



DEVELOPING OF A NEW IDENTITY BY THE CHARACTERS IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S JASMINE

Taruna

M.A English, Maharshi Dayanand University, Rohtak, Haryana (NET Qualified)

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Abstract:

Bharati Mukherjee is a well-known Indian- American writer. She presents the theme of immigration but she asserts that her theme is central for the American readers. She personally likes the American culture and presents in her novels the various themes which are dominated with the American tendency of fluidity and multiculturalism. Mukherjee presents a new outlook of South Asian immigrants in her narrative; she becomes the first Indian-American writer to make a special niche in the American literary tradition with her central themes and subject matters which are quite appreciated by the American readers. In *Jasmine*, she depicts the young woman of a small village from Punjab who faces lots of problems in her adventurous journey to America. This paper is confined to her own reflection as an American writer.

Key Words: Immigration, Fluidity, Multiculturalism

Bharati Mukherjee, the winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award for her collection of short stories, *The Middleman and Other Stories*, is a well-known Indian- American writer. She presents the enthusiastic stories of the South Asian immigrants who live in the U.S.A, she calls them new pioneer of the American land. These immigrants have the capabilities to register their presence in the foreign land by fully assimilating the American culture. Although Bharati Mukherjee writes about the theme of immigration but she asserts that her theme is central for the American readers. She personally likes the American culture and presents in her novels the various themes which are dominated with the American tendency of fluidity and multiculturalism.

Jasmine, a novel is about the young woman of a small village from Punjab who faces lots of problems in her adventurous journey to America. Her life in India is filled with dismal situations, including the murder of her husband by the Khalistan terrorists. It was her husband's wish to go to America that leads *Jasmine* to migrate towards U.S.A. The novel is about the individual quest for asserting the desired identity in the foreign land. The protagonist of the novel has all the qualities by which she can create her own world by following the American dictum. Talking about the novel, Bharati Mukherjee asserts in an interview with Ameena Meer, "It was in writing that book that I transformed myself from being an expatriate to realizing I'm an immigrantmy roots are here. There is no going back" (Mukherjee 11).

The story of the novel starts from a poor village in Punjab where Jyoti is born in a traditional patriarchal family, to a city in India where Jyoti's husband is murdered by terrorists, to the south Florida where Jyoti is raped by a mutilated Vietnamese officer, to an Indian community in Queens where she finds herself in restriction with the Indian people, to Columbia university in upper Manhattan where she works as a nanny in the house of a professor, to an Iowa farming town where she becomes the wife of Bud Ripplemyer, and finally *Jasmine* decides to lead towards California with her former lover Taylor with the hope of new future and she has no sense of regret for leaving Bud. *Jasmine* herself is bewildered by the speed of her transformation in American culture and landscape, "I feel at times like a stone hurtling through diaphanous mist, unable to grab hold, unable to slow myself, yet unwilling to abandon the ride I'm on. Down and down I go where I'll stop, God only knows (Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 138-39).

Jasmine with her courage and will power makes her path easy and asserts her identity, she is no longer an illegal immigrant rather she acquires the American citizenship. She knows that in America nothing is permanent and absolute, everything is transitory, and everyone has to succeed in one's life by hooks and crooks. Her decision to leave Bud and moves with Taylor towards California suggests that she has all the instincts to survive in America as she herself acknowledges her nature as "greedy with wants and reckless from hope" (241). Like the protagonist of the novel, Bharati Mukherjee also encounters many immigrant experiences. She also lives in different countries, different cultures and acquires different citizenship. Her novels are the reflection of her own quest to sustain permanent identity as an American mainstream writer. Her love for America can be traced in these lines:

I knew from the moment I got here that I wanted to stay... mine is clear eyed but definite love of America. I am aware of the brutalities, the violence here, but in the long run my characters are survivors. Like *Jasmine*, I feel there are people born to American. By Americans I mean an intensity of spirit and a quality of desire. I feel American in a fundamental way, whether Americans see me that way or not. (Steinberg, Publishers Weekly)

Bharti Mukherjee confirms her identity as a mainstream American writer with the statement “I am one of you” (Mukherjee, Immigrant Writing). She does not recall herself as an expatriate writer, writing from the third world perspective rather she attracts the attention from the American readers with her central themes in the novels. In her novels, she describes the American culture, its characteristics, its territory, with the new emerging class, i.e. south Asian immigrants who change the American culture and also affected by this value system. Like the writer, the protagonist of the novel hates Indian culture where the women position and role totally depend upon the patriarchal society, there is restrictive world for women, they personally do not choose or decide about their life rather their roles are pre-defined in the Indian society. But Jasmine wants to reposition her stars by her self-will and courage. We can compare the situation of Jasmine with the writer’s situation, in fact the novel, Jasmine, is the reflection of the journey of the writer from an expatriate writer to a mainstream American writer.

The speed of transformation which the protagonist undergoes reflects the fluidity in American culture. In America, everything changes very rapidly, and one who has the ability to cope with this speed, sustains one’s life. Jasmine has all the qualities to sustain her life in America, she completely vanishes her past life, takes risk in her journey, meets with the people who help her and with her physical beauty and intelligence keep pace with the American life. Although the events that happen in the novel seem quite impossible, many questions are raised in this context. We discern how the protagonist, in spite of lack in higher education and no acquaintance in the foreign land, makes her voyage. Events are represented in the novel in a very hectic speed- the death of Jasmine’s husband, the sudden exile of Jasmine, the murder of the Vietnamese man who rapes her, her life with Taylor and Bud, the suicide of her neighbour Darrel, she adopts a young Vietnamese immigrant boy, Du, pregnant with Bud’s child, and finally leaves Bud and leads towards California with her ex-lover Taylor.

The novel describes the two countries- India and America. Indian part is not much explored rather much attention is given to American culture and values system. Indian culture is represented as restrictive for the women to their personal independence because their identity is pre-defined by the patriarchal society. American culture, on the other hand, is praised by the writer for its fluidity and transitory nature. Every individual enjoys his personal freedom without any sense of obligation and cultural values never come on his way of freedom because they are not imposed on his life. In an interview with Bill Moyers, Bharati Mukherjee herself praises America as, “I feel very American.... I knew the moment I landed as a student in 1961... that this is where I belonged” (Video Cassette).

On her way to America, Jasmine is raped by a Vietnamese half-face man and she decides to attempt suicide but at the last moment, the memory of her died husband comes to her mind. It is for her husband’s sake, she incarnates herself as Kali- the Devi of destruction and kills the rapist and moves ahead in quest of fulfil the wish of her husband. Her husband wants her to be an educated woman who can think for herself and does not control by any rigid patriarchal biases. He wants to take admission in American university and lives there permanently along with her wife. Now Jasmine’s mind predominated with the conquest of the American land, she comes cross with a lady who guides her and makes her to learn some skills that are necessary while living in America. With the help of this lady, she finds a job of nanny in the house of a professor named Taylor who lives with his wife and with an adopted son; Duff. Taylor gives Jasmine a new name, i.e. Jase. In the company of Taylor and Duff, Jasmine lives like a family member. Taylor secretly loves Jasmine but in the same locality she confronts with the murderer of her husband, and she disappears from Taylor’s life; and moves towards Iowa where she finds an old lady who gives her a job in the bank. Bud, an employee, in the same bank fascinates towards her. He takes her to his home and once again she finds herself as a member of the family where she is the step- mother of a Vietnamese war refugee boy, Du.

Jasmine changes the locales and names very rapidly in the novel; this is the process of self-development for her. Her journey from a small village in India to California in U.S.A., suggests that she has enough ability to forget her past and assimilates in the new condition. She suffers on the way but in the last survives. The writer, by this adventurous novel enunciates that, “There are no harmless, compassionate ways to make one. We murder who we were, so we can rebirth ourselves in the image of our dreams” (29).

Jasmine kills herself many times in the accomplishment of her dreams. Her killing of herself results in another birth, another life, and another place, and this suggests the writer’s own belief of reincarnation. In an interview with Alison B. Carb, Bharati Mukherjee acknowledges her belief in reincarnation:

I believe that our souls can be reborn in another body, so the perspective I have about a single character’s life is different from that of an American writer who believes that he only has one life. As a Hindu I believe in the existence of alternate realities, and this believe makes itself evident in my fiction. (The Massachusetts Review)

Thus the old life leaves behind and the new life follows, this may take some time in the actual transformation. Jasmine leaves behind the brutal memories of village life in India and tries to repose her stars in America. In the U.S.A., she also suffers many emotional setbacks but like a truly born American, she overcomes these emotional hazards and finally makes up her mind “greedy with wants and reckless from hope” (241).

Unlike the other diasporic writers, Bharti Mukherjee does not depict the nostalgic aspect in the life of her characters. Her characters come in the foreign land by their own choice, they like the American culture

which provides sufficient space to the individual to explore their life and they feel free from all the orthodox customs and traditions. Their characters participated in a kind of journey where they leave behind their old identity, and with their courage, determination and will power assert their presence in the foreign land. In the last foreign land becomes their real home. Talking about the themes of her novels, in an interview, Bharati Mukherjee asserts:

I don't think about my fiction as being about alienation. On the contrary, I mean for it to be about assimilation. My story centres on a new breed and generation of North Americana pioneers. I'm fascinated by people who have enough gumption, energy, ambition; to pull up their roots... my stories are about conquests and not about loss. (Canadian Fiction Magazine)

Mukherjee presents a new outlook of South Asian immigrants in her narrative; she becomes the first Indian-American writer to make a special niche in the American literary tradition with her central themes and subject matters which are quite appreciated by the American readers. All her characters are adventurous and become victorious in the last in their journey of assimilation in the foreign land. In the novel, *Jasmine*, the success of the journey of the protagonist, considers to be the success of the writer herself as an American citizen or an established American writer.

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