Labyrinth: Volume-6, No.1 January-2015
ISSN 0976-0814; pp. 95-99

Transnational Identities: Diasporal Anguish in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

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Abstract: The diasporic writers belong to different category; they have Indian origins, but live in the west, mainly England, Canada, and the U. S. A. The migration of Indian people to U. S. A. and other countries, their status and their nostalgic feelings for the mother country as well as their alienation to the new one is the major subject of the diasporic writers. The Indian born American writer Bharati Mukherjee is ranked among the great Diasporic writers like Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Jhumpa Lahiri, Rohinton Mistry and Anurag Mathur. Jasmine (1989), Bharati Mukherjee's magnum opus coming fourteen years after 'Wife' embodies the evolution of Jyoti, the fifth daughter of the family of nine. Jasmine is the story of a young woman from Punjab, India who experienced identity crisis and diasporal anguish both in and out of her own culture. Jasmine's quest starts as Jyoti in India where she is against Indian patriarchy. She is 'a widow in the war of feudalism'. She finally decides to go and live in America and enters her dreamland, where she feels identity crisis in many ways. She lives through many lives in her short lifespan, she becomes Jane, Jase or Jazzy each time moving a step closer towards a desired unification of identity. During her journey, she is the object of male domination starting within her family and other men in her life. Finally she chooses Taylor instead of Bud. Jasmine claims- 'not choosing between men' but between 'the promise of America and old world dutifulness' Mukherjee 1991. This paper will focus upon the diasporal anguish and identity crisis, which Jasmine the title character and the narrator experiences both in and out of her own culture.

Keywords: Immigrants, Identity Crisis, Diasporal Anguish.

Among the diasporic writers Bharati Mukherjee represents immigrant issues. She was born in upper middle class Hindu Brahmin family in Calcutta. She attended the Universities of Calcutta and Baroda and obtained a master's degree in English and Ancient Indian Culture. Bharati Mukherjee immigrated to Canada in 1968 with her husband Clarke Blaise, a Canadian writer whom she met while studying at the University of Lowa in America. The fourteen years in Canada were perhaps the most difficult years of her life. She was a victim of racial and ethnic discrimination. She could no longer bear it; she went back to the United States in 1980 where she was granted the status of permanent resident. She describes herself as-

> A writer from the Third World, I left India by choice to settle in the U. S.. I have adopted this country as my home. I view myself as an American author in the tradition of other American authors whose ancestors arrived at Ellis Island. (Carb, The Massachusetts Review- 29.4:650)

Her varied experiences in life find ample place in her writings both fictions as well as non-fictions. She can conventionally be described as a writer who has lived through several phases of life, first as a colonial, then as a national subject in India, then as an exile as a post-colonial Indian in Canada and finally as an immigrant, later as a citizen, in the United States. Mukherjee has fused together her several experiences, life and background, into a new kind of literature- the 'new immigrant' literature, the main thrust area in her novels is the description of the condition of the Asian immigrants in North America with particular reference to the changes taking place in South Asian women in a new world.

> I maintain that I am an American writer of Indian origin, not because I am ashamed of my past; not because I am betraying or distorting my past, but because my whole adult life has been lived here and I write about the people who are Immigrants going through the process of making home here……. (Carb,The Massachusetts Review. 29.4:645)

Thus it is clear that Mukherjee's themes focus on the phenomenon of migration, the status of the new immigrants, their feeling of alienation as expatriates and the Indian women sojourning abroad and her struggle for identity. In an interview she stated- "Fiction must be a metaphor. It is not a transcription of real life but it's a distillation and pitching at higher intensification of life. It's always a distortion." -- Jouvert- A Journal of Post-Colonial Studies. Mukherjee's works corresponds with the various phases of her life as her protagonists are close projection of herself. In brief her writings embody her sense of what it means to be a woman writer of Bengali- Indian origin who has lived in both Canada and America. Mukherjee found it difficult to limit herself so she crossed boundaries and saw herself as a pioneer of new territories, experiences and literatures. Jasmine (1989), Bharati Mukherjee's magnum opus, coming fourteen years after 'Wife' embodies the evolution of Jyoti the fifth daughter of a family of nine. Jasmine was born in a rural village, Hasanpur in Punjab. She tells the story as a twenty four year old pregnant widow, living in Lowa with her crippled lover, Bud Ripplemayer. Jasmine juxtaposes in her memory each of her identities as Jyoti, Kali, Jazzy, Jase and Jane, implying that she evokes and revises her past in her different identities. She creates a new world consisting of new ideas and values, unmasking her past, establishes a new cultural identity.

Jasmine, born as Jyoti in Hasanpur, a village in Punjab was told by an astrologer that she will be a widow at the age of seventeen. She doesn't believe it, but the man hits her and she falls on the ground, bits her tongue and gets a scar on the forehead. "It's my third eye [……] now I'm a sage" (Jasmine- 5), she tells her sisters. The pain she feels and the scar will always remind her of that moment in her life, when she tried to run away from her fate. Then she runs to her sisters at the river, she swims and suddenly sees a rotten dog's body. The stench she smells and the pictures follow her, the rest of her life, whenever she drinks a glass of water "I know what I don't want to become." (Jasmine 55)Jasmine's mother becomes widow, when she is a teenager. Her mother shaves her head, as a sign of widowhood. Jasmine also remembers the story of a widow who

burned herself on her husband's grave after his death. After having such experience- father dead, mother resigned under the sufferings of widowhood, she stays strong and takes the role of mother in the house. The child is gone and she is reborn as a young woman.

Then Jyoti falls in love with Prakash and marries him. Prakash "wanted to break down the Jyoti I'd been in Hasanpur and make me a new kind of woman. To break off the past, he gave me a new name: Jasmine" (Pg. 77) and this was the beginning of a new journey for her. She was aware of her husband's obsession. She said- "My husband was obsessed with passing exams, doing better, making something more of his life than fate intended" (Pg. 85). Then she made up her mind- "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. We'd be on the other side of the earth, out of God's sight" (Pg. 85). Renamed as Jasmine, she was looking forward to go to America with Prakash, but Prakash got killed by the khalsa terrorists on the eve of their departure. But grief-stricken Jasmine instead of spending the rest of her life as a helpless widow at Hasanpur, she went to America on a forged passport.

Jasmine left India to survive against the forces of destiny but her American dream collapses at this very first sight. She was raped by Half-face who had- "lost an eye and ear and most of her cheek in a paddy field in Vietnam" (Pg. 104). Half face was the ship captain in which Jasmine reached America, but after reaching America, half-face raped Jasmine in a hotel. After half-face raped she did not kill herself as she felt that her mission was not yet over- "I didn't feel the passionate embrace of Lord Yama that could turn kerosene flame into a lover's caress. I could not let my personal dishonour disrupt my mission (Pg. 117) and she killed half-face by becoming Kali personified, the Goddess of destruction burned her dishonoured clothes. Mukherjee says-"I said my prayer for the dead clutching Ganapati, I thought. The pitcher is broken. Lord Yama, who had wanted me……. Had now deserted me……. My body was merely the shell, soon to be discarded. Then I could be reborn, debts and sins all paid for."(Pg. 120-121) Jasmine was reborn not by killing herself but by killing half-face. Thus, she began her journey into America. Then, Jasmine met Lillian Gordan who educated her, made her free from past memories and strengthened her will to survive. She advised Jasmine- "Let the past make you wavy, by all means. But do not let it deform you" (Pg. 131). With Lillian's help she met Professor Vadhera, she stayed at his house, but she was disappointed to learn that Mr. Vadhera depended not only on his teachings but on trading in human hair. So she decided to leave the house. After a short time, Jasmine worked in the house of Taylor and Wylie in Manhattan as a care giver to their little daughter Duff. There her name was changed from Jasmine to Jase. While she worked as a care giver, she also took part time jobs like answering phones and tutoring graduate students in Punjabi in the University. The pulling down of her between two opposite forces, i.e. – the Indian and the American did not frighten her. The alien country taught her to live with ease and confidence. She becomes more Americanized. Jasmine gave ease and

love to those who needed her. Taylor helped Jasmine very much. Taylor feels desolate when Wylie moves out of the family to move in with the wealthy Stuart Eschelman. Here Bharati Mukherjee registers her comments on the uncertainties in America, where nothing lasts for a long time, not even a human relationship. 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 the monuments are plastic, agreements are annulled. Nothing is forever, nothing is so terrible, or so terrible that it won't disintegrate Mukherjee, (Jasmine 181).

After his wife Wylie left him, he felt that he needed emotional support and confessed his love to Jasmine. Her immigrant status does not give any hindrance to the emotional bond between them. But her fate never leaves and her romantic life between Taylor and Jasmine ends in fear and terror because of the presence of Sukhwinder, the Khalsa terrorist who killed Prakash in India. She decides to run away from their life for their betterment and for herself. Then she went to Lowa and met another benefactor Mrs. Ripplemayer in the form of a mother, she helps Jasmine to find a job in Lowa's bank, owned by her son. She also made a place in the heart of the banker Bud Ripplemayer, the estranged husband from his sons and wife Karin, Jasmine was very happy with her new job and her status as a step-mother of Du, a sixteen year old Vietnam War victim adopted by Bud. There she assumed a new identity and she became "Jane" from "Jase"Violence struck her life again, when a farmer shot Bud from point blank range, paralysed. Jane renders wifely devotion in order to comfort him and she became pregnant carrying Bud's child, but did not wish to marry him. She made Karin understand that she was not her enemy but it was her devotion for Bud that matters.

Jane had fully accepted the American family but she was waiting for real love. Then she gets a letter from Taylor informing her that he would shortly come to take her. She was worried for Bud as Du decided to go to California to stay with his sister, but she gently told the news to Bud. Taylor once again comes to her life. She walked out of Bud's life and agreed to Taylor and Duff. "I am not choosing between two men. I am caught between the promises of America and old world dutifulness" (Mukherjee, Pg- 240). Her bidding farewell to Bud's life is not out of selfishness but she is dangling between the morality of India and practicality of America.Bharati Mukherjee ends her book on a novel note-

> Then there is nothing I can do. Time will tell if I am Tornado, rubble maker, arising from nowhere and disappearing as a cloud. I am out the door…… greedy with wants and reckless hope." (Mukherjee Pg 241)

She has the courage to transform her dreams into reality and is not only a path finder full of self-confidence but also an example, a leader for all womankind desirous of liberation from the shackles of age-old dogmas. Bharati Mukherjee successfully transmits a message through Jasmine who is subjected to multiple codes of society and geographical locales.

Jasmine assimilates herself to the mainstream culture of the adopted land. The past has to be wiped out. The novelist admits that life of an immigrant involves a series of incarnations. In one of her interviews she confided:

> I have been murdered and reborn at least three times, the very correct woman I was trained to be and was very happy being, is very different from the politicized, shrill, civil rights activist I was in Canada, and from the urgent writer that I have become in the last few years in the United States. (Lowa review 20, 3 (1990), Pg. 18)

Jasmine undergoes a similar plight. At every stage of change there are mixed feelings of fear, anger, bitterness and confusion; yet every stage is a discovery of her. There is an undefined median between the old self and the new one. Jasmine is a complex blend of the "silent woman", "the speaking person" and the "teller of tales". Within her there is unconquerable desire and also struggle for self-denial and self-realization. Though Jasmine adopts herself to the American lifestyle yet she cannot efface the self-sacrificing Indian woman within. If Jasmine appears to be a rebel and a revolutionary, it is not that she protests against the Indian culture as such, rather it is against its retentiveness. Jasmine revolts against the traditional conservative attitude of the Indian towards women who are not allowed to be self-reliant. About her women character she rightly stated: "The kinds of women I write about…..are those who are adaptable. We've all been raised to please, been trained to be adaptable as wives, and that adaptability is working to the women's advantage where we come over as immigrants". (Lowa review 20, 3 (1990), Pg. 19) Jasmine's freedom loving spirit surfaces to the forefront throughout and she may be described as a rebel, an adapter and also a survivor. Her confidence is revealed in this statement:

> "There are no harmless, compassionate, ways to remake oneself. We murder who we are so we can rebirth ourselves- in the image of dreams. (Mukherjee, Jasmine Pg. 29)

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