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Limbo and Liminality in the Quest for Identity and Recognition in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

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Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, linguistically and culturally dissect an Indian woman's journey from a small town of Jullundhar to the lofty highs of New York and to the 'flat' lands of Iowa. *Jasmine*, being etymologically true to her name even though it is not even her real name, at the first place is a creature of the void, who battles every single moment. At times with her relatives over a prospect-less marriage while at other, with her identity as the "other" in the land of English-speakers. Perpetually being infatuated with the language since her schooldays, the novel throws light on the development of Jyoti, the English-learner to Jase and Jane to her American lovers. The novel is rife with the identity of an Indian woman post partition, who would rather listen to Pakistani radio channels, the sophisticated Urdu of Pakistani-Punjab sounding more homely than the rustic Indian one. India's obsession with English and the west is painstakingly laid out in the fore, this novel bearing witness, truth, and travesty to the subject's affection for the master. The stark contrast between first and third world countries is laid bare, emphasising on the reason for 'brain-drain' and outflow of potential talent beyond the domestic frontiers. This paper's aim is to decrypt the various stages at which the identity and fate of a threadbare Indian woman develops, especially that of the Punjabis, who for ages like other ethnic groups in South Asia have travelled for the sake of a better and brighter life abroad.

Keywords: *Jasmine*, immigrant, postcolonial, identity, Bharati Mukherjee.

Introduction

Bharati Mukherjee (1940-2017) in her eponymous novel *Jasmine*, sketches the journey of Jyoti, a girl from the fictional town of Hasnapur (a probable fictionalized aberration of the

actual Hasanpur in modern day Indian-Punjab) in post-independent Punjab, India. Jyoti, or “light” as our heroine has been named by her grandmother goes through a series of life-changing events that culminate towards her change in identity and individuality. Everywhere she goes, just as the immigrant she arrives on the coast of Florida, Jasmine rapidly adapts and acclimatizes with the American counter-parts or states. Mukherjee in creating Jasmine, gives us a rare peek into the window that can be semiotically, to a certain extent be labelled as her life in the States. In a 1996 interview with Mukherjee, it is revealed that her move to Iowa was significantly marked with a life-transforming situation very much akin to Jasmine's as well. (Desai and Barnstone 131) Termed as “the trauma of self-transformation”, Mukherjee's Jasmine stands on the slippery slope between identity-based realization and a painful suspension between two worlds of contrasting cultures. In order to visually emphasise on the larger picture of immigrant- linguistic, cultural and social dynamics I would take the help of Suketu Mehta's brief breakdown of the Mexico-American immigrant dilemma in *This Land is Our Land: An Immigrant Manifesto*, focusing on the deteriorating border-friendship America and Mexico, amidst Tijuana and San Diego. (13) Jasmine is in a similar situation, swinging back and forth between her identity as an Indian-Punjabi Jyoti and an Americanised Jane to her Rochester-like fiancé Bud.

Liminal and Sub-liminal Transitions

A liminal sense of suspension between ‘two worlds’ has perpetually been a recurring theme in the works of the South Asian diasporic group featuring the likes of Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Mukherjee herself, yet what sets *Jasmine* apart from other emotionally riveting yet thought-provoking works is Mukherjee's sarcastic undertones

mocking the Indian obsession with the American glitz and yearn for Americanised stardom. The first half of the novel focuses on Jasmine's ominous fortune-telling of her widowhood, Prakash, her only husband, since Bud Ripplermeyer, her lover and father of her unborn child fell short of marrying her, introduced Jasmine to the brand-new world of western innovation and glam. Jasmine, when she was Jyoti as an innocent and naïve school-girl had always been drawn towards English (language and culture) just as the rest of India was, post-independence. Jyoti came from the rubble of Partition and an ill-fate that could have befallen her as a young unmarried girl of an Indian village yet Prakash gave Jyoti not only a new name but also a purpose. Despite admiring Prakash respecting her sexual boundaries as an under-aged wife, Jasmine had her own desires which were miserably tarnished and tainted by Half-Face. Jasmine's preserved virginity met with violence and rape by a bestial monster, who was not her husband but perpetrator. Jasmine's resolve to survive is credible as she not only single-handedly avenges her loss of dignity by murdering Half-Face but also manages to make a name of her own, from New York to Iowa. Despite continuously marching forward with optimism in her bosom, Jasmine cannot obviate her dark and gruesome past, be it her husband's murder at the hands of rebels in India or Bud's bullet-induced perpetual paralysis at the hand of a local farmer.

It is remarked by Bud's former wife, Karin who calls Jasmine a "tornado" that is capable of "leaving a path of destruction behind" (Mukherjee 138). Jasmine does in fact, not only navigate a pendulous momentum constantly but has the same effect on people and places she goes by. Conflict, as a theme, acts as a leitmotif that recurs on a regular basis- from Jasmine confronting strange soothsayers predicting matrimonial downfall to navigating the American life as an Indian wholly trained as a household chore-accomplisher and wife.

Jasmine's confrontation with the forces both of her fate and the society is applaudable from every single facet, since she not only embarks on a journey with no future, i.e., satisfactorily commemorating Prakash's American dream as an immigrant student and worker but also creates a self-made identity of her own. Jasmine's personal grit, indomitable spirit, and unvanquishable emotional rigour to survive against any calamity is what propels her to survive rape, illegal immigrant identity towards acquiring a semi-established identity of her own. Despite being "suspended between two worlds" of diametrically opposing and opposite cultures, Jyoti as Jasmine, Jase and Jane perseveres every catastrophe. Jasmine's diasporic status is further enunciated with her constantly being on the move from Jullundhar district of Punjab, India to the east coast of Florida and then to New York, Iowa and California. Turner's "frontier" theory of westward expansion and movement of mankind is applicable in Jasmine's transitoriness. (Kain 156) Towards the end, upon being discovered by Taylor and Duff, Jasmine remarks:

It isn't guilt that I feel, it's relief. I realize I have already stopped thinking of myself as Jane. Adventure, risk, transformation: the frontier is pushing indoors through un-caulked windows. Watch me re-position the stars, I whisper to the astrologer who floats cross-legged above my kitchen stove. (Mukherjee 162)

Eponymic Symbolism and Significance

Jasmine's identity-based evolution and revolutionary symbiosis of individuality and surroundings positions her beyond the hackneyed "flotsam-jetsam" conundrum. Despite being an illegal immigrant herself, with implacable fears of deportation, battling an unpredictable future yet managing to be employed, further educated and loved by her associates;

Jasmine adds layers to her personhood and as a migrant truly embodies her fleeting status. According to the Egyptian and Victorian symbolic meaning behind flowers, jasmines are known for their “affability”, which is one of the major traits behind the popular amicability with Jasmine and others. Her incredible sense of understanding and emotional attachment yet detachment at the same time is what sets her apart, and possibly saves her from dedicating herself towards all the men in her life, as much as she did for Prakash. Jasmine's life is incredibly sad- for an eighteen-year-old to lose her husband in a terrorist skirmish and embark on a journey towards uncanny unpredictability, takes a turn when she is discovered by a kind-hearted American woman who is used to providing asylum to immigrants like her. Jasmine's simple, direct and no-nonsense nature is what puts people at ease. Yet Jasmine never finds truly her ground for she must now live up to the life of a real migrant, for whom there is no place called home. Or if seen from the other end, for Jasmine home has a different connotation. Her aspirations to continuously push forth her life and fate over the tightrope of the myriad alternatives that life has got to offer keeps her running.

Vestigial History and Feministic Futurism

Jasmine, like a buoyant traveller craftily navigates the highs and lows of her migrant life with her foremost priority as a comfortable life that commensurate with her hard-work. She is able to adjust with America and the Americans with little to no alternations. Despite her actively optimistic demeanour, within resides a scarred and battered soul who is a product of her circumstances, constantly striving to challenge an imposed and forecasted future of ominous auguries. She learns it first-hand, how to convert her battle-scars from being a bomb-explosion survivor at the hands of the Khalsa Lions to fending off sexual-fiends and misfortunes. According to

Ashcroft and others in *The Empire Writes Back*, “A major feature of post-colonial literatures is the concern with place and displacement. It is here that the special post-colonial crisis of identity comes into being; the concern with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place.” (Ashcroft et al 8) I draw the image of “displacement” and “dislocation” emphasised in *The Empire Writes Back* by critics like D.E.S. Maxwell from how a language in this case, English and deified western education in America, creates a perpetual sense of “gap which opens between the experience of place and the language available to describe it forms a classic and all-pervasive feature of post-colonial texts.” (9) “The language of colonial power” institutionally and socially demonizes the local in this case, Indian Urdu or even Hindi. Mukherjee not only satirizes the linguistic fanaticism that runs deep in India in general and South Asian in particular but also piques the incisive questions regarding such obnoxious obsession and the inveterate idealism of occidental values. Despite adapting to the American lifestyle, Jasmine’s narrative consistently questions the “hybridity” and “hyphenated identity” as propounded by Sudha Pandya, initially touched upon by Spivak in her subaltern theory. (Kain 1) Conflicting emotions and an inner turmoil whether ‘to stay or not to stay’ plagues the entire trajectory of Jasmine’s progress and development. The postcolonial concept of “middle passage” is metaphorically aligned with Jasmine’s status of migrancy. Having “stowed away on boats like Half-Face’s,” she had “hurtled through time tunnels...seen the worst and survived. Like creatures in fairy tales... shrunk and... swollen and...swallowed the cosmos whole” (Mukherjee 162). Jasmine’s propensity for internal chaos is projected out to her surroundings, she goes about like a whirlwind that causes changes to ensue and restoration of life, as she remarks, “Time will tell if I am a tornado, rubble-maker, arising from nowhere

and disappearing into a cloud" (Mukherjee 162). The novel is also a treatise on globalization and "pan-nationalism", that create a rift between the identity owed to the nation of birth compared to the pursued national identity. (Loomba 154)

Conclusion

Every year, thousands of South Asians embark towards the western world in search of better prospects in terms of education, employment while some like Jasmine, merely out of curiosity and no apparent hard-core reason. America's promise to employ and educate immigrants from the east is what draws them like flies towards food, which finally ends up in an age-long battle of cultural shock, mis-adaptation and a hoard of problems related to identity-based degeneration and disintegration. In conclusion, Jasmine's story is a symbolic yet attributable reality of immigrants. Her syncretic process of stitching motley yet praise-worthy experiences that give birth to an amorphous and analogous individual, both culturally and socially, births a different yet strangely familiar Jasmine in fragments and entireties. Her identity as a migrant who never gives up in the face of impediments crafts a postcolonial product of post-feminism beyond borders and linguistic barriers. Apart from being part of the humongous Asian continent, the South Asian landmass is another sub-structure within which the theme of migrancy is popularly acknowledged. The concept of identity and the perpetual fight for establishing one on part of the migrant has been forever at logger-heads with the individuals involved in migrancy. Being part of India, a country where reportedly and officially eight lakh citizens have forgone their Indian citizenship for prospects elsewhere has made the problem related to the popular-exodus more severe than ever before. Be it linguistically or culturally, immigrants have always suffered with belonging and spatial alienation. This paper is a

testimony to one such fictional story of an immigrant community—the Sikhs, who have taken refuge in many western countries especially in US and Canada, effectively questioning the reason and essentialism involved in making such life-changing decisions that continue to have repercussions later.

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