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A quest for real identity in bharati mukherjee's jasmine

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Abstract

The rising ebb and flow of globalization has altered the vista of present day literature. The pinnacle of this new literary stream has been occupied by a new generation of South Asian female writers. Among them Bharati Mukherjee has specified herself among all those groundbreaking diasporic Indian female writers. The description of diasporic experience of these expatriate writers provides an opportunity to look into the lives of all those people of Indian origin, who have been living in United States. Such experiences also act as a paradigm or lens through which all the complex constructions of diasporic experiences can better be understood. My objective in this research paper is to show how immigrants in Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* attempt to adjust and adapt to American society and how they are left as rootless and homeless. Her protagonists try to represent themselves with a new identity after facing a lot of struggle in an alien land. Bharati Mukherjee declares that in the modern age of diaspora no one can claim his/her biological identity as real and authentic identity because emigration brings both physical and psychological changes.

Keywords: Identity, bilungsroman, double-consciousness, ghettoization, assimilation.

1. Introduction

The conflict of identity has become a practical problem which is faced by modern individuals. The identity of a modern man is incomplete, contradictory and fractured. In postmodern sense, identity is not a thing, but it's a continuous process which goes on endlessly. Identity crisis is gaining intensity due to globalization and other developments. Madan Sarup proclaims in *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World* (1998), that identity "is a mediating concept between the external and the internal, the individual and society, theory and practice. Identity a convenient 'tool' through which we try to understand many aspects – personal, philosophical, political – of our lives"¹ (Sarup 28). Thus the domain of identity includes many writings which mingle together and contradict. Sarup further states, "These writings consist of many quotations from the innumerable centers of culture, ideological state apparatus and practices: parents, family, school, the workplace, the media, the political parties, the state etc. Human subjects have the capacity to; work' on these differences within an individual, who is never a unified member of a single unified group. It is these differences that create the space in which the human subject exercises a measure of interpretative freedom"² (Sarup 25).

Sarup views identity as a multi-dimensional space which provides grounds for interpreting it into different meanings. The variations in identity are due to increase in migrations and globalized activities and processes and such processes are affecting a large number of people and societies. Hyphenated identities are challenging native conceptions of collective identity and citizenship. All diasporic studies, theories and cultural studies have been expressed the changing migrant identities. Bharti Mukherjee, V.S.Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Stuart Hall, Homi Bhabha, Avtar Brah, Gayatri Chakravathy and many other migrant writers and theorists have shared much on how transnational unfixed identities have been challenging the concept of nation-bound identities and ethnic purity. Instead of many differences they exhibit, the idea of the problem is taken up in the same way as post-structuralists and postmodernists comprehended. The term subject conveys split-up and unfixed notion of the 'self' and therefore, can be replaced with the terms like 'self' and 'identity' which state self as a fixed, centered, complete and autonomous. A dual location of the diasporic identity and self is an in-between space and this location interrogates and poses problems whether identity is natural or invented, and all the diasporic literature is pregnant with the notion of identity and identity formation. Such dynamic processes help in constructing and strengthening ethnic ghettoization and in making hyphenated identity status a wide phenomenon.

Zygmunt Bauman, a sociologist, in his book *Liquid Modernity* (2000), has advanced a

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different and new turn to the debate. He argues that in the postmodern era, society is viewed as a postmodern consumer society, consumption is the motto of life and life is regulated by consumption and it is “guided by seduction, ever rising desires and volatile wishes – no longer by normative regulation”³ (Bauman76). Consumers want to take immediate satisfaction and prompt fulfillment “means immediate ‘on-the-spot’ fulfillment – but also immediate exhaustion and fading of interest”⁴ (118). Bauman searches for a stable identity; for him it is a never-ending process and it is an exploration for ceaseless addictive spirit of experimentation. Old identities are disposed off easily and new ones are constructed and accepted by heart. Old identities are thrown away like the cover of a mobile phone. Migrant’s quest for identity takes three separate paths: this quest results in understanding of hyphenated identity in in-between space, it brings about the quest for massive single identity with its national ventures, it also gives rise to uncontrolled fascinate modifications without any compunction. Cultural theory has attracted lots of public attention and enables a selective reachability to knowledge and productive of “new ethnicities” (Stuart Hall) which denies ethnological and racial assertions of motherland and ancestral tribes which emphasizes flow and ethnic progression and normal association to the land of real belonging. The second point is set against to this idealistic hybridism as it is reauthentication of absolute identity. And the third point which denies both amalgamation and autochthonic.

Bharati Mukherjee’s works are accounts of diasporic identities and a subject of endless reinventions. In many interviews she appeared, she rejects the notion that identities are stable, fixed and unchanging. She does not accept the notion of hyphenation and subscribes to the postmodern idea that self is always incomplete and always remains in the process of becoming. Her narratives explore her ideology of identity and state that identities are fluid and discursive formations but a close reading of her texts depict a contradictory view in which all her protagonists find it different to discard their old, traditional and cultural identities and selves. Mukherjee explores the sufferings and transformations a migrant has to undergo for survival in the host culture. The migrant adopts new cultures and new epistemologies connected with his/her own nostalgia, consciousness of unhoused and marginality which leads to the generation of new experiences, inner selves and subjectivities. Mukherjee proclaims in an interview with Russell Schoch that she through her works has depicted the capacity to alter the thinking of people about others and about nationhood. She proclaims:

“To make people realize that we have to get away from thinking of ourselves – of our identities – as fixed, as dependent only 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 decided 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’re going to crack.”⁵ (Interview with Russell Schoch”)

Mukherjee’s conception of fluid identity is true to her characters who always remain in the state of becoming. Even Roger Bromley states, “Becoming always exceeds its own limits, fixtures and closures. . .”⁶(Bromley 5). Therefore, Mukherjee’s protagonists happily shed their old cultural identities and put on new selves and identities. They take on

all possible styles of becoming. Mukherjee finds corroborative information regarding nature of identity in a “fascinating published material of psychologists and academics – Alan Roland’s work on the contextual self and in Robert J. Lifton’s work on the protean self”⁷ (Interview with Tina Chen and S.X. Goudie). Anything which helps in the process of becoming may be modern technologies or mental or physical violence is responsible for bringing about desired changes and transformations.

In the process of identity formation self-perception plays a significant role and this feature is acquired during the initial years of life. In self-perception, there is always an intrinsic ambivalence in which a person attempts to draw a line between artificial image and real one. Jacques Lacan proclaims that there must be proper differentiation between “I and Not-I” during self analysis. According to Lacan:

“The human offspring, at an age when he is for a time, however short, outdone by a chimpanzee in instrumental intelligence, can nevertheless already recognize as such his own image in a mirror. . . This act. . . immediately rebounds in a series of gestures in which he playfully experiences the relations of the assumed movements of the image to the reflected environment, and of this virtual complex to the reality it reduplicates. . .”⁸ (Lacan 93).

The duplicate reflection of self exists in a different space, so this sense of ambivalence can be extended to the outer environment. Environment has a great impact upon the individual and if anyone examines its influence upon the individual, the role of environment becomes intricate. Self-perception is not only influenced by spatial and temporal factors, these factors play a significant role in the transformation of one’s identity. Bharati Mukherjee in *Jasmine* explores the troubles and tensions crop up due to changes in self-perception. *Jasmine* is a tale of a diasporic South Asian woman who lives in America. Lacan postulates that self is viewed in the manner it is represented, it is constituted from the conceptions of others who are the observers of the self. On the other hand, bildungsroman means that self is the outcome of internal progress and this process starts from a single self. The Lacanian’s set of ideas intricate the bildungsroman portrayal of self, as Lacan describes that the process of the creation of an identity is assisted by others, whereby others create the self. External factors contribute in the development of an individual.

Likewise, external forces, outer environment assist Jasmine in the formation of her identity. She seeks the precise path between time and space. Her conception and outlook about herself changes and results not only in a notion of “double consciousness” of Du Bois, but a multiplicity of consciousness. Jasmine is confronted with multiple identities which create tension and she tries hard to accept this situation of conflicting perceptions to avoid a start of psychological tension within her mind. She feels the need to reconcile and for her reconciliation means to rediscover her identity for forming a new self. Jasmine not only perceives herself in a different manner but adapts herself and turns into a completely different person into every space she enters. Jasmine redefines the term assimilation as creation of a new self, but not adaptation. Even though Jasmine undergoes various transformations but her past always remains with her and frightens her by ceasing to accept new way of life she wants to enter.

Jyoti is born in the small village of Hasanpur, in the district of Punjab, India. She gets married to a laborious, handsome young man, named Prakash Vjeh. While living in India,

Jasmine perceives America differently. For her being American means being white. When her husband Prakash brings the brochure of the Florida International Institute of Technology, after going through it Jasmine gets astonished to catch a glimpse of America and feels America in fact is very different. In addition to this, Jasmine has an opposed perception about the sexuality of American woman and she becomes anxious because Prakash is studying in that institute where “there will all those hot-blooded American girls. You know what they are like.”⁹ (Jasmine 91) At this moment Jasmine is unaware of all the complexities of cultural and ancestral identities in America and what is more, she is right-wing in her perception about female sexuality.

Prakash perceives Jasmine as a sexual figure and his caretaker cum wife. But he doesn't demote and humiliate her, for Prakash she is an innocent and pious wife who is worshipped in age-old traditional Indian culture. Prakash regards Jasmine's secrecy and he is “afraid of embarrassing [her] with any desire or demand”¹⁰ (79) Jasmine even views herself in a sexual context but without any shame. Prakash renames “Jyoti” as “Jasmine”, he assists Jasmine in her transmutations and he turns Jasmynes into the changed figures of his creation. “[Prakash] wanted to break down the Jyoti I'd been in Hasnapur and make me a new kind of city woman. To break off the past, he gave me a new name: Jasmine....Jyoti, Jasmine : I shuttled between identities.”¹¹ (77) Prakash gives a new identification to Jasmine by changing her old identity; this signifies her first movement from her conventional Indian tradition and customs. Jasmine has occupied two distinctly separate selves; she is shuttling between two selves and trying hard to connect with them, though she understands that the two selves are separate from each other.

When Prakash renames Jyoti as Jasmine, it throws light on a significant question of mechanism or operating system that assists in the process of identity-formation of Jasmine. According to Lacan's definition of self, this mechanism is external force which inspires to generate Jasmine's new identity, Jasmine herself is going through an internal transformations. While comparing Jyoti to Jasmine, Jyoti is delineated as a more independent woman than Jasmine. Jyoti's new identity has emerged from Prakash's psychology, so in greater proportion she is a male's creation. On the other hand, Jasmine is more advanced, progressive and forward looking woman but this metamorphosis is the result of conventional Indian male dominated system, as Prakash wishes to see her. She modifies herself and eventually becomes the outcome of Prakash's expectations and aspirations. Thus through this Mukherjee examines the process of identity formation through Lacan's perception. Lacan describes that identity formation is a very complex process and it is not entirely dependent on the internal power of an individual, but also upon external forces.

Unfortunately, Jasmine becomes widow at the age of seventeen after Prakash is murdered. In shattered and crushed condition, she makes up her mind to accomplish the unfinished dream of her husband of moving and settled in America. “Prakash had taken Jyoti, and created Jasmine would complete the mission of Prakash.”¹² (97) After landing in Florida, she encounters Half-Face, who is the captain of the ship through which she makes an entrance into the country. At this moment, she encounters her first experience of American ethnic division. Jasmine is surprised about the name of Half-face which sounds (“Bubba”). She enquires whether this name does have Indian origins because it sounds somewhat Indian “Baba”. Half-face then answers “Bubba ain't no Indian name,

no way. In the nigger-shipping bizness we don't bother with last names.”¹³ (111) Half-face behaves in a disrespectful way to Jasmine, for he views her not as an Indian, rather as a black person.

In a new place she finds herself homeless and in the hope of getting security and shelter, she trusts Half-face and permits him to accompany her. As they reach the motel Half-face reveals his dirty intentions and rapes her. He perceives Jasmine as a prostitute “one prime little piece.”¹⁴ (115) After this shameful act, Jasmine is filled with sense of indignity and humiliation about her sexuality because of the manner 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. . .”¹⁵ (117) Jasmine has acquired a new conception of her sexuality from which she can't escape herself, due to this her barbarity evokes in order to express her strife and hostility that she experiences between the sexual identity she has had with Prakash and with Half-face. She assassinates Half-face and her and this bold act increases her strength and she drops her idea of committing sati by burning herself over the burnt clothing of her husband. After the assassination, Jasmine does a commitment to herself to begin a new journey in America. She prepares herself to lead a different life, which is away from her pure and pious identity and her orthodox Indian past. After the rape incident Jasmine reveals a new transformation of her identity she expresses when she used to live with Prakash, who took her as a more liberated and independent woman. She acknowledges that this agony of rape has brought the greatest change in her life; this shocking experience on one hand shuts her completely from inner and on the other hand, builds her confidence and permits her to cope with herself and come into her own self. Thus Jasmine's identity is formed not only by construction but by destruction of herself. As the novel proceeds, such contradictions and conflicts become an order because Jasmine requires all obstructions and retardations in her way to develop as a new person.

Jasmine comes face to face with Lillian Gordon, who helps her by affording her a new house. Lillian also imparts her lessons on how to become an American, thus initiating the process of assimilation. After Prakash, Jasmine's husband, Lillian characters in Jasmine's life who assigns a new westernized nickname “Jazzy” to Jasmine. This name is a symbol of her acceptance of American culture. In the company of Lillian, Jasmine learns to speak, to walk, and to dress the way the Americans do. She can amalgamate into American culture easily, for “... if you walk and talk American, they'll think you were born here. Most Americans can't imagine anything else.”¹⁶(134-5.) Jasmine realizes that to become an American does not mean being white or being permanently settled in United States, it means appropriate acquisition of American culture, customs and its social behavior that completes the process of assimilation. Jasmine takes on her new identity gladly, that she feels was far away from her so long, but now once thought of as an impossible identity has changed into possible one. “I checked myself in the mirror, shocked at the transformation. Jazzy in a t-shirt, tight cords and running shoes. I couldn't tell if with the Hasnapuri sidle I'd also abandoned my Hasnapuri modesty.”¹⁷ (133) As Jasmine moves from her older identity to becoming “Jazzy”, her self-perception declares that Jasmine is now a part of past. But this past never eliminates completely, its traces are always there in the present.

Jasmine's life is an ever-lasting process of movement. She migrates from one place to another, from one self to another.

Her life is a segment of “interstitial space”, and this space is specified by progressive movements and ambivalences. All diasporic communities commute this space and it is common for them. This is a space where “nothing was rooted anymore. Everything was in motion.”¹⁸ (152.) America is equated with Jasmine, as she glorifies and adores America as a symbol of integrity and uniformity. Now she realizes that every new location depicts a new feature of American life as every new place involves the construction of another new self for her. Both America and Jasmine can never be unique or complete in their nature, they rather exist heterogeneously while reflecting the possibility of a new self. Through this, Bharati Mukherjee depicts the relationship between surroundings and diasporic character, and this association is inseparable. Even Lacanian theory propounds this fact of individual and her surroundings influence each other and transform each other. As has already discussed earlier, which Jasmine lives her life in liminal surroundings which are specified by a perpetual ambiguity characterized by Jasmine herself. She puts across this sense of transitory nature where she articulates her diasporic experience. “We are refugees and mercenaries and guest workers; you see us sleeping in airport lounges. . . taking out for the hundredth time an aerogram promising. . . a passport, a visa, a laissez-passer. . . We are outcasts and deportees. . . landing at the end of tarmacs. . . roughly handled and taken to waiting rooms. . . 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. . . For us, there is only a slate and someone who remembers to write in chalk, DELAYED, or TO BE ANNOUNCED, or OUT OF SERVICE...What country? What continent? We pass through wars, through plagues. . . The zigzag route is straightest.”¹⁹ (100-01)

Figurative expressions and language used in this passage are references of travel, migration, movements and transitory nature of the expatriate experience. Life is not in motion but it is “delayed” on the way to the final destination. Airport lounges represent home like place while passport demonstrates the solution of all possible chances, waiting rooms present the way of life. Disruption, defenselessness, anxiety and ambivalence are the terms which define and describe the liminal condition as well as Jasmine’s perpetual identity formation. She states, “I am caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness. . . We’ve stowed away on boats. . . we’ve hurtled through time tunnels. We’ve seen the worst and survived. Like creatures in fairy tales, we’ve shrunk and we’ve swollen and we’ve swallowed the cosmos whole.”²⁰ (240)

The above interpretation of diasporic experience can be seen in a negative sense, but the flow of narration solidifies the possibility of external and internal agency for a nomadic person. At one point of time Jasmine narrates : “We’ve swallowed the cosmos whole”²¹.(240) This statement of Jasmine points out that the nature of diasporic experience is not completely negative but a diasporic person can retain something positive of it. To swallow the cosmos and remain alive is an achievement in itself. Jasmine undergoes the same condition and bears “the worst” situations which shatter her entirely until she has “shrunk”. Though a nomad moves from one place to another in a “zigzag route”, but in turn a physical and mental strain string all diasporic figures to continue their route in order to reach toward their destination.

For every new set of consciousness Jasmine creates a new identity, her preceding identities are not completely erased,

but reoriginate in significant situations in the text and thus intensifies and makes worse the conflict between different selves. However, this conflict strengthens Jasmine to create more authoritative and powerful identity, different from her former identities. Jasmine soon gets smothered by the inertia of this house and she goes ahead with her next move to New York to become the au pair for an American family. Jasmine’s interaction with Taylor, his wife Wylie and his daughter Duff helps her in creating a new perception about herself. She gets involved with Hayes family and gradually learns to train in English language, thus making appropriate attempts to get assimilated herself into America culture. Taylor perceives Jasmine as a sexual being. He accepts her ethnicity but can’t adjust her fully into his non-native imaginative perception. Jasmine proclaims that her wish to change herself for Taylor is not only useless but springs out of her own inclination to change herself by removing all traces of her relation with her sexuality. In the final phase of identity formation, Jasmine generates his new identity in Baden County. Here she comes across Bud Ripplemeyer, an American Banker. Jasmine falls in love with him and this intimate relationship turns into marriage. Jasmine’s ethnic identity entirely changes in Baden. Her distinction from others is recognized but not understood and freely accepted. No endeavors are made to comprehend the specifications of this distinction. In contrast, Baden natives intend to entirely transform Jasmine into westernized figure and to view her as a familiar figure instead of non-native. Jasmine’s life is an ever-lasting process of movement. She migrates from one place to another, from one self to another.

Conclusion

Bharati Mukherjee explores the identity of Jasmine which is invariably developing, evolving and is totally unpredictable. Jasmine has various options but she prefers to choose the option of reproducing herself by encountering conflicts and coming out with multiple selves simultaneously. Different selves move in continuation towards the next identity. Jasmine, from starting to end, has created many selves and ultimately realized her uniqueness of creating even more identities. Her identities keep ever-changing with new surroundings and she views herself in a new light with each passing moment of time and shift in space.

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