

An Analysis of *Quest for Identity* in *Jasmine*

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ABSTRACT

The novel *Jasmine* can be as an eruption of long suppressed volcano of hatred and silence of a subaltern (doubly shadowed figure) who rises in fury to get back her share i.e. her voice and identity, right to be an individual and independent personality from the society and world. The story begins from the point where she refuses the subjugation, not only to patriarchy and colonial authority but even to her fate which wants her to imprison in bars of widowhood and exile. She is determined to make out her way through the tempest of life. Jasmine chooses rebellious nature and violence as weapons to fight with the magical aura of subjugation and slavery. She is determined to decolonize herself from its effect and explore the further possibilities by using the technique of changing identities. Hers is a journey from darkness to light and innocence to experience. It mainly celebrates the strength and determination of a colonized subject who rushes into the colonizer's/master's territory with a mission to construct and deconstruct herself. On the other hand, this novel is an attempt to synthesize in the protagonist the essence of two cultures i.e. Indian and American. Jasmine rebels against age old superstitions, traditions and effect a proper balance between tradition and modernity by breaking all the bonds and shackles. The fabric of the novel is woven with the colourful threads of history, culture, myths, superstitions and one's zest to struggle and rise like a phoenix out of its own ashes.

Key words: Volcano, subjugation, subaltern, phoenix, colonial

In the novel *Jasmine*, Mukherjee tries to enfold the complicated layers of cross-cultural reality through the series of adventures which the heroine undertakes during her odyssey from Punjab to California via Florida, New York and Iowa. Her struggle symbolizes the restless quest of a rootless person piqued by a depressing sense of isolation all around. Sumita Roy points out that Jasmine's "search for self-recognition takes her in social and spiritual a direction [...] till she arrives at a time when she can view the future "greedy with wants and reckless from hope" (203).

This novel is an account of adaptation and not defeat. Just as Thomas Hardy declares his Tess as 'a pure woman,' Mukherjee declares her Jasmine as 'an authentic woman' and even 'a heroic woman.' The novel *Jasmine* comes under the creative phase of Mukherjee's writing career termed as phase of immigration, when she distances herself from her Indian origin and decides to come to terms with her uprootedness and undergoes the transition from the 'aloofness of expatriation' to the 'exuberance of immigration.'

Writing through this perspective, Jasmine emerges as a fighter and a rebel who wants to be an observer as well as participant in achieving the American Dream. Her call is for fighting against the static ghetto of little India and not to choose to play the victim. According to her, all the immigrants and migrants are part of America and America is made out of them. With this revisionary slogan Mukherjee not only intends to expand America but to change it by the strategy of transformation.

Bharati Mukherjee got the inspiration of writing *Jasmine* (short story) from a friend's housekeeper, a Caribbean woman of Indian origin, whose energy was dictated by desire to remake or reconstruct herself. Thus, Mukherjee creates her model of the fighter woman (An Amazon) who has to adapt herself and struggle for herself and not let her be crushed under the burden of fear or nostalgia for past roots. The stories in *The Middleman and Other Stories* tackle the issue of the essential difficulties encountered by an immigrant in negotiating and coming to terms with a new set of values or in other words straddling between two cultures and in the process of being transformed and also transform the new culture. The short story *Jasmine* from *The Middleman and Other Stories* later grew into the popular novel by the same title dealing with dual culture identity problem.

The novel follows the topsy-turvy life of a young Punjabi woman who after breaking all the cocoons of tradition and patriarchal society enters in the master's territory as a tornado. Bharati Mukherjee herself explains how the energetic and resourceful Indian immigrant Jasmine:

This is about a very young widow who comes illegally into the United States and makes a new woman of herself. It is actually a kind of continuation from *Jasmine*, one of the short-stories in *Middleman* in which this young girl from Trinidad works an au pair girl. I finished that story but the character wouldn't die. She remained inside my head. So I changed her nationality from Trinidadian to Indian—She's changed physically but the essence of the character is still the same (Y.M. Saini, Sunday).

Another influence is the V.S. Naipaul's famous essay *Jasmine* which is a milestone for post-colonial consciousness. In this essay the Jasmine flower is used as a leading metaphor for the disconnection between the colonial natural world and the possibility of its representation through the English language imposed by the Colonizers. Mukherjee has adopted Naipaul's *Botanical Figure* to contest the paradigm of origins in the third world as a hindrance for success in favour of the word Jasmine's 'flowering possibility.'

Jyoti, an intelligent but voiceless village girl having no identity of her own, is crushed under the curse of being a fifth daughter in the family. Being a peripheral creature she has no right to move towards centre. She is debarred from his education, modernity and professional life which signify individuality and power. Subaltern is not allowed to be powerful in colonial societies as she is doubly shadowed figure. Eventually she marries Prakash who encourages her to shake off tradition and become self reliant by rechristening her as Jasmine. Fate plays a powerful role in the novel as just before Jasmine and Prakash move to the United States, Parakash is killed in the bomb blast. After his death, Jasmine's odyssey starts as a refugee. On her way to Florida, she is assaulted and raped by the captain of boat. But her mission rejuvenates her out of the ashes of her mortality and pushes her forward. She refuses to embrace *yama* as sati but is determined to live and explore America, to be a part of it. With the help of Lillian Gordon, she meets Professor Vadhera. She refuses to be a part of little India of Vadhera family. She chooses to become Day mummy or caregiver of Duff, daughter of Taylor and Wylie. Once again past relocates her in the shape of hot dog vendor, Sukhi (Murderer of Prakash) and sets her on move towards Iowa.

In Iowa, she meets Mother Ripplemeyer and eventually becomes the live in partner of Bud Ripplemeyer and mother of their adopted son Du. He, too, like Jasmine is a refugee and wants to be an American possible. Towards the end of the novel, various incidents like Darrel's death and leaving of Du force Jasmine to decide her further course of action i.e. to leave Iowa and joint Taylor and Duff in California. With an optimistic note of further exploration and stability in the form of new identities i.e. (continuous process of uprooting and re-rooting) she moves on. In the end, Jasmine has not only decolonized herself but revolutionizes master's territory by her exotic Asian beauty and intelligence.

The story begins in the Hasanpur, Punjab where Jasmine is not Jasmine, she is called Jyoti (means light) and is the fifth of a long line of daughter in a poor migrant family from Lahore born after 18 years of partition riots "God's cruel, my mother complained, to waste brains on a girl. And God's still more cruel, she said, to make a fifth daughter beautiful instead of the first" (40). Jyoti is presented as an unlucky child, born female (an other and peripheral creature) too late to profit from her beauty and intelligence. She is whiz in Punjabi and Urdu, good at counting and at reading and the first likely candidate for English instructions. From the very beginning she is a rebel and non-conformist who questions the prophecies of the astrologer about her widowhood and exile "Life times ago, under a banyan tree in the village of Hasapur, an astrologer cupped his ears his satellite dish, to the stars- and foretold my widowhood and exile" (3).

Breaking from the usual time honoured traditional marriage Jyoti chooses Prakash Vijh, an intelligent, educated young man who does believe in feudalism, for her husband. Prakash shapes her into Jasmine, a modern city woman from Jyoti, a cursed and hapless village girl. "He gave me a new name: Jasmine. He said," You are small and sweet and heady, my Jasmine. You'll quicken the whole world with your perfume" (77).

Jasmine undertakes her odyssey to the U.S. on forged papers knowing not what future holds in store for her. She starts acknowledging her uprooted identity and her minority status in the big airport lounges:

We are refugees and mercenaries and guest workers; You see us sleeping in airport lounges; You watch us unwrapping the last of our native foods, unrolling our prayer rugs, reading our holy books, taking out for the hundredth time an aerogram promising a job or space to sleep, a newspaper in our language, a photo of happier times, a passport, a visa, a laissez-passer (100-01).

As her transmigration begins, this view of her status and condition as a diasporic being or a middleman starts hardening. She says with pain induced voice:

We are the outcasts and deportees, strange pilgrims visiting outlandish shrines, landing at the end of tarmacs, ferried in old army trucks where we are roughly handled and taken to roped off corners of waiting rooms where surely, barely wakened custom guards await their bribe. 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 (101).

Jasmine is estranged by the uncertainties of her life in an unknown country and shows confusion of an exile, who is straddling between the two countries and two cultures "What country? What continent? We

pass through wars, through plagues. I am hungry for news, but the discarded papers are in characters or languages I cannot read" (101).

Her passage to America is characterized by a traumatic experience, the first and the worst in the long series of adaptations, which requires to compromise her morality in order to survive. The transformation of identity from dutiful, submissive widow into assertive, criminal and individualistic American woman is in full swing. Jasmine's first encounter with America is a kind of what Malashri Lal says a "regeneration through violence" (59).

In the series of transformations of identity, her second incarnation starts from this painful moment. Jasmine contemplates her suicide, but the shower seems to waken her up from her suicidal drift and baptizes her with a new name and strength. She has a mission to fulfill and because of the mission, she cannot die yet. She admits:

I didn't feel the passionate embrace of Lord Yama that could turn a Kerosene flame into a lovers caress. I could not let my personal dishonor disrupt my mission. There would be plenty of time to die; I had not yet burned my husband's suit. I had not stood under the palm trees of the college campus (117-18).

She extends her tongue and slices it, blood oozing a perfect vengeful image of Goddess Kali, goddess of destruction and strength to destroy the devil who has violated her chastity. Slicing of her tongue represents an effective split from her mother tongue and traditions. Jasmine's full transformation from the victim into a vengeful goddess seems to be reinforced by imaging herself as the reincarnation of Kali as she says:

No one to call to, no one to disturb us. Just me and the man who had raped me, the man I had murdered. The room looked like a slaughter house. Blood had congealed on my hands, my chin, my breasts [...] I was in a room with a slain man, my body bloodied. I was walking death, Death incarnate (119).

To expatriate is to be in a state of mind and emotion which includes a wistful longing for the past. It is often symbolized by the pain of exile and homelessness. There is a complex view of the double vision of the expatriate—both a looking forward and a yearning backward. George Steiner describes the expatriate writer as "the Contemporary Everyman." As expatriate experience is, in fact, part of every person's life, it is part of the human condition. No matter where you lived, even if you lived in the same place all your life, you would look at the past, at lost moments, at lost opportunities, lost loves.

Jasmine also feels cultural shock like all immigrants, when she for the first time sees a revolving door or her encounter with American beggar who shouts abuses at her by calling her a 'foreign bitch.' In between confusion and chaos, Jasmine is tossing between identities and changing roles to explore the secrets of unknown America. In her transmigratory mythology, the self which is fluid and accumulative can be killed and endlessly reincarnated, "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" (138-39).

An immigrant's life is celebration of post modern geography and free floating identities, living everywhere and no where at the same time, consuming differences and creating mobile identities. In fact it's a series of reincarnations. As Mukherjee confides in one of her interviews:

I have been murdered and reborn at least three times, the very correct young woman. I was trained to be, and was very happy being, is very different from the politicized shrill, civil rights activists I was in Canada and from the urgent writer that I have become in the last few years in the United states (Michael, Gearson, and Grimes 18).

Violence has its own niche in the odyssey of Jasmine. It is the force which pushes her forward towards perfection. Violence is necessary for the formation of anything new. So, every advancement in Jasmine's pilgrimage is calculated with violent incidents. Right from her birth to astrologer; mad dog incident; father's death; Husband's death; Her traumatic journey and rape; encounter with Sukhi in New York; maiming of Bud and suicide of Darrel Lutz. But like Yeatsean gyre, her search for identity is continuous. "The recurrence of violence," in the words of Zohreh T. Sullivan "both contaminates and defines the spaces she enters, which she must then abandon" (172).

The concluding lines release the tension which runs like a red thread through out the novel, between Jasmine's predicted fate and her desire to escape and transform it. Otherness and Difference are no longer bugbears requiring protective cocoons of security. Instead of it, challenges must be confronted and play the role of positive stimuli and this forms the Leitmotive of the novel. Jasmine's last words are full of optimism and hope. She says "Then there is nothing I can do. Time will tell if I am a tornado, rubble-maker, arising from nowhere and disappearing into a cloud. I am out of the door and in the potholed and rutted drive way, scrambling a head of Taylor, greedy with wants and reckless with hope" (241).

Jasmine can be read as a fable of new migrant and her adventurous to create a niche for her. To quote Zohreh T. Sullivan:

Jasmine, manages to carve new certainties' out of losses, to shake off manacles of oppression, to celebrate the present as redemption for past struggles and as fresh space and time in which to create newness out of destruction of death. Here actions also carry their dark underside, always reminding us of the inevitable cruelty of newness, revolution and mutability (72).

Jasmine is an immigrant, plunges into the present new world. She undergoes an important change in the process. The so-called assimilation involved in immigration, however, does not mean a denial of the past, which is an impossibility. It means giving up a rigid hold of the past. It is a recognition of duality or in the words of Mukherjee, a recognition "of fluid identities" in her introduction to the collection of stories Darkness (1985), Mukherjee says that she saw her Indianess not "as a fragile entity to be preserved against obliteration [...] but as a set of fluid identities to be celebrate" (3).

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