



TRANSFORMATION AND CULTURAL ASSIMILATION IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S *JASMINE*

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Abstract

The word Diaspora signifies a sense of displacement and a challenge to the limits of existing boundaries. Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* showcases the struggle of one such female protagonist in search of her identity and a journey with cross cultural crisis, transformation and assimilation. The present paper tries to study the expatriate female protagonist's journey to attain her selfhood through the process of transformation involving resistance as well as acceptance.

Key words: transformation, culture, tradition, assimilation, patriarchal.

Bharti Mukherjee's foremost concern, as a postmodern writer has been the life of expatriates and the dilemma of 'acculturation' and 'assimilation'. Her works focus on the phenomenon of migration, the status of new immigrants, and the feeling of alienation experienced by Indian women expatriates and their struggle to establish their own identity and place in society. To some extent her characters are autobiographical portraits of her interpretation and reaction of her experience as an expatriate in Canada. She represents in her novels the contemporary woman's struggle to define herself and attain an autonomous selfhood especially in cross-cultural crisis. The present chapter deals with a study of the theme of transformation and cultural assimilation in Bharti Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* and the female protagonist's struggle for survival.

The novel *Jasmine* by Bharti Mukherjee is the story of an immigrant from the Third World to the United States who had been uprooted and re-rooted in an alien soil. The novel focuses on Jasmine, an underage village girl from Punjab, who

ventures as an undocumented woman and as a widow to the United States, where her fate is "rewritten". The eponymous heroine of the novel is the narrator of the story, who gives a detailed account of her journey from "unhousement" to "rehousement"[J,13]. In the post colonial era partition has ever been the most prolific and prominent area for the creative writers. Partition no doubt was a political decision but not an event in isolation for— it had repercussions on the lives of people as it resulted in geographical, economic and, most important of all, emotional and psychological dislocation. A number of novels were written on the theme of partition, the destruction it brought and the plight of the refugees. These novels faithfully record the reign of violence that characterized the period and provide a sad, telling commentary on the breakdown of human values. A strain of despair and disillusionment dominate these novels. However, the setting up of nation played a vital role in providing a platform for the women on which they could perform and raise their voices. It has to some extent, effaced the notion of 'double colonization' of

women wherein they were colonized both by patriarchal and imperial ideologies. The novel *Jasmine* tells story of such a woman. Born as Jyoti to a man driven from his affluent house in Lahore to a life of ignominious poverty in the remote Punjab village Hasnapur during partition riots, Jasmine has early acquaintance with the heart-wrenching agony of people uprooted from their homesteads. The simple village girl, Jyoti, renamed Jasmine in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* reveals socio-psychological traumas relating to the life of an exile or expatriate. She is born eighteen years after partition. Her family is from Lahore and has aristocratic connections. However, with the division of Punjab and their forced migration from Lahore to Hasnapur, they became simple peasants. Jasmine has already inherited a tradition of exile and migration from her family. Resigned to her supposedly inferior status in society for the sin of being born a girl, and constantly made aware of her misfortune as a dowryless daughter, Jyoti has an uneventful childhood.

The story begins in Hasnapur when Jasmine is aged seven followed by the bold events responsible for her transformation from the ill-fated village girl, Jyoti, to the self-assured emancipated American woman. Though the main focus of the novel is on the problems of cultural retention and resistance to change and the cultural assimilation of the immigrants, it also deals with the impact they have on the lives of the natives. Through this novel Ms. Mukherjee tries to prove that America is "the embodiment of openness, liberalism and freedom. A culture of dreamers, a land of transformation, where an individual can reverse omens".⁽¹¹⁾ Jasmine, the fascinating heroine of her novel, stands as an example of the "fusion" the author claims is occurring now: "immigration was a two-way process and both the whites and immigrants were growing into a third thing by this interchange and experience".⁽¹²⁾

Jasmine is not only typically Indian but is shown harbouring a desire for independence and a respect for success that appear incongruous in her Indian setting of poverty, gender-discrimination and rigid social conventions. Jasmine's yearning for these from early childhood mark the beginning of her struggle for self-actualization or the realization

of her cherished ideals. Marrying Prakash, a young engineer, who too is obsessed like her "to make something more of his life than fate intended," (J,85) Jyoti begins the journey of realizing her 'self' and 'potential.' Marriage brings about a total change in her mindset. The 'newness' of life in Jullundhur, beginning with the change of her name to Jasmine, makes her realize that 'motherhood' need not be her sole destiny. Enthused by Prakash's plans of eventually settling into a much better life style in America with their own business concern, Jasmine identifies immediately with the vision of freedom: 'If we could just get away from India, then all fates would be cancelled. We'd start with new fates, new stars. We could say or be anything we wanted' (J,85). She leaves her country in search of her dreams and this migration or "cultural transplant" leads to a crisis of identity and a final reconciliation to the choice. Jasmine takes several births namely Jyoti, Jasmine, Jaze and Jane. Through her character the novelist underlines the propensity to spiritual transformation as a pre-condition to cultural assimilation.

Jyoti's transformation into Jane can be divided into three phases. The first phase comes to end when she steps out of Flushing and the second begins with her living in the Taylor household. The third phase covers her life with the Ripplemeyers in Baden, Iowa county. From Jyoti the village girl in Hasnapur, to Jasmine the city woman, to Jazy, the undocumented immigrant, to Jaze the Manhattan nanny, to Jane the Iowan woman who enters the story, the constant "J" represents the element of continuity within transformation. From the beginning Ms. Mukherjee lays stress on the protagonist's strong will, predilection for English and interest in America. Jyoti loves English because "to want English was to want more than you had been given at birth, it was to want the world" (J,68). The inscription on the American aerogram "Celebrate America" and "Travel....the perfect freedom" (J,83) is an invitation to her as it were, which she realizes later. Time and tragedies only strengthen her resolve to go to America to fulfil her husband's dream. Thus, she launches on her odyssey to "the promised land". Her passage to America after her husband's death is characterized by a traumatic experience, the first

and the worst, in a long series of adaptation, which requires her to improvise morality in order to survive. Before long her hopes are shattered as she is raped in a hotel room by Half-Face, the lecherous captain of their boat. For the first time in her life she “understood what evil was about. It was not being human” (J,116). After overcoming her despair and the thought of suicide, she resolves to punish the evil one like Kali. The transformation of identity from dutiful submissive widow into assertive, criminal and individualistic American woman is in full swing. Cultural alienation is a world phenomenon today. The tremendous difference between two ways of life, leads a person to a feeling of depression and frustration. This could be called culture shock. When a person leaves his own culture and enters another, his old values come into conflict with the new ones he finds. America, the land of dreams had many disillusionments in store for Jasmine. In a foreign land she started facing both physical and psychological trauma. Like Kali, the Jyoti-Jasmine-Jane protagonist destroys evil, the external and internal distortions of the woman’s self, in order to birth a new wholesome cosmos, a woman complete in herself.⁽⁵⁾ She herself constitutes, in her various identities, the two halves of the complete self, depicted in Hindu cosmology as the male and female aspects of the Godhead. Thus transforming a physical scar into the spiritual power of the “third eye”, the protagonist reinvents the roles of fate, destiny, and a woman’s will. By grasping at the dream of a new life, Jasmine (like the others) feels compelled to sacrifice most of her original self, because both the ethnicity and the womanhood that she identified with had to be massively reworked in this new place.

The second phase of Jasmine’s transformation takes place in the Taylor household. The next identity of Jase is thrust on her by the Hayse’s family, where she works as a “care-giver.” It gives her freedom from her past role of Jyoti and widowhood and she enjoys here “a professional status” as against “the documented rectitude” at Flushing. Taylor helps her transform herself from a diffident alien with forged documents into adventurous Jase. Life with them sinks deeper and the image of America appears as wonderland to

Jasmine. The slow changes noticed in her are symptomatic of her inner change. She gets more Americanized and feels ‘rooted’. She blooms from a diffident alien with forged documents into an adventurous Jase: “ I became an American in an apartment on Claremont Avenue...” (J, 165). But these changes are not without pain: “There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself. We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams”. (J,29). This paradise of comfort and happiness is violated by fate once again. Her flight to Iowa country on sighting her husband’s assassin in New York and living with the Ripplemeyers mark the third phase in her transformation. Thus, Ms. Mukherjee recounts the lives of the illegal aliens who brave the worst humiliations and sufferings in settling in a new world.

The end of the novel leaves us with the picture of a woman still adjusting to America. She is large with the child of one man, and runs away with another man to pursue a new dream of happiness in this land of endless possibilities – her America. However, she discovers, the process of transformation is an ongoing continual one. Even in the more liberated landscape of America there are “potholed and rutted” driveways where a Third World immigrant woman might find herself sinking into new forms of old expectations, new ways of exercising old oppressions. Jane in her pregnant condition encounters the underlying biases and assumptions with which mainstream America isolates the immigrant “other,” the Third World “you”. (J, 214). The fact lies that there is an inevitable psychological violence in an immigrant’s life which is of positive character and value as it hardens their will to survive. The transformation in them is not smooth but jerky and violent as in case of Jasmine. She is thrown from one state of insecurity to another and she lets go all her hold on things which she would have held dear in India. She realizes that she has become a drifter moving in a world of uncertainties: “I feel at times like a stone hurtling through diaphanous mist, unable to grab hold, unable to slow myself, yet unwilling to abandon the ride I’m on. Down and down I go, where I’ll stop, God only knows”. (J,139). In many ways the unevenness

of voice in Jasmine reflects the precarious nature of her identity and existence. Bharati Mukherjee's heroine sheds her past life and experience and takes upon a quite new self once she crosses the border of her native country. In the course of many transactions, she acquires many names, each indicative of a new phase in her 'Americanization.' Through her main character Bharati Mukherjee makes her comments on the lack of certainties in America. She says :

In America, nothing lasts, I can say that now and it doesn't shock me, but I think it was the hardest lesson of all for me to learn. We arrive so eager to learn, to adjust, to participate only to find that monuments are plastic, agreements are annulled. Nothing is for ever, nothing is so terrible, or so wonderful, that it won't disintegrate. ⁽¹⁴⁾

Living on the edge, on the "margins" as it were, Jasmine lunges into the safe and unsafe expanses with almost a heady assurance. Fear, anger, pain, bitterness, confusion, silence, irony, humor, as well as pathos underline her observations as she discovers for herself the undefined median between the preservation of the Old World and the assimilation into the new one. However, she discovers, the process of transformation is an ongoing continual one.

Bharti Mukherjee's novels are self-actualizing. She has tried to assemble all types of temperaments in her novels and works out the mental and physical interactions of female bond. Her depiction of women and their different relationship portray the dominance of patriarchal practices in traditional society, as well as the forms of liberation and empowerment which are available to women in their diasporic situation. They are not controlled by one faith, one ethnic, racial or cultural proclivity. They are typical representation of young woman particularly of The Third World countries who aspire to attain their own individual identity. Jasmine's image seems to be a personification of Bharati Mukherjee's concept of Americanness as an outlook on life. As cited by Davidar, "Some people were meant to be American even if they never leave their village in Punjab. At

heart they are American. It is a desire for more, more more." ⁽⁴⁾The novel *Jasmine* therefore, presents an account of adaptation, and not defeat. Just as Thomas Hardy declared his Tess as 'a pure woman,' Mukherjee declares her Jasmine as an authentic woman and even a heroic woman. The lonely girl who seeks liberty and loves English, fails to realize her desires in her own society – she has no other option but to emigrate. In the midst of the chaos that Punjab represents, the author seeks to project the lonely, singular voice of Jasmine's quest for freedom. Raging against fate and the norms of society which tried to condition her existence, Jasmine asserts that she is not just nothing. Jasmine is particularly beautiful, with inborn aristocratic traits, intelligent and capable of learning the tricks of survival. Her vulnerable condition, the years of training in a different culture based on sacrifice, submission and acceptance is what makes her attractive to the men in whom she finds comfort. While America teaches her to live with ease and confidence despite her fluid identity and undocumented status, Jasmine gives her care, concern and love to those who believe her and who need her. For all America gives her, Jasmine pays back with gratitude and love. Even though she suffers, a hope for future is always in her mind. The astrologer's definition of Jyoti as nothing but "a speck in the solar system" (J,3) raises her voice in protest right from the beginning. She overcomes sentiment and tries to order herself. She is portrayed in the "doer" role, as the woman making herself with no time for reflection or nostalgia. It is quite obvious that Jasmine is a round character who does not remain the same at the end of the story. She is not meek and submissive to accept all that life offers her instead very intellectual and powerful who adapts herself according to the new situation. She is an instance to prove that the Indian society consists of courageous women like Jasmine who can accommodate themselves comfortable in the entire difficult situation. It is basically a story of transformation, reinventions and reincarnations especially of Jasmine, the protagonist of the novel. The female protagonist has to face the problem of the loss of culture and endeavours to assume a new identity in a new place and culture. She travels from

one circumstance and geographical location to another and so her inner self-travels the journey of rebirth towards a higher plane. She protests against culture, tradition, patriarchal society in Indian soil and isolation, starvation, and physical and psychological pain in American soil and emerges not as a tragic character but as one who is determined to change her destiny and explore the infinite possibilities. Thus, *Jasmine* is Bharati Mukherjee's conscious effort to depict the struggle for survival of an expatriate woman and the agony to have diasporic dreams that comprise of female oppression, transformation and cultural assimilation in an alien society. Mukherjee assumes in her novel that there is only one way to be American, that is to say, by asserting one's own individuality, centering the others around the self. It is an affirmation of the American way that resourcefulness, self-confidence, independence, and a willingness to risk cannot but result in success and self fulfilment.

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