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**“ I SHUTTLED BETWEEN IDENTITIES ”: A WILLINGNESS TO SURVIVE IN BHARTI
MUKHERJEE’S ‘JASMINE’**

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ABSTRACT

The emphatically prolific writings of Bharti Mukherjee feature as a new reconstituted space in the history of Second Generation Indian Diaspora. Her creativeness profoundly conceptualizes multiple identity reverberations and hybridization of culture through a contemporary lens of consciously ambivalent third space. Thus, the aim of the present research is to descriptively examine the crooked trajectory of Jasmine (Jyoti, Jassy, Jane, Jase), the central protagonist of Mukerjee’s novel, to some extent a creation emblemizing her own self. Furthermore, the idea of naming and renaming throughout the narrative will accentuate a liminally plural yet an emancipated woman of the post-modern American world. This ‘new woman’ will function as an active prototype of migrancy and subsequent rehousement (which is not so easy) thereby authenticating the feminist credentials of its explicitly hyphenated author. Finally, the mythological significations as reflected through the protagonists’ actions and inclinations will be discursively analyzed as a part of the study. Altogether, what we finally arrive at will be an immensely radical ‘newness’ blending the past, present and future in a single entity, transformed and rebellious to its very core.

Key Words: Diaspora, hybridization, ambivalent, third space, plural, post-modern, rehousement, radical newness.

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“Nothing of me is original. I am the combined
Effort of everyone I’ve ever known.
Chuck Palahnuik, Invisible Monsters.

Here stands Jasmine belaboring a highly motionized dynamicity at each level of her existential crisis thereby furthering a perpetual metamorphoses in order to abrogate the feudalistic dominance of her past and look forward towards the pursuit of a potentially utopian future. She assertively declares, “For me experience must be forgotten, or else it will kill”. (Mukherjee 29)

Bharti Mukherjee in her much contested narrative of contemporary woman's immigration conveniently traces the psychological growth of her protagonist Jasmine through the process of renaming and constant identity re-fashioning that further accentuates the idea of a post-modern reconstruction of a hyphenated Indian – American. The text frequently articulates the patriarchal hegemony exercised over women thereby stooping them to the level of a Spivakian subaltern. Ranging from the astrological prophecy of widowhood and exile to her subsequent rape in a cheap motel of Florida, Jasmine appears to feature as the denigrated victim of the post-colonial world. "I was nothing, a speck in the solar system... I was helpless, doomed" (Mukherjee 1) utters Jasmine while emphasizing her plight of being born as a girl.

However, right from the onset she resists from being a marginalized subject of the phallogocentric society thereby challenging the normative doctrines of familial upbringing. Unlike Spivak who terms the violent identity shuffling as a steady erasure of being that is capable of reducing one to a mere disfigured third world subject, Jasmine on the other hand raises her voice (though suppressed in the beginning) and aspires to break the shackles of tradition that limit her survival. This courage to fight back leads to her adoption of multifarious identities and her marriage to Prakash is the first actual kindle. Unlike the orthodox men of Hasanpur who see marriage as a cultural sanctioning of patriarchal control, Prakash on the other hand is emblematic of city values who rather than enforced obedience wishes "to make [her] a new kind of city woman" (Mukherjee 77). Therefore, he renames her as Jasmine while Jyoti of Hasanpur is left behind. In other words this act of renaming is symbolic of dismantling the previous feudal existence along with a simultaneous movement towards a modern lifestyle.

Yet this mobility is a liminal one in the sense that it is again an identity construction through phallic gaze and this same process is reiterated further in the novel as the protagonist crosses and re-crosses the transnational borders. Never the less it is the time for transformation where Jasmine becomes a part of her husband's future aspirations with respect to an equal role in farsighted business. But unfortunately, Prakash dies in a sectarian religious violence that leaves Jasmine utterly shattered. This is a turning point in her life where she ardently decides to commit a ritual suicide though not in India but in U.S where her husband intended to go. According to the critic Timothy Ruppel "in spite of temporary recognition... she is still unbalanced precariously between Jyoti and Jasmine" still caught between tradition and modernization. (Ruppel 185)

From here onwards the only aim of her life becomes to ritually immolate herself and therefore she illegally travels to U.S with a forged passport. But life is not so easy for her. As an eastern woman she is bracketed as an object of contemplation, an exotic mystery that needs to be deciphered and played with. This becomes the foremost reason of her rape at the hands of Half-Face who looks upon her as a sexual toy thereby mythifying her existence and obliterating any sign of resistance. In addition, this very violence can be interpreted with respect to Edward Said's idea of Orientalism, the construction of a colonized 'other', both passive and available or in other words an orient who apart from discovered as the one was submitted to being made so under the western gaze. However, rather than committing suicide after her forced defloration, she murders her perpetrator taking the form of Kali, the goddess of destruction and subsequent renewal. Moreover, her rape signals a transformative moment that further asserts her need for survival as well as a good bye to Prakash's city woman Jasmine. From here onwards starts her fresh journey towards Americanization.

Moving ahead in order to assimilate the newly imbibed spirit, she meets Lillian Gordon who in a way acts as a catalyst thereby positively assisting her fractured personality towards post-modern Americanness. She is bestowed with a nick name Jassy which conveniently symbolizes her entrance into as well as the acceptance of American culture. This radical change further emphasizes the concept of Diaspora and considering both Mukherjee and Jasmine as its active spokespersons.

Critic Stuart Hall in his essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" states that

"Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (Hall 3).

However, Bharti Mukherjee stands somewhat apart from the canonical outlook of Indian – American Diaspora. This assertion can be empiricized by what she articulates in her interview with Tom Grimes when asked about her novel 'Jasmine'. She says:

"...I wanted to get away from that sense of belonging. I didn't want anyone to know where I fit in, so I could be whoever I wanted to be, anywhere I could keep moving" (Interview 11).

The above can be interpreted as a dichotomous duality. On one hand it lays emphasis on mobility of self through the process of inclusion and exclusion thereby leading to a nostalgic yearning for the homeland, its values of culture and tradition, yet Mukherjee's arguments as well as the body of the narrative discerns an anti-nostalgia and therefore a decisively radical break away from Indian roots. This viewpoint can be supported by the claustrophobia that Jasmine faces during her stay at the Vaderas and her subsequent desire to distangle herself from such strangling enmeshes. In other words, the writer moves away from the idea of preservation of mother culture unlike the tendency of other diasporic writers and ultimately at the end, Jasmine emerges as free self-willed individual, American in spirit to the extent of bearing the child of a white crippled banker.

This autonomy as discussed above is achieved through the multiple passages of personality that the protagonist undergoes. After undergoing the contemporary imbibitions of Americanness as well as her dismayed stay at the Vaderas, she joins as a 'day mummy' to Duff, the adopted daughter of Taylor and Wylie Hayes where though the white couple acknowledge her liminal status but never exoticize it. Jasmine contemplates "Taylor didn't wanted to change me. He didn't want to scour and sanitize the foreignness. My being different... didn't scare him" (Mukherjee 165). Taylor renames Jasmine (now Jazy) as Jase and after getting separated from Wylie, he unreluctantly allows to enter his life both as a lover and a surrogate mother to Duff. However, their happiness does not last for long as the murderer of her husband Prakash is seen and recognized by Jasmine and therefore in order to avoid his intervention in her new family, she flees to Iowa where begins yet another chapter of her life with the crippled banker Bud Ripplemayer and their adopted son Du.

But before taking into discussion the last complete phase of Jasmine's life, the recurring archetype of violence needs to be focused upon as it is the very driving force that leads to the creation and recreation of identity. As observed earlier in the narrative where initially the sectarian bombing and then the rape scene (both identified as instances of extreme violence), her personality traces a trajectorial growth from innocence to experience and here too as well violence plays an important role in her decisive action thereby redefining her fluctuating self yet again.

This process of simultaneous fabrication finally leads her on the verge of becoming Mrs. Jane Ripplemeyer (Jane being the new name assigned to her by the crippled banker Bud). However, Bud, unlike Taylor, is frightened by Jasmine's 'genuine foreignness' and therefore he looks upon her as an inscrutable mystery that fascinates him to the extent of creating an obsessive desire to possess her completely. But at this point her past in the form of Taylor and Duff intervene on the scene and Jasmine is once again ready to flee but this time not in the opposite direction but towards her past that further valorizes her with agency and capacity to decide her fate. Besides this she tries to justify her action by articulating that "[she] is not choosing between men. [she] is caught between the promise of America and the old world dutifulness" (Mukherjee 240). In other words her acceptance of Taylor is representative of her emancipatory yearning that carries the possibility of fulfillment in California, the final destination on her narrative chart.

This choice of the protagonist can be witnessed as a prominent instance of celebrating the American modernity that she aspired to move towards after her rape. Yet the idea of the first world as a singular unified construction is fraught with problems. There are instances in the novel where

Jasmine realizes the plasticity of relations in American society, the one which she looks forward to actualize in her own being. One such instance is the divorce between Taylor and Wylie that reflects the ephemerality of human bondings thereby compelling her to declare

“In America nothing lasts... we arrive so eager to learn, to adjust, to participate only to find the monuments are plastic, agreements are annulled. Nothing is forever, nothing is so terrible or so wonderful, that it won't disintegrate” (Mukherjee 181).

Thus, in the above words Mukherjee is critical of transitoriness of American values that she aims at voicing through Jasmine's perplexity. This further problematizes the narrative along with Mukerjee's own plurality as an American writer of Indian Diaspora. This blurred dichotomy between celebration (of American identity) versus nostalgia (for the homeland) needs to be disambiguated in order to substantiate the profoundness of the text. An analysis of Du's character (adopted son of Bud and Jane) can be of aid in this sense. Like Jasmine, Du is too an immigrant from the third world nation of Vietnam. However unlike Jasmine who at every moment tries to break herself from the emanations of her homeland, Du on the other hand, retains vivid memories of his Vietnamese origin. In other words, it is Du's sense of continuity of his cultural identity that separates him from Jasmine's optimism with respect to her geographical as well as psychological mobilization. But none the less, Jasmine duly pays respect to her adopted son's ability to maintain his hybrid identity.

Therefore, from the above interpretation, Du becomes the prominent symbol of Diasporic conventionality as observed in the contemporaries of Mukherjee who schizophrenically try to extract a sense of belongingness from their roots while the writer of Jasmine on the other hand dissociates herself from the same in order to emerge as the 'new pioneer' of the generic American history. Moreover, rather than a sense of severe loss, Mukherjee understands immigration as an experience of rebirth and reincarnation that further energizes her with an optimistic determination to look beyond the idea of marginalized hybridity. She courageously articulates in her interview:

“I have been murdered and re-born atleast three times, the very correct women I was trained to be, and was very happy being, is very different from the politicized shuttle, civil rights activist I was in Canada, from the urgent writer I have become in the last few years in the U.S” (Interview 18).

This manifestation of re-birth is worth of validation in Jasmine's own words.

“I have had a husband for each woman I have been. Prakash for Jasmine, Taylor for Jase, Bud for Jane, Half – Face for Kali”. Critic Jill Roberts compares this identity shift to the Hindu cycle of re-births, where each stage is symbolic of each Yuga of Hindu mythology. This provides Jasmine with a cosmic aura, the ultimate amalgamation of Shiva (emphasized by her forehead wound which she views as her third mystical eye, thereby providing her with a saintly existence) and Kali (the fierce goddess who kills the devil with her gory tongue hanging out calling for renewal). Furthermore, this life force finally allows her to emerge as a strong willed woman (through violent events) for whom her sexuality rather than a object of vulnerability transforms into a personification of strength. And this metamorphoses is only feasible when she is pushed into a society severely repressive, psychologically unspacious so that she, through her sufferings, becomes capable of discarding such casteist, classist, genderist constrictions thereby fluidifying her inner being for subsequent regeneration.

Altogether, Jasmine is a study of circumstantial adaptability that in turn challenges the western feminist perspective of over-categorized nonwestern women, that relegates them to the position of meek mystery and un-resistive tendencies. Moreover, the morality of her actions aims for justification in her own rights which though, a phenomena of difference, are still capable of heroic appreciation. Even in times of utter destitutive servitude, she brims with regenerative hope of recognition which thereby becomes one of the foremost reasons of the prolificity as acknowledged by the global readers.

The above interpretation further aligns the story of Jasmine with the life of her creator thereby strengthening the autobiographical consciousness of the work under discussion. In a way, Mukherjee's own psychological state is very well blended within the text that deals with politics of migration. Although the chronological parallelisms between the writer and the protagonist may not be traced at the incidental level (unlike Jasmine who actually encounters physical harassment, Mukherjee only witnessed it as a distanced observer in the pre – partitioned India) and but none the less, the zeal of transformative emergence is reflected at the heart of the narrative. In short, Jasmine personifies a reiterative series of redefinition, through the myth of ' samsara ' that finds sufficient avowal in Jasmine's own words:

“ We murder who we were so that we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams ”
(Mukherjee 25).

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