

Identity crisis in Bharathi Mukherjee's novel Jasmine

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Abstract

Bharathi Mukarjee is a writer who deals with the problem of the Indian immigrants mainly , women she writes about the struggles and problems faced by Indian women. The problem of cross cultural crisis and the decisive search for identity is also one of her important themes. In the novel **Jasmine**, Bharathi Mukarjee writes how the female protagonist tries to tackle the problem of loss of culture and endeavors to presume a new identity in the U.S. The protagonist **Jasmine** leaves her country to accomplish 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. In this context, this papers tries to explore on how she struggle throughout her life to reinvent the coherent self by her constant effect to assimilate to alien culture.

Key words: *Identity crisis, Alienation, Diaspora and Assimilation*

Women in the 20th and 21st century face identity issues, which leads to a lot of emotional Baggage that they have to carry in order to fulfill their responsibilities as wife and mother. All these issues have been dealt by writers like Virginia Woolf, May Swenson and Ursula K. Le Guin in their fiction. Woolf feels that when the path is marginally open, there are a number of obstacles that come in the way of women. Mukherjee's novels are self-actualizing and portray the quest of women to search for their identity. She feels that women are often caught in the flux of tradition and modernity.

Jyoti is born in the small village of Hasanpur, in the district of Punjab, India. She get married to a laborious, handsome young man, named, Prakash vjrh. While living in India, Jasmine perceives America differently. When her husband Prakash brings the brochure of the Florida International Institute of Technology, after going through it Jasmine gets astonished to

catch a glimpse of America and feels America in fact is very different. In addition to this, Jasmine has an opposed perception about the sexuality of American woman and she becomes anxious because Prakash is studying in that institute where “there will all those hot-blooded American girls. You know what they are like.”⁹ (Jasmine 91)

Prakash regards Jasmine’s secrecy and he is “afraid of embarrassing [her] with any desire or demand”¹⁰ (79) Jasmine even views herself in a sexual context but without any shame. Prakash renames “Jyoti” as “Jasmine”, he assists Jasmine in her transmutations and he turns Jasmies into the changed figures of his creation. “[Prakash] wanted to break down the Jyoti I’d been in Hasnapur and make me a new kind of city woman. To break off the past, he gave me a new name: Jasmine....Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttled between identities.”¹¹ (77) Prakash gives a new identification to Jasmine by changing her old identity; this signifies her first movement from her conventional Indian tradition and customs. Jasmine has occupied two distinctly separate selves; she is shuttling between two selves and trying hard to connect with them, though she understands that the two selves are separate from each other.

When Prakash renames Jyoti as Jasmine, it throws light on a significant question of mechanism or operating system that assists in the process of identity-formation of Jasmine. According to Lacan’s definition of self, this mechanism is external force which inspires to generate Jasmine’s new identity, Jasmine herself is going through an internal transformations. While comparing Jyoti to Jasmine, Jyoti is delineated as a more independent woman than Jasmine.. She modifies herself and eventually becomes the outcome of Prakash’s expectations and aspirations. Thus through this Mukherjee examines the process of identity formation through Lacan’s perception.

Unfortunately, Jasmine becomes widow at the age of seventeen after Prakash is murdered. In shattered and crushed condition, she makes up her mind to accomplish the unfinished dream of her husband of moving and settled in America. “Prakash had taken Jyoti, and created Jasmine Would complete the mission of Prakash.”¹² (97) After landing in Florida, she encounters Half-Face, who is the captain of the ship through which she makes an entrance into the country. At this moment, she encounters her first experience of American ethnic division. Jasmine is surprised about the name of Half face which sounds (“Bubba”). She enquires whether this name



does have Indian origins because it sounds somewhat Indian “Baba”.

In a new place she finds herself homeless and in the hope of getting security and shelter, she trusts Half-face and permits him to accompany her. As they reach the motel Half-face reveals his dirty intentions and rapes her. After the rape incident Jasmine reveals a new transformation of her identity she expresses when she used to live with Prakash, who took her as a more liberated and independent woman. She acknowledges that this agony of rape has brought the greatest change in her life; this shocking experience on one hand shuts her completely from inner and on the other hand, builds her confidence and permits her to cope with herself and come into her own self. Thus Jasmine’s identity is formed not only by construction but by destruction of herself.

Jasmine comes face to face with Lillian Gordon, who helps her by affording her a new house. After Prakash, Jasmine’s husband, Lillian characters in Jasmine’s life who assigns a new westernized nickname “Jazzy” to Jasmine. This name is a symbol of her acceptance of American culture. In the company of Lillian, Jasmine learns to speak, to walk, and to dress the way the Americans do. She can amalgamate into American culture easily, for “... if you walk and talk American, they’ll think you were born here. Most Americans can’t imagine anything else.”¹⁶(134-5.) Jasmine takes on her new identity gladly; that she feels was far away from her so long, but now once thought of as an impossible identity has changed into possible one. “I checked myself in the mirror, shocked at the transformation. Jazzy in a t-shirt, tight cords and running shoes. I couldn’t tell if with the Hasnapuri side I’d also abandoned my Hasnapuri modesty.”¹⁷(133) As Jasmine moves from her older identity to becoming “Jazzy”, her self-perception declares that Jasmine is now a part of past. But this past never eliminates completely, its traces are always there in the present.

As has already discussed earlier, which Jasmine lives her life in liminal surroundings which are specified by a perpetual ambiguity characterized by Jasmine herself. She puts across this sense of transitory nature where she articulates her diasporic experience. “We are refugees and mercenaries and guest workers; you see us sleeping in airport lounges. . .taking out for the hundredth time an aerogram promising. . .a passport, a visa, a laissez-passer. . .We are outcasts and deportees. . .landing at the end of tarmacs. . .roughly handled and taken to waiting



rooms . . . 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. . . For us, there is only a slate and someone who remembers to write in chalk, DELAYED, or TO BE ANNOUNCED, or OUT OF SERVICE...What country? What continent? We pass through wars; through plagues . . . The zigzag route is straightest.”¹⁹ (100-01)

Disruption, defenselessness, anxiety and ambivalence are the terms which define and Describe the liminal condition as well as Jasmine’s perpetual identity formation. She states, “I am caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness . . . We’ve stowed away on boats. . . we’ve hurtled through time tunnels. We’ve seen the worst and survived. Like creatures in fairy tales, we’ve shrunk and we’ve swollen and we’ve swallowed the cosmos whole.”²⁰ (240) the above interpretation of diasporic experience can be seen in a negative sense, but the flow of narration solidifies the possibility of external and internal agency for a nomadic person. At one point of time Jasmine narrates : “We’ve swallowed the cosmos whole”²¹.(240) This statement of Jasmine points out that the nature of diasporic experience is not completely negative but a diasporic person can retain something positive of it.

For every new set of consciousness Jasmine creates a new identity, her preceding identities are not completely erased, but reoriginate in significant situations in the text and thus intensifies and makes worse the conflict between different selves. Jasmine soon gets smothered by the inertia of this house and she goes ahead with her next move to New York to become the au pair for an American family. Jasmine’s interaction with Taylor, his wife Wylie and his daughter Duff helps her in creating a new perception about herself. She gets involved with Hayes family and gradually learns to train in English language, thus making appropriate attempts to get assimilated herself into America culture. Taylor perceives Jasmine as a sexual being. He accepts her ethnicity but can’t adjust her fully into his non-native imaginative perception.

Jasmine proclaims that her wish to change herself for Taylor is not only useless but springs out of her own inclination to change herself by removing all traces of her relation with her sexuality. In the final phase of identity formation, Jasmine generates his new identity in Baden County. Here she comes across Bud Ripplemeyer, an American Banker. Jasmine falls



in love with him and this intimate relationship turns into marriage. Jasmine's ethnic identity entirely changes in Baden. Her distinction from others is recognized but not understood and freely accepted. No endeavors are made to comprehend the specifications of this distinction. In contrast, Baden natives intend to entirely transform Jasmine into westernized figure and to view her as a familiar figure instead of nonnative. Jasmine's life is an ever-lasting process of movement.

Mukherjee's Jasmine deals with a young Indian widow's successful attempt to reshape her destiny and her happiness in an alien land. From the rural Indian culture, the protagonist Jasmine goes to America where she encounters several difficulties and courageously Overcomes them. She constantly changes herself during her life journey, which starts from Jyoti the village girl in Hasnapur, to Jasmine, the city woman, to Jazzy, the undocumented Immigrant, to Jase, the Manhattan Nanny, to Jane, the Iowan woman who enters the story and finally sets to move to California. Throughout the novel, she strives to "fit herself in the American society and finally becomes able to settle there, adapts the American way of life and asserts her identity.

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