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Transformation of Woman in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

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Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee is truly a global author, an expert in cross-cultural issues and a keen craftswoman who is an expert in portraying the phenomenal, systematic and detailed account of coming-of-age. She knows how to keep her readers glued to her writings. She builds a mystery and then demystifies it page after page, with each page unfolding and unraveling new dimensions of the character she writes about. In this era of globalization, in view of easing borders but mounting cultural differences, the conflict within to adapt to the change is the mainstay of some of her highly acclaimed works. She endeavors to dive deep into the distorted psyche of those immigrants who have been surviving in the conflict of traditional Indian values; inherent in their personality and their fascination for western mode of living that they have chosen out of their professional compulsions or for their urge to achieve a greater freedom in liberal and dynamic society of west. "Framed with the didactics of immigrants and emigrant, the thematic difference of which centers much of Bharati Mukherjee's fiction, her focus remains the predicament of migrant entities and the possibilities for absorption and rejection in the new world" (Jamwal 1). In her own words, Mukherjee finds this conflict of cultures to be an adventure worth living. She has found herself "thrust into adventures. Once I left the very protective, overly nurturing society [of India], my life intersected history" (Steinberg 33). The cultural intermingling in her work is the reflection of her personal life too. She was born in Calcutta (India), and then migrated to America. She married Clarke Blaise, who is settled in Canada. Her life is one of the perfect examples of mixing of two cultures. However, the cultural conflicts and identity crisis continues – as she names her two sons as Bart Anand and Bernard Sudhir – by mixing English and Bengali names. This struggle for identifying oneself is very well reflected in her works and underlines the relevance of cross-cultural differences in one's life. The conflict between a protective patriarchal society's upbringing and that of the values of a free society of the west is the substratum for casting the web of her stories. Just like a spider's web – neatly crafted-- her stories catch the reader's enthusiasm, line after line until the reader reaches to the core of this web. The centre stage of her stories is mainly acceptance of the truth. She finely builds the plot, based on a systematic circumstantial theme, and is able to

justify life as it is. She does not make any comment but the transition of the petite Indian village belle theme climaxing to a western world, gives the reader an opportunity to understand the turn of events in a beautiful manner.

Keywords: Globalization, Cultural Differences, Identity, Gender

Jasmine is a famous work of Bharati Mukherjee in which she depicts the metamorphosis of an Indian village girl to an American woman. Through this novel, Mukherjee tries to peel-off the complicated layers of cross-cultural realities in a thrilling manner. No doubt despite being a poorly-educated village girl, who is dependent on her brothers and husband, and who has no idea of what the world outside the bounds of her home is, Jyoti, the protagonist of the story, is the mascot of the inner strength and determination of a woman. It is the story of her determination and strength that empowers her to reach newer destinations – dedicated towards a single goal and then finding herself. The odyssey of Jyoti from a small village in Punjab to California, via Florida, New York and Iowa, personifies the acclimatization of a native soul to a cosmopolitan being in the changing environments. It's a story of adjustments and adaptation in view of the changing circumstances. It's a story of sustenance and progression. It's a story of a beginning and not the end. The whole story is mesmerizing but not at all perplexing. And here Mukherjee succeeds in making the reader part of her story. She provides the reader with a picturesque account of details – not of the surroundings but of the circumstances. *Jasmine* is a psychological treat to read and continues to maintain the suspense and thrill and takes the reader to an unending journey even after the last page is over. Thus, Mukherjee succeeds in pushing forward the theory of a seamless world for the women, and she targets a society where girls are often confined. The two contrasting worlds – one having no bounds and the other where you cannot go beyond boundaries-- present a juxtaposition of two situations and this is where Mukherjee beautifully crafts the storyline. According to Chetna Pokhriyal, *Jasmine* is a story based on the theme of “alienation” and “assimilation” (1) and during this course the strength of Jasmine, as a representative of the women of India, comes to the centrestage.

Jasmine is a story of transformation of an Indian country girl into an urban American citizen. This story cannot be complete with the biggest and most lucrative feature of American life, i.e. money. Jasmine is called a “gold digger” (*Jasmine* 195) and to some extent she is. She does not mind choosing “...the promise of America instead of old-world dutifulness” (*Jasmine* 240). She even doesn't mind being called a gold digger. Once in America, she becomes a true American. She understands the value of dollars and does not waste time in learning the art of earning it. She knows economic freedom means freedom from all the obligations. She understands the language of dollars in a capitalistic environment. For her economic freedom is the ability to pay “...back Professorji in a single check” (*Jasmine* 180). Economic freedom is the mainstay of Marxism inspired feminism.

Marxism and feminism are theories of power and its unequal distribution (Mackinnon 516). Through economic freedom the author presents the means to offset this inequality.

Uzunoglu Erten, in a critique of *Jasmine*, terms the novel an attempt to depict “cultural conflict and quest for identity” (33). Erten further elaborates:

In the postmodern world, where identities are both reduced and multiplied ironically, concepts such as globalization and multiculturalism have emerged to define the new world order. While the world is shrinking into a global village where differences melt into similarities, cultures and groups outside the dominant ideology find out ways to put forward their diversity.... *Jasmine* is the story of a young Indian woman who experiences identity crisis and cultural conflict both in and out of her own culture. (33)

The story revolves around a young village girl who by virtue of fate has to move from her native place in rural India to Tampa, Florida. During this movement from her native village Hasnapur, Jyoti, undergoes various metamorphoses during her odyssey in America—from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jase to Jane. Jyoti is the name given to her by her parents. However, when she marries, her husband, who is an ambitious young man, rechristens her as Jasmine and takes her to the city. As luck would have it, she is suddenly widowed. Driven by the passion to pursue the unfulfilled ambition of her husband, she decides to undertake a journey to America. The spitting image of the stereotypically good Hindu wife, Jasmine decides that upon reaching the long awaited destination in Tampa, Florida, she will build a funeral pyre of her late husband's clothes under a tree, and commit sati in his memory by diving into the flames. After being a widow, this desire of her becomes a passion and the entire events of the novel evolve while she makes her attempt to pursue her passion. The determination and strength of the central character can be understood in her ventures to live her husband's dream. She makes her way to the west as a stowaway on a boat. When she reaches the U.S. as an illegal emigrant a chain of events waits for her. She is raped and in turn she murders her rapist, she moves to New York, and obtains a “caregiver's position” with an academically inclined couple. For Taylor, the gentle, intellectual academic, Jasmine becomes Jase. However, the journey is not stopped; circumstances make way for her movement to Iowa, where she moves in with a banker, rechristened as Jane, adopts a Vietnamese son, gets pregnant and finally abandons the promise of domestic security to be carried off by Taylor to California. The entire chain of events reveals the growth of the persona of Jyoti, the village girl who had no choice of her own, to Jane, who knows what she wants and does so as per her choice. “America is no longer just the big nation far away, but has become, in its lesson of impermanence, the movement and rhythm of her pulse” (Aneja 73).

Jyoti is a girl who is born somewhere in the mid 1960s in the rural Indian settings named Hasnapur, somewhere in Punjab. It's a story that goes back back in memory lane – however, Mukherjee has taken the freedom to mix the events in their relevance and not in a

chronological order. The story starts in retrospect when she is twenty-four-year-old and is a widow by marital status, pregnant by physical status and living in love with her crippled lover, Bud Ripplemeyer, in Iowa. The story prospective deals with an account of two months in Iowa to relate the most recently developing events. But during that time, Jasmine also relates biographical events that span the distance between her Punjabi birth and her American adult life. These past biographical events inform the action set in Iowa. In chronological order, Jasmine moves from Hasnapur, Punjab, to Fowlers Key, Florida (near Tampa), to Flushing, New York, to Manhattan, to Baden, Iowa, and finally is off to California as the novel ends. Patel finds this chronology of events to be perfect to be termed as an attempt to construct identity through mobility (35). Dascalu uses a better phrase to define it – she calls the storyline to be the “deconstructive ontology of the hyphenated being in exile” (260). Aneja prefers to call it “a sweet scent of exile” (Aneja 72).

The story is unconventional, much like the voyages of a sailor in the medieval times. Interestingly, the itinerary of Jasmine is also like that of Christopher Columbus, who set the journey to find a new route to India. As a young man Christopher Columbus went to Portugal to make a living – Jyoti moved to city after her marriage. Columbus got the patronage of King of Spain to start his voyage to India – Jyoti got the patronage of her brothers to set the sail to start her voyage. And in the end – both ended up in finding new lands. Thus, the story is full of adventure and while doing so Bharati Mukherjee successfully and strongly adopts a feminist outlook underlining the inner strengths of a traditional Indian woman who bravely fights all the odds to emerge as a winner.

Despite all the odds, Jasmine has a strong desire to be educated. The village Masterji also tries to explain that education will help the girls to attain a position in the society.

[I]n hot-weather countries Mother Nature is too fecund. That is why it is important that modern ladies go for secondary-school education and find themselves positions. They are not shackling themselves to wifhood and maternity first chance. Surely you know, sir, that in our modern society many bright ladies are finding positions? (*Jasmine* 50)

In the novel *Jasmine*, the issue of women's education has been raised at places. “Mataji bullied Pitaji into letting me stay in school six years, which was three years longer than my sisters” (*Jasmine* 45). She qualifies this sentence with another that shows that in the traditional village society, education of girls has no worth at all. For girls are brought up to be married, their destiny is marriage and obeying their husbands. “...big-city men prefer us village girls because we are brought up to be caring and have no minds of our own. Village girls are like cattle; whichever way you lead them, that is the way they will go” (*Jasmine* 46). The paradox is that while the brothers of Jasmine are given freedom to get education, it is Jasmine who is smuggled “...into the examination hall so I could write their exams. They were proud of me

because Masterji said I wrote the best English compositions, and they had me translate instruction manuals and write school or job applications.” (*Jasmine* 46)

Education is a big feminist issue. It plays a great role in bringing gender equality. According to Bhaskar Chatterjee, “Gender disparities in education are directly linked with gender inequalities existing at the level of the family, educational institutions and society...It is difficult to achieve gender parity in education without moving towards equality between sexes in terms on entitlements, opportunities and experiences” (73).

Jyoti, the village girl, who becomes Jasmine after marriage, transforms to Jase by circumstances and turns to Jane by choice – with each change of name, the character grows. As village girl, Jyoti is a girl who is restricted – by tradition. She wants to study but she has to face hurdles; even then she is a brave girl, she questions the astrologer who predicts her widowhood irrespective of the aftermath. Jyoti just does not turn her face like a coward in the moments of distress but acts intelligently and bravely when faced with a problem- be it an animal or a human. She is beautiful, intelligent and brave yet confined, searching for a space where she can be set free. Most of the description of Jyoti is that of her childhood and adolescence. Identity is a major issue with adolescents. Disagreement with surroundings is the first step in search of that identity. Jyoti has a lot of things to complain about – she argues with the astrologer and despite his rebuttal has more faith in herself than in his proclamations. She wants to study and she makes it clear to her father. She has a lot of questions in her mind for which she wants the answer. She does not seem to agree with the thinking of her mother, her grandmother and all the village folks regarding the fate of a girl. “The onset of cognitive thinking triggers a host of emotional tasks to be completed, not the least of which is the development of a positive self-esteem and some degree of autonomy from their parents” (Irvin 25). In Jyoti, we see a confined bird which is unhappy being caged. She wants a sky to fly high. The confrontation of Jyoti with the people and surroundings around her is a clear sign of this persuasive intent to get free.

The growth of a girl in Indian society is seen mainly in relation to her attitude towards her family and her duty towards it. Coming into sharp conflict with the sense of family duty is the girl's burgeoning feeling of self identity. It is in the course of this conflict that the full identity of the girl is formed. The successful formation of this identity depends upon the delicate balance that the girl maintains between submission and revolt. Growth into maturity and selfhood is frequently tested in family situation in the course of confrontation with adults. (Iyer 79)

Ravichandran and Deivasigamani rightly call the story of Jasmine to be a “story of an identity in motion” (Ravichandran and Deivasigamani 553). This is evident with every change in time, place and most importantly name of the central character of the novel *Jasmine*. If Jyoti is a bird confined in a cage, then Jasmine is a step ahead in the direction of

being free – and as the circumstances unfold, the character grows – with each experience providing an opportunity to learn a new lesson and with each new lesson the protagonist of the novel attaining a new sense of self identification. Thus with each turn of events, we come across a new identity. Throughout the novel, we come across “remaking” and “reshaping” of the identity of Jasmine. This “remaking” or reshaping of identities is an important concept in the novels of Bharati Mukherjee, who, discarding the hyphenated label of Indian-American, calls herself an American by “choice” (Dlaska 1). Her novels, according to her husband, Clark Blaise, deal with the “unhousement” and “rehousement” of people, “the process of breaking away from the culture into which one was born and the re-rooting of oneself in a new culture” (Dlaska 1)

After marriage, Jyoti becomes Jasmine, a new name, a new social role and a new meaning to life. The love and adoration she receives from Prakash gives her a new identity, the camaraderie she shares with Prakash gives her an identity of being equal. It is the time when she has happier times of her life. She starts to see the dreams and lived the fantasies – “Vijh & Wife! Vijh & Vijh. Vijh & Sons.” (*Jasmine* 89) This shuttling between identities continues throughout the novel so does the events that govern this shift. “Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttled between identities” (*Jasmine* 77).

The brutal killing of Prakash is a turning point that makes this subtle transformation of identities a radical one. The dependent village girl who was learning the art of being in love with her husband turns into a determined, goal driven lady who knows what she sets her eyes on and is destined to get it by any means. The rest is the story of this transition. Adaptation of new values, new cultures, new identities and exploration of new selves is the mainstay of the novel. The events are swift and full of momentum and so is the identity of Jyoti to Jasmine. “I.. am a tornado. I hit the trailer parks first, the prefabs, the weakest links. How many more shapes are in me, how many more selves, how many more husbands?” (*Jasmine* 215). The village girl that we identify as Jyoti is no more existent, this tornado is capable enough of transforming the innocent Jyoti from rural India into a urbane well assimilated American. Sobti perceives the evolution of different identities of Jasmine by Bharti Mukherjee as “readdressing the fractured identities” (42).

The revelation of new identities and evolution of a new personality has been viewed as the evolution of “a perpetual nomad” (Dayal 69) who “...shuttled between identities” (*Jasmine* 77). The mobile woman or nomad becomes, in Rosi Braidotti’s words, “the kind of subject who has relinquished all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity ... [who] expresses the desire for an identity made of transitions, successive shifts, and coordinated changes, without or against an essential unity” (Braidotti 22). In contrast, Doreen Massey describes this mobility and shifting of identities to be - “spaces and places are not only themselves gendered, but ... also reflect and affect the ways in which gender is constructed and understood” (179); then mobility allows the female characters to move beyond the traditional boundaries of female identity. This is exactly what happens in *Jasmine* and it seems to be a

natural progression as a process of adaptation to the changing environment. The transformation of Jasmine throughout the novel shows human characteristics. Bharati Mukherjee has tried to remain realistic and not create larger than life images. The resurrection of Jasmine's identity with each change in time, place and circumstances is the characteristic of survival. The change follows the Darwinian principle of "Adapt or Die". The inner strength of Jasmine is joined with her determination that she cannot die until she fulfils her goal, and that is why despite traveling across the world, facing a number of hardships, changing as per the need of the hour, she survives and ultimately fulfils her stated goal. But in doing so she finds a new meaning to her life, a new identity and probably courage to start a new journey.

The evolution of new identities is thus an inspiration, a ray of hope depicting a never-say-die approach and above all an instinct to survive. Symbolically, this transition raises some very feminist questions – first of all the question of life of a woman after the death of her husband in Indian context. Most of the times, the life of a widow in Indian society is viewed as the end of road for her. One cannot imagine the adventurous journey covered by Jasmine to reach to USA as a characteristic of a traditional Indian woman. Indian woman is considered as a symbol of forgiveness. Jasmine defies these ideals – she chooses to be "...greedy with wants and reckless from hope" (*Jasmine* 241). she is not stable – she prefers to be a nomad and makes her choice of changing a would-be husband even when she is carrying the baby of another, she is revengeful – she kills the half-faced man when he rapes her; she is not pure in the true Indian sense as she can by choice get pregnant with a man and can decide to live with another. The entire shifting of identities is an attempt to give a free identity through one's own experience and not fit into the stereotypical cast by tradition.

Jasmine is a woman for whom, her personal goals are supreme and they tarnish the sacrificial image of an Indian woman. Karin calls her a "gold digger". Despite justifying her relationship with Bud by stating, "Bud is gold,... and if digging him out of the sadness he was in when I met him was what she meant, then, yes, I was a gold digger" (*Jasmine* 196), she does not clear herself of this blame. The feebleness of Jasmine's justification on this count goes astray when Jasmine tries to deny her attraction to Bud's assets, but even in attempting to reframe her relationship with him as based on emotion, she cannot disclaim the material underpinnings of their relationship. Yes, she says, my very care for Bud is a kind of digging for gold—acquiescing to and oddly rehearsing the language of land claims and speculation alongside protestations of feeling.

The relationship of Jasmine with Bud Ripplemeyer is one of the strongest attempts to break the Sati-Savitri image of Indian women; Jasmine becomes "caregiver" Jane to a crippled Bud. In her earlier Avatar as a nanny in the Taylor's household too her domestic duties were indeed more maternal. However, as Bud's caregiver, however, Jasmine seems to be ready for much larger roles- "[a]fter I prepare him for bed, undo the shoes, pull off the pants, sponge-bathe him, he likes me to change roles, from caregiver to temptress, and I try to

do it convincingly” (*Jasmine* 36). The depiction shows a change of roles at the wink of an eye, a shift from a caregiver to an erotic figure. Further account of the dexterity with which she performs these tasks again breaks the image of chastity of a traditional Indian woman, “[t]here are massages I must administer, pushing him on the prostate, tools I must push up him so that, at least on very special nights, he can ejaculate” (*Jasmine* 37). It is noteworthy, that unlike her contemporary writers such as Arundhati Roy who have provided graphical depictions of sexual acts in *The God of Small Things*, Bharati Mukherjee, despite touching the sensitive subject of sexuality, and that too in an unconventional way, does not give a graphic account anywhere.

Jasmine is an epitome of redefined Indian woman, who walks through her extremely protected environment to a society with no boundaries. Her life is full of adventure, mostly absent from the life of an Indian woman. She breaks a number of iconic images associated with Indian women. She is a born rebel, she challenges the destiny, argues with the astrologer who predicts her widowhood, and despite being wounded by the irritated astrologer does not surrender to her predicaments. She raises a voice for her education. She makes her ambitions clear. She goes to see the Cinema with her brothers. She enters into a marital relationship through a registered marriage defying the tradition of extravagant marriage ceremonies. For her, her goal is supreme, and for that she is ready to pay the cost. She changes with the circumstances, and does not fall into the guiles of the Indian middle class morality. She knows well when to bend and when to revenge and she completes these tasks almost perfectly.

To be frank, Jasmine is a total transformation of an Indian body into an American soul. While defining this character, Bharati Mukherjee says, “I think of Jasmine and many of my characters, as being people who are pulling themselves out of the very traditional world in which their fate is predetermined, their destiny resigned to the stars. But Jasmine says: I'm going to reposition the stars.” (Meer 26)

Talking about the iconoclastic portrayal of Jasmine, Bharati Mukherjee says, “Jasmine falls in love with a number of men who change her life, and whose lives she changes substantially; sometimes destroys, inadvertently. It's a novel of a woman with appetites that she is willing to indulge. She's a torn angel” (Meer 26). This shows that Jasmine is the story of change and transformation and a change replaces tradition.

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