in the bank owned by her son, ends in Bud’s falling in love with her. Bharati Mukerjee’s use of friendly soul’s readily giving advice and assistance must be understood as a tribute she wants to pay to American generosity rather than as a flawed narrative device. As she says: “My characters are survivors. They have been helped as I have, by good strong people of conviction.”

Jane settles down to a peaceful life in Bud’s life house, happy in her new financial security and her new stepmother status about Du, a sixteen-year-old Vietnam war victim adopted by Bud, after his grownup sons left the house and he is separated from his wife Karin. Violence mars the even tenor of her life yet again, this time in Bud’s becoming a cripple waist downwards by a disgruntled farmer’s shooting at him from point blank range. It is not just Bud, but the entire countryside, the very serenity of rural life that is the victim here as it was in Punjab at the hands of terrorist violence. Sarah Curits rightly notes:

“What makes Iowa like the Punjab is not just that “Nothing is fair. God is cruel” (Mata Jee’s cry) but that existence in both places is frequently interrupted and constantly shattered by violence. The most terrifying aspect of the violence is that its roots are comprehensible but it strikes at random.”

Feeling miserable thinking that if Karim were on the scene she would have somehow averted the disaster, she exerts herself to the utmost in seeing to it that Bud is comfortable. Her patience mollifies even Karin who was till then infuriated by the news of Jasmine's pregnancy by Bud. The valuable lesson she has already learned, that in "America nothing lasts-Nothing is forever, nothing is so terrible or wonderful that it won't disintegrate," fortifies her in warding off guilt feelings about usurping Karin's place in Bud's heart. She has learned to adjust to a new set of values but she has not shed all values altogether. Her analysis of her relationship with Bud shows that there is a clear distinction in her mind between living with someone separated from his wife and deliberately breaking up a home: "Bud would have left Karin or twisted in mid-life until he dropped. I was a catalyst. Not a cause."

A sudden letter from Taylor informing her that he and Duff would be calling on her shortly comes as a pleasant surprise. Bud's cool announcement of his decision to go to California and stay with his sister and her family makes her worry about its probable impact on Bud. An exile herself she fully understands Bud's need to 'belong' and silently watches him leave and breaks the news to Bud as gently as she can.

She rebuffs the overtures of love made by young Darrel, their next-door neighbor and feels sorry for him for being tied down to farm work tending pigs, while his heart was set on going to some big city and get rich the easy way. His suicide shatters her and Bud's plans to legalize their relationship by marriage add to her gloom.

Taylor's arrival at this juncture is a welcome relief to her and when he in his winning way convinces her that there is nothing wrong in her leaving Bud, she feels reassured and consents to go with him and Duff to the West Coast may be California, "greedy with wants and reckless from hopes."

Jasmine's walking out of Bud's life is not a wanton act of frivolity. Her two remarks: "The moment I have dreamt a thousand times finally arrives" and "I am not choosing between two men. I am caught between the promise of America and old – world dutifulness," clarify for us that it was not a rash abandonment of responsibilities. In a way this decision of Jasmine is a resonant response to the courage she admired in Bud in trying to take charge of his life, and the cowardice of Darrel in trying to run away from the problems of life by the extreme step of death. Her desire for self – actualization – "I want to do the right thing. I don't want to be a terrible person" – has nothing to do with guilt associated with 'sin.' Jasmine's lack of guilt proves not her callousness but her conscious striving to do only what she thinks is right. Karin is aware of this, hence her statement earlier in the novel: "This is Puritan country. We are born with guilt or quickly learn it. Guilt twists a person."

Her sense of 'relief' at leaving Bud rather than guilt underscores that she was happy to be doing what she had been wishing to do from a long time back, a wish strengthened by her sincere concern that the astrologer's prediction should not take a toll of Bud's life. Jasmine's linking her life to that of Taylor is to be seen as a validation of her avowed belief, "Treat every second of your existence as a possible assignment from God," a reaffirmation of the courage she mustered in killing the mad dog saying "I was not ready to die."

Jasmine may or may not appear as a ‘rabble maker’ by everyone stepping into the orbit of her life, but at every stage in her trouble-torn life, in all her identities as Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase and Jane, she seems to act boldly and unhesitatingly, thrilled at the prospect of ‘adventure, risk, transformation.’

The word ‘transformation’ together with her words of farewell to the mental image of the astrologer which has been haunting her all these years, “Watch me reposition the stars,” suggest that Jasmine has indeed achieved self-actualization in America-the only land on earth that gives one ample opportunity to work at making a dream a reality.

Thus, synchronous with her self-actualization Jasmine becomes truly Americanized, not just in peripheral social or cultural mores but in a primal “intercity of spirit, “and dines peace neither in India, nor America, but in the ‘American dream.’

Conclusion:

The study reveals that Bharati Mukherjee’s innovative technique of alternately highlighting one or the other of the ‘change’ in her heroine’s identity-Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase, Jane. Bharati Mukherjee fills in details about different segments of Jasmine’s life in its meandering course through the terrains of Hasanpur, Jullundur, Florida, Columbia Baden and thereafter to California. The fragmentation of life suggests by the dominant narrative voice’s underscoring, not an unequal importance given to Jasmine when compared to the other characters, but of her total isolation as “a strange pilgrim in an outlandish shrine.” This paper tried to explore on how she struggled throughout her life to reinvent the coherent self by her constant effort to assimilate to the alien culture and setting.

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