

IDENTIFYING IDENTITY: THE QUEST FOR FEMALE IDENTITY IN MUKHERJEE'S JASMINE

S. Daniel Gnanaraj

Assistant Professor of English
Christ University
Bengaluru,
Karnataka 560029

Bharati Mukherjee's novels do not blindly promote or project American multi-culture or celebrate assimilation. They poignantly present and represent a definitive order to confront the historical and psychological circumstances that exist in the context of race and ethnicity in the United States. There are also concealed interpretations of Americanization, U.S. hegemony, and a chaotic situation of hybridization which neither the centre nor the periphery holds. She questions the role of individuality in a multi-cultured and crowded country through her novel *Jasmine*

The novelist blends the literal with the metaphorical and presents her character jasmine in an ambiance of ambivalence. Jasmine is both a destroyer and preserver, who destroys her ruthless past and preserves her identity so as to recreate in a strange land. She is also like the goddess kali who kills to feed the cycles of birth and re-birth. Jasmine as the heroine and as the metaphor of goddess transforms to uproot violence against the self and does prove that there is no singular self of herself. This transformation creates her sense of belongingness not only to the country she has emigrated but also to the cosmos on the whole.

Bharati Mukherjee has made unmentionable contributions to the realm of immigrant literature and recorded the inner voices and anguish of Asian American in synchrony with writers like Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston. She herself as a writer and as an individual has travelled culturally and geographically from India to the United states and therefore gives a first hand experience of the problems and perspectives faced by the people from all sections of the Indian society in an alien land. This is evident from her interview given to John crabbe and cited by John.K.Hoppe in his article, *The Technological Hybrid as Post-American: Cross-Cultural Genetics in Jasmine*. Mukherjee profoundly observes the diasporic disintegrations, the problems and predicaments of ethnicity and rootlessness in a new nation as :

We [immigrants] have experienced rapid changes in the history of the nations in which we lived. When we uproot ourselves from those countries and come here, either by choice or out of necessity, we suddenly must absorb 200 years of American history and learn to adapt to American society. Our lives are remarkable, often heroic.... Although they [the fictional immigrant characters] are often hurt or depressed by setbacks in their new lives and occupations, they do not give up. They take risks they wouldn't have taken in their old, comfortable worlds to solve their problems. As they change citizenship, they are reborn. (137)

Mukherjee succeeds most brilliantly in her 1989 novel, *Jasmine*. In *Jasmine* we see most clearly not only the evolution of the central character (*Jasmine*) as she enters her unfamiliar American culture and moves through an oscillating series of painful and joyful experiences, but we are asked by the author to comprehend *Jasmine's* metamorphosis (and her impact on the culture) through the implicit interplay of American myth and Hindu religious imagery. The religious and mystic synthesis defines the progress of the narrative and informs the psyche of the central character. (Sudha 151) After all, as *Jasmine* reflects, "Fates are intertwined in modern world and how can God keep them straight?" (12)

The novel *Jasmine* is a culmination of Mukherjee's characters: although a young Asian woman is the protagonist, she has changed from being a victim or passive agent to someone willing to make hard choices in pursuit of an identity not offered by the easy, pre-existing patterns from which she can choose: to be the burnt widow of her first husband; to be the victim of the man who raped her; to settle into a "Little India" enclave, isolated from America; or to be the caregiver of an older man. Instead, she and the motley recipients of her love have remade themselves into an atypical-and therefore more truly American-family unit. (Victoria Carchidi 94)

Jasmine is a tell-tale version of the female mind presented through the eyes of a village girl, *Jasmine*. She gets uprooted from her native land and finds herself in Florida, an unknown land. The rest of the narrative unfurls and explicates the travesties and struggles of *Jasmine* through her *Odyssey* in the United States. She is unfortunately widowed and finally wishes to undertake a journey to the United States to fulfill and re-live the dreams of her husband. She undergoes many re-christening of her names from *Jyoti* to *Jasmine* and finally from *Jase* to *Jane*. Being the best example of a chaste Hindu wife, *Jasmine* decides to reach Florida, the long-awaited destination and prepares to kill herself by burning herself in a funeral pyre made from her husband's clothes. She is suddenly raped upon reaching America and murders the rapist.

The story then shifts to New York where she gets the job of a care-taker in the house of an academically inclined couple. *Jasmine* becomes *Jase* at the home of Taylor, a genteel intellectual. Her next name transformation becomes fruitful at Iowa. She moves there with a banker, and later adopts a Vietnamese son and becomes pregnant after that. *Jasmine* is torn between the promises of the old world in India and the promises of new dreams in America. She continues to be born again and again to adopt herself to the changing times.

In Mukherjee's book, *Jyoti* is presented as an unformed mass of stereotypical values and beliefs. Through the multiple losses of her identity, or rather a lack of one, she finally seems to obtain a sharper definition and an identifiable personality. The metamorphosis is equally a movement from object- someone whose personality is viewed, observed and made note of- to subject, a character who carries the action of the text with her. The move occurs in the context and because of the insertion of *Jyoti* in the West and the penetration of her body by a Western male. As long as she remains an object of contemplation in the walls of Indian culture, *Jasmine* is seen as the victim of the text- victimized by her father who resists educational growth, victimized by the culture that has turned her to a Sati performing bride and later victimized in the West, when she

is raped or subjected to stereotypical readings. Thus she is a victim in the hands of third world patriarchy, Economics and the first world of imperialism.(Aneja 75)

As the novel opens, one could feel the pangs of pain experienced by Jyoti when she is told of the untimely death of her husband by an astrologer. She is extremely frightened and angered by the thought of being widowed at an early age. Jyoti falls to the ground and recalls, “My teeth, cut in to my tongue. A twig sticking out from a bundle of firewood. I’d scavenged , punched a star shaped wound into my fore head(1).The wound to her forehead scars to what she later boasts of a third eye”(2). The metaphor of the third eye draws the reader close to associate the third eye to Lord Shiva, the alpha and omega of creation and destruction. Shiva, by his third eye causes the cycle of Birth and Death of Creatures in the cosmos.The image of the Third- eye sets the tone of the novel in manifesting the dimensions of destruction and renewal in its narration.Jyoti becomes an incarnation of creation and destruction in her own life and in the lives of others. Her identity undergoes a series of deaths and re-births from Jyoti, a rustic Punjabi girl to Jane at the close of the novel.

WORKS CONSULTED

- Bose, Brinda. “A Question of Identity: Where Gender, Race, and America meet in Bharati Mukherjee” in Nelson, Emmanuel S. (ed.) *Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspectives*. New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993.
- Chua, C.L. “Passages from India: Migrating to America in the Fiction of V.S. Naipaul and Bharati Mukherjee” in Nelson, Emmanuel S. (ed.) *Reworlding: The Literature of the Indian Diaspora*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” in Mohanty, C. T., Russo, Ann and Torres, Lourdes (eds). *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991.
- Mukherjee, Bharati. *Wife*. New York: Fawcett Crest, 1975.
- Said, Edward. “Reflections on Exile” (1984) in Russell Ferguson et al. (eds.) *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*. New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1990.
- Sharma, Maya Manju. “The Inner World of Bharati Mukherjee: From Expatriate to Immigrant” in Emmanuel S. Nelson (ed.) *Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspectives*. New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1993.
- Rushdie, Salman. “Imaginary Homelands” in *Imaginary Homelands:Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*. London: Granta Books, 1991.
-] Bharati Mukherjee, *Wife* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1975) 212-13. All subsequent references to this work will appear in the text in parentheses.
- Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Madness in the Age of Reason* (New York: Random House, 1965) 250. All references to Foucault are from this work and are hereafter indicated in the text in parentheses after the abbreviation MC.
- Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Writers from Bront to Lessing* (Princeton: Princeton, 1977) 14.