Research Paper Literature

Assimilated Woman Psyche – A Reading of Bharati Mukherjee's Jasmine

J. RAJINI

Assistant Professor Department of English Kongu Engineering College (Autonomous) Perundurai, Erode – 638 052

ABSTRACT

Bharati Mukherjee is at her best in the portrayal of the predicament of women in terms of alienation, immigration, assimilation, expatriation, exile and quest for identity. She further looks beyond the entire trauma experienced by her women characters in order to trace the psychological transformation of her women characters. Mukherjee has predominantly written all the novels highlighting the struggles and hurdles that women face throughout their life. She transforms the stereotypical sufferings of a woman to an aggressive or independent person trying to seek an identity of their own and portrays them as self-assertive individuals in her fiction.Mukherjee's Jasmine explores the tortuous physical, mental and emotional agony of the protagonist Jasmine. It further reads the assimilated psyche of the protagonist who gets acquainted with the transformations, accepts the reality, adapts to the situations, showcases her intrepidness at times of crisis and emerges out into a totally whole new being.

KEYWORDS assimilation, psyche, trauma, transformation

Bharati Mukherjee's Jasmine is a story of a young widow who undergoes painful experiences throughout her life and finally attempts to achieve happiness. The novel traces the eventful life of a young Punjabi girl Jyoti who is born in Hasnapur, a small village in Punjab. It also traces the transformations that happened in her life on her way from Hasnapur to America.At the age of seven, an astrologer predicts that Jyoti will be widowed and live among foreigners. Though her childhood is an eventful one with misery, her marriage to PrakashVijh, an Engineering student and a man of intelligence brings out joy and pleasure in her life. At the age of fourteen when she marries Prakash, she starts to experience happiness. He renames her as "Jasmine" and gradually moulds her to change into a new, revolutionary woman. She says: "He 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" (77).

Prakash also implants the idea of settling into a much better life-style in America. As he plans to continue his studies in America, Jasmine fantasizes to lead a happy life thereafter with him.But for Mukherjee's heroines things never go that very easily.Pathetically her happiness lasts not for a long time in Jasmine's life. Prakash becomes a victim to a sikh extremist, Sukhwinder in a bomb explosion and dies. As he plans to continue his studies in America, Jasmine fantasizes to lead a happy life thereafter with him. But now her dream is shattered. She is grief-stricken, heart-brokenand left traumatized when she is called by the police for the "…identification of your (her) respected late spouse" (94). Jasmine's dejection and depression starts right from this cruel act of killing.However she decides not to spend the rest of her life as a widow. She resolves not to get back to Hasnapur. The transformation that Prakash had inculcated in her helps her to stand strong. She decides to leave to America in order to fulfil the mission of her husband as a matter of duty and honour. With the help of her brothers, she arranges her illegal documents, gets her passport and moves to the United States."Prakash had taken Jyoti and created Jasmine, and Jasmine would complete the mission of Prakash…I turned everything over to my brothers, along with my plan. They were stupefied. A village girl, going alone to America, without job, husband, or papers? I must be mad! Certainly, I was. I told them I had sworn it before God. A matter of duty and honor…" (97)

Mukherjee at this part of the novel portrays Jasmine as a sturdy woman rather than a submissive Hasnapuri woman. For, she gathers up all her guts and decides to move to an unknown country. She is desirous about standing against the superstitious beliefs and desires to break down the taboos of a Hasnapuri woman or any other woman of the Indian society. It is this thought which urges her to leave India. But unfortunately upon her arrival in Florida, Jasmine receives the next shock of her life, after the death of her husband. She is brutally raped by the sea captain Half-face in a motel. She is shocked and totally shattered. She now understands what evil is all about and decides to commit suicide. But then suddenly reminds herself about her mission. Mukherjee once again projects her as a strong woman: "… a sudden sense of mission that stopped me. What if my mission not yet over? ... 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." (117-118).However a sudden sense of mission changes her intention to commit suicide and she finally kills the captain.She imagines herself as a vengeful god and transforms herself into reincarnation of goddess Kali and reforms the act of killing."The room looked like a slaughterhouse. Blood had congealed on my hands, my chin, my breasts… I was in a room with aslain man, my body bloodied. I was walking death. Death incarnate"(119).At this point Jasmine very closely resembles Dimple in Bharati Mukherjee's ***Wife***. She too reverses her thought from the idea of committing suicide to the act of murder. But in Dimple's case, the victim is her own husband.

Jasmine is then offered help by Lillian Gordon, a kind Quaker lady. She helps Jasmine to reinvent herself into her first American identity, "Jazzy". She offers not only home but also teaches Jasmine, the American talk and walk so that she would not be suspected by others. The next change in the life of Jasmine comes up to her when she seeks the help of Lillian's daughter, Kate who gets a job of a live-in day mother for Duff, the adoptive daughter of Columbia University couple, Taylor and Wylie Hayes. When Wylie leaves Taylor, Jasmine plays a pivotal role in taking care of the family. Eventually she falls in love with Taylor and his world of ease and comfort. Taylor gives her a new identity "Jase" and she shows all her eagerness to lavish care on her new family. But then, her happiness ends when by a strange accident of fate, she happens to spot her husband's killer in New York. Fearful of the discovery of her illegal status and in order to escape from the past she flees to New York and ends up in rural Iowa.

Changes in the life seemed to be the only permanent thing

for Jasmine. In Iowa she starts her life as a live-in- companion to Bud Ripplemeyer a small town banker and her new identity is Jane Ripplemeyer. They adopt a Vietnamese refugee boy who constantly reminds her of own past. She thinks of Du as the son that she and Prakash might have had but now she is carrying Bud's child. However, she refuses to marry him because she is so fearful of the astrology what she believes is her destiny. When Du leaves for California to be with his sister's family, she feels totally isolated. But one day she receives a card which says Taylor and Duff are heading her way. As the novel ends, Jane joins hands with Taylor and prepares herself to face her challenges in America and for her next transformation. Mukherjee in her novel beautifully portrays the assimilated psyche of Jasmine. Being a submissive girl of Hasnapur, Jasmine finally transforms into a different woman, a woman of assimilation and thus becomes an agent of change and succeeds in her life.

Jasmine thus is portrayed as woman who is capable of transforming into many selves with new names which signify the new identity. She travels from violence in her native village Hasnapur to the United States, where she is raped, where she murders, where she marries again, where she adopts children and finally settles with the one whom she loves.

Jasmine sets off on a new life - or rather on a new version of a previous life when Taylor approaches her and urges her to accompany him to California. Pregnant with Bud's child, she prepares herself to face the challenges in America and probably for her next transformation. Throughout the novel, she experiences not only physical violence but also mental violence that forces her to get assimilated to different phases of her life. SushmaTandon thus views Jasmine's transformation:"- This is the story of Jasmine who cuts her tongue, burns her past, sheds her cultural baggage, changes her clothes, alters her walk and her name and instead of becoming a nonentity in this violent procession of nullification, a husk void of self, she acquires the desired and desirable identity of Jase or Jane, the identity of a white banker's or professor's au-pair" (145). Mukherjee thus beautifully portrays the assimilated psyche of Jasmine who transcends the limitations of her cultural setup in order to take up the challenges ahead of her and also as a dynamic character who undergoes drastic changes in her life.

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