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Bharati Mukherjee's jasmine: A quest for self-identity

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Abstract

The aim of this research paper is to portray the traumatic experience and cultural dilemmas occurs between the first and second generation immigrants which shows the depth analysis of women consciousness, self-contemplation and their experiences of being immigrant among the male dominated society in *Jasmine* (1989), written by Bharati Mukherjee. The novel is set in the present about a young woman, named as Jasmine, settled in United States who, trying every bit to adjust to the American way of life. In order to survive in the new adopted region, she changes her identities many times. In a quest for her self-individuality on a foreign land, Jasmine is made as immigrant personality due to the state of exile, the pain of separation, a sense of loss and perplexity. The protagonist of this novel, Jasmine, goes through various identity changes during her life's journey in America, from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jane and many times she experiences a deep sense of antagonism arising in a fluid state of identity. The novel 'Jasmine' focuses on the theme for the search of individuality on a foreign land. The chief concern of the protagonist 'Jasmine' is a quest for self-identity in this novel. It is transparently portrayed by Bharati Mukherjee.

Keywords: Quest for identity, globalization, frequent identity change, assimilation, survival

Introductions

Indian culture is the most conservative on the ground of morality and feminine world, Indian women are more aware about the moral ethics and values of human life. Indian women immigrants are way different than other racial woman. A woman has to face many hurdles when she deals with such diplomatic and intricate issues.

The concept of self-identity is studied from feminist perspectives. Quest for self- identity is a single or multifaceted term stands for self-realization of self- actualization. Modern individuals face the conflict of identity which has become a practical problem. The identity of a modern individual is contradictory, fractured and incomplete thing, but a continuous process which goes on boundlessly. Identity crisis is procuring potency due to globalization and other developments. Variations in identity are seen due to increase in migrations and globalized activities and processes. Such processes influence a large number of people and society.

Bharati Mukherjee's narratives are accounts of diasporic identities and a subject of endless makeovers. In many of her interviews, she denied the conception that identities are stable, fixed and unchanging. She never accepted the conception of hyphenation and subscribes to the postmodern idea and self is always half-done and always persists in the process of becoming. Ideology of identity is explored in her narratives and shows that identities are fluid and discursive formations but a close glance of reading of her narrations portray a contradictory view in which all her protagonists find it difficult to depart with their old traditional and cultural identities and selves. Mukherjee portrays the agony and changes a migrant has to undergo for survival in the host cultures and theories of knowledge connected with her/his own nostalgia, consciousness of marginality and unhoused which leads to the generation of the new experiences inner selves and subjectivities. Once in an interview with Russell Schoch, Mukherjee demonstrates that she has portrayed the strength to alter the thinking of people about others and about national hood through her narrations. She reveals: "To make people realize that we have to get away from thinking of ourselves – of our identities – as fixed, as dependent on inherited things: language, race, class, culture. And instead to improvise identity to see ourselves as part of a changing community in which our loyalty depends on what community we have adopted and decide to give our loyalty to: "I've always felt that individuals are a series of identities, simultaneous identities Identity is not fixed. The moment you think there's only one way, you are going to crack."

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(Interview with Russell Schoch) Portrayal of women and their relationships in Bharati Mukherjee's narrations shows the dominance of patriarchal practices in traditional society. Women protagonists for Mukherjee's novels are typical representatives of young woman particularly of The Third World countries who adores the dream of emigrating to America and desire to settle their permanently.

Bharati Mukherjee lived in India, United States, Europe and Canada. Migration in these countries which are so different from her birth enabled her to write very powerful novels on immigrant experiences.

The story of a courageous girl through her immigrant experiences in United States is explored in Bharati Mukherjee's celebrated novel. Her struggle illustrates the restless search of a rootless person. The story tells about Jasmine, the heroine of the novel, who starts her journey from India to America where she imagines a variety of identities. She goes through a series of adventures during her life journey from Punjab to California via, Florida, New York and Iowa. She transforms herself with courage and confidence. Her journey leads Jasmine through many changes through Jyoti, a Punjabi village girl, to Jasmine, a loving and devoted Hindu wife, to Jazzy, an altered, non-immigrant, to Jase, a nanny in the home of a New York college professor, and to Jane, live in partner of a bank official in Iowa.

Jyoti is born into a traditional family in the small village of Hasanpur, in the district of Punjab, in India, after eighteen years of the partition riots. She is intelligent, self-willed and a fighter. She is a free spirit, a protestor who interrogates the forecasting of the astrologer about the widowhood and banishment: in the coldest tone:

"You're a crazy old man. You don't know what my future holds". This annoys the astrologer and he chunks hard on her head and she faints and falls on the ground getting a star-shaped scar on her forehead. She finds out the scar as a curse but she treats it as her third eye. She does not believe in the extensive judgement that village girls are like dumb cows. Keeping this concern in head she opposes to marry the widower chose by her grandmother and marry Prakash Vij in a court of law, a laborious, handsome young man. Jasmine perceives America in a different way, while living in India. In her outlook being an American means being white. After going through the brochure of the Florida International Institute of Technology, brought by her husband Prakash, Jasmine gets startled to catch a glimpse of America and feels America in fact is very different. Furthermore, Jasmine has a contradictory opinion about the sexuality of American woman and she gets worried as Prakash is studying in that institute where "there will all those hot blooded American girls. You what they are like". At this moment, Jasmine has not a trace of idea about all the complexities of cultural and ancestral identities in America and what is more, she is right wing in her outlook about female sexuality.

Jasmine is considered as a sexual figure and caretaker cum wife in the eye of Prakash. But he never disgrace or depose her. Jasmine is a decent and reverent wife who is worshiped in ancient traditional Indian cultural. Jasmine's secrecy is respected by Prakash and he is "afraid of embarrassing [her] with any desire or

demand". A new identification is given to Jasmine by changing her old name by her husband, Prakash; this denotes her first step from her typical Indian tradition and customs. Jasmine has diverted in two distinctly individual selves; she is commuting between two selves and trying very hard to connect with them, though she understands that the two selves are different from each other.

Through her experiences, Jasmine compares whatever happens in America with that of India. At an early age of seventeen, Jasmine becomes widow as Prakash falls a prey to the Khalsa Lions the rebels demanding a separate land of Khalistan for Sikhs. The newly emerging Jasmine does not agree to spend her life into widow's weeds. She makes up her mind to fulfill the unfinished dreams of her husband of moving and settled in America. "Prakash had taken Jyoti, and created Jasmine would complete the mission of Prakash." After landing in Florida, she meets Half-Face, who is the captain of the ship. He is the one who helps her in making an entrance into the country. She meets her first experience of American racial division as Half-Face behaves in a disrespectful way to Jasmine, for he views her as a black person, not as an Indian.

Jasmine finds herself all alone in a new place and in hope of getting security and shelter, she permits Half-Face to accompany her as she trusts him. After reaching in the motel, Half-Face shows her true color and reveals his dirty intentions. He rapes her. He perceives Jasmine as a prostitute "one prime little piece." Jasmine is filled with embarrassment and disgraceful about her sexuality after this sinful act because of the way Half-Face perceives her. "I determined to clean my body as it had never been cleaned, with the small wrapped bar of soap, and to purify my soul with all the prayers I could remember..." Jasmine has obtained a new understanding of her sexuality from which she can't escape herself, due to this her viciousness awakens in order to express her disagreement and hostility that she experiences between the sexual identity she has had with Prakash and with Half-Face. She slaughters Half-Face and after this courageous act her strength increases and she quits the idea of committing sati by burning herself over the burnt clothing of her husband. She takes vow to herself after the courageous act of assassination that she begins a new journey in America. She gets ready to lead a different life, which is thoroughly different from her pure and pious identity and her orthodox Indian lifestyle. A new change in identity is revealed she expresses when she used to live with her husband, Prakash, who found her as a more liberated and courageous woman. She admits that the pain of rape has brought the greatest change in her life; she is shattered completely within with this experience and on the other side, builds her

confidence and allows her to cope with herself and revives her own self.

Thus it can be said that Jasmine's identity is formed by not only construction but also destruction of herself. Such disagreement and variance comes before the eyes of readers as the novel proceeds because Jasmine needs all interferences and hindrances in her way to develop as a person.

Jasmine meets Lillian Gordon, who helps her in managing her a new house. Lillian also teaches her how to behave like an American, thus taking the tiny steps in the process of assimilation. Lillian is the one, who after Prakash, Jasmine's husband, gives another new identity to Jasmine and assigns a new westernized nickname "Jazzy". This name is a sign of acceptance of American culture. Lillian teaches Jasmine to speak, to walk, and to dress the way Americans do. "... if you walk and talk American, they'll think you were born here. Most Americans can't imagine anything else." Jasmine understands that to become an American means relevant acquisition of American customs, cultures, and its social nature that finalized the process of accommodation and not being white or Bing permanently settled in America. As Jasmine proceeds from her older identity to new one "Jazzy", her self-consciousness reveals that Jasmine is her past. But the traces of this past are always there in the present, as it's never eliminated completely.

Jasmine makes new identity with every new set of acknowledgement. Though her new identities are not completely erased, but emerge in consequential situations and thus makes worse the conflict between different selves. On the opposite side, this clash reinforces Jasmine to create more impressive and authoritative identity, different from her past identities. Jasmine's connection with Taylor, his wife Wylie and his daughter Duff helps her in making a new interpretation about herself. Taylor considers Jasmine as a sexual being. He accepts her sexuality but can't adjust her completely into her non-native imaginative perception. In the last phase of identity formation, Jasmine meets Bud Ripple Meyer, an American Banker. She falls in love with him and has intimate relation which turns into marriage. Her cultural identity is changed entirely in Baden. In this way, Jasmine's life is an endless process of movement. She relocates from one place to another, from one self to another.

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