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The Notion of Transformation and Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

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Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee is one of the eminent expatriate writers of modern English literature. She was born in India, but settled down in Canada at present. Her writings spread the fragrances of her motherland, its traditions, customs and values. Each novel of her has a heroine of Indian origin, who suffers hard to find out her own new identity in the new world. In her novel *Jasmine*, she takes up the theme of search for identity. The novel moves round a woman protagonist Jyoti an ambitious lady who moves from her motherland and settles down in the U.S. in order to fulfill all her wishes and dreams. During her lifetime she travels to many places and with the changing of place her identity also changes. She from Jyoti transforms to *Jasmine*, *Jazzy*, *Jase* and *Jane*. Throughout her journey, she believes that she is born more than once.

Keywords

Bharati Mukherjee; *Jasmine*; Traditions; Customs; Values.

Introduction

Expatriate sensibility is a wide spread phenomenon in this new era of literature. It is a strong bonding and feeling that an expatriate feels for his country or nation. To understand the expatriate sensibility it is very necessary to understand the psychology of an expatriate artist, who is struggling hard to find out a new identity in the new world. Someone said that “every journey away from home is only a journey towards home”. An expatriate writer always focuses on the native country that has been left behind. There are many expatriate writers who are born in India, but settled outside the country like Vikram Seth, Geeta Mehta, Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee etc. and their writings always spread the fragrance of their native land. When one looks at the various expatriate writers, the feeling of ‘nostalgia’ in their writings can be acknowledged.

This paper focuses on the life of an immigrant in the novel *Jasmine* by Bharati Mukherjee. Bharati Mukherjee is one of the eminent expatriate writer of modern Indian fiction. She was born in India, but for the last two decades, she has settled down in America. At present she is working as a professor in the Department of English at the University of California, Berkeley.

Mukherjee’s novels cover a wide range of expatriate sensibility. Her novels reflect the cultural conflict of East–West, alienation, assimilation and the sufferings of immigrants, who are trying hard to find out their own identity in the new world. Each of her novels depict the story of a female immigrant protagonist and her diasporic journey, how much they suffered in an alien land and how many times they transformed themselves in order to survive in the new world. Her writings always present the true pictures of Indian expatriates.

Life of an Immigrant in *Jasmine*

Bharati Mukherjee wrote *Jasmine* in 1989. It depicts the story of a young Indian woman Jyoti who lives in the United States and tries to adopt to the American way of living in order to survive there. She tries hard to adjust in the new environment among the new people. Many times she transformed herself also but every time she fails to establish her new identity in the new world. The more she tries the more she suffers. Jyoti is a lonely alien woman in the midst of the crowd, who suffers a lot in her life in order to search her real identity and happiness.

Her Transformation and Quest of Identity

In the novel *Jasmine* she takes up the theme of quest of identity. In the novel Jasmine's search for her identity and her true self began from the day she was born. Jasmine is married at the age of fourteen to Prakash Vihh an engineering student. Prakash is a modern city boy who does not believe in old Indian traditions and customs and want to live a modern luxurious life. After marriage he gave the name Jasmine to Jyoti. It was the first transformation in her identity. She said: "wanted to break down the Jyoti I'd been in Hasnapur and gave me a new name: Jasmine (Mukherjee 77)". Prakash wants her to become a modern city woman. To break off the past he gave her a new name Jasmine and this was the beginning of a new journey of her life. They both are ambitious and want to live a luxurious life so they plan to settle down in America, but in the meanwhile religious tensions arise and Jasmine and Prakash became the victims of a bombing. Prakash is killed in the bombing saving his wife.

Jasmine with a determined mind, continues her journey and sets off to the United States and tries to enter in the country illegally (she is underage and without visa). When she reached the Gulf of Florida, she is brutally physically harassed by the captain of the ship. She stabs the captain to death by transforming into Kali, the goddess of destruction. She was reborn not by

killing herself but by killing the captain and in this act she finds strength to continue her journey and to start a new life in America.

Again her identity is transformed when she meets an American girl Lillian Gordon, who helped her to learn how to become an American. Gordon advised her: “let the past make you wary, by all means but do not let it deform you (Mukherjee 131)”. Gordon gave the nickname Jazzy to Jasmine. She gladly accepted her new name and separated herself from all that is Indian and forgets her past completely.

Jasmine travel a lot in her life and with the changing of place her identity also changes. According to her plan, she then moves to New York, where she stays with an American family, Mr. Taylor, his wife Wylie and their daughter Duff. Taylor begins to call her Jase. She absorbed the alien culture greedily and at this phase of her life she became more confident and self-dependent. She was happy there. The alien land taught her to live with ease and confident. In spite of her unstable identity Jasmine gave love and care to all those who needed her and helped her. She fell in love with Taylor and lives with him and with his daughter when his wife leaves him. But again comes a shift in her life, when sees her husband’s murderer in New York. Jasmine then leaves for Iowa because of fear and then she meet Mr. Bud Ripplemayer an American banker who calls her Jane. They lived together but Jasmine was not happy and feels isolated there. Four years living with Bud, she leaves with Taylor for California without any sense of guilt. Jasmine had a sense of relief in leaving Bud rather than feeling guilty. She remarks: “I am not choosing between the two men, I am caught between the promises of America and old world dutifulness, a care giver’s life is a good life a worthy life (Mukherjee 181)”.

It was a clear response of her courage. Thus, throughout the novel Jasmine travels to many places and she is given different identity every time. One can say that she is born more than once.

Conclusion

Mukherjee in order to diminish the cultural conflict releases her characters into a free land and they construct their own new selves through a series of experience. Jasmine learnt to “walk and talk” like an American, she grasp every opportunity to become American. At every step of her life, Jasmine is a winner she does not allow the troubles to obstruct the path of her progress. She happily accepted whatever comes in her way without any regret. She learnt to live not for her husband or for her children but for herself. She is a true feminist who fights against every challenges in life and made her place in the society. At last Jasmine said: “there is nothing I can do, time will tell if I am a tornado arising from nowhere and disappearing into the cloud (Mukherjee 241)”. At the end she realizes that the true identity of a person does not lie in being an American or an Indian but it lies in the inner spirit of the person to be at peace with herself. Thus Mukherjee presents Jasmine as a survivor, a fighter and an adaptor.

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