

QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S JASMINE

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Abstract:The Indian-born American writer Bharati Mukherjee is one of the prominent novelists of Indian Diaspora. She has created a fair place for herself in the literary circle abroad, by her contribution to Indian English writing. Bharati Mukherjee's novels focus mainly on identity of women. Issues about women caught in the intricacies of diaspora, their struggle and hardships they face form the core of her writings. The novel of Bharati Mukherjee's Jasmine revolves around the central theme as the quest of identity. Jasmine is the main protagonist of the novel. Quest for self-identity is the basic concern of her heroine.

Keywords: Quest for identity, Self-realization, Cultural Construct, diaspora.

Jasmine was born in a rural village, Hasnapur. She tells the story as a twenty-four-year-old pregnant widow, living in Iowa with her crippled lover, Bud Ripplemeyer. Jasmine juxtaposes in her memory each of her identities- as Jyoti, Jasmine, Kali, Jazzy, Jase and Jane, implying that she evokes and revises her past in articulating her identities. The author depicts this transformation and regeneration as a positive and optimistic journey. Jasmine creates a new world consisting of new ideas and values, constantly unmasking her past. She tries to establish a new cultural identity by integrating new desires, skills and habits. This regeneration is defined more significantly in the changes in her attitude. Jyoti, the protagonist of Jasmine being "the fifth daughter, seventh of nine children" is literally strangled to death by her grandmother is a survivor and fighter from the beginning. Jasmine survives the infanticide only to become a rebellious child who stands apart from other traditional women in words and actions. From the very beginning Bharati Mukherjee has delineated Jyoti as a rebel against blind beliefs and superstitions.

Jasmine is a coming-of-age novel depicting the journey of the protagonist Jasmine. The novel's opening phrase, "Lifetimes ago..." sets in motion the major motif, or theme, the recreation of one's self. Born as Jyoti in a small village in Punjab, gradually assimilates herself into the American culture as Jane Ripplemeyer. The story of the novel begins with a flashback to her childhood days. Jane recalls the astrologer who predicted her future and told her that one day she will be widowed and exiled and she could not challenge her destiny. Bharati Mukherjee, has however challenged the conventional portrayal of a meek female

character by making Jyoti a rebel from her childhood. Her resilience and mental strength make her fight against all odds. The ominous prediction of the astrologer baffles her and when she tries to run away from him, she falls and a twig cuts her forehead. This made it appear as if she had what the Oracle called a third eye, a way of seeing things that others could not.

Jasmine's marriage to Prakash is also another sign of her rebellious self. Prakash Vijn is an enthusiastic and energetic young man who dreams of going to America one day. He even saves money for this purpose. It was Prakash who renamed Jyoti as "Jasmine" and sows the seed of 'new woman' in her. When Prakash prepares to go to America, she says, "I'll go with you and if you leave me, I will jump into a well". A woman has to accept, the path of her husband, Renamed as Jasmine, joyously sharing the ambition of her husband, she looks forward going to America, a land of opportunities. This dream turns into dust as Prakash dies of bomb explosion. But Jasmine is no typical woman—like a phoenix she emerges anew from her ashes of past self and decides to go to Iowa by herself, chasing her husband's dream.

This journey changes her life. The centre of her life is relocated as she moves from one experience to another. The conflict arises when she boards a ship to America and enters illegally. She was the only girl in the ship and got many bad treatments from the leader named The Half Faced. She is brutally raped by the leader of the ship and here emerges another self of Jasmine which is compared to Goddess Kali. She kills her predator and flees off to the Land of Dreams—America.

Bharati Mukherjee has tried to portray America in a good light. Hence, when we see Jasmine struggling on her first day in America due to language barrier and her lack of knowledge, she meets a kind-hearted an old white lady Lilian Gordon. Lilian teaches her to speak, to cook and most importantly—to be confident. She also teaches Jasmine the American lifestyle. Finally, Jasmine decides to move to New York in order to pursue her goals.

In New York, a new chapter of Jasmine's life begins where she started living in Professor Devinder Vadhera's apartment. She took care of his family and eventually, he makes her a green card which is Jasmine's another step towards being a part of American society. She could manage herself quite well and gradually starts recovering from her past traumas. She decides to get a better job in order to assimilate herself in a new country.

In the final part of the novel, Jasmine is faced with a challenge where she has to choose between two men. One is the man whom she decided to spend the rest of her life with, and the other one is the one she truly loved. Finally, she decided to be with the one she loved (Bud Ripplemeyer) and moved to California. This again makes way for her final transformation from Jasmine to Jane.

Bharati Mukherjee explores the identity of Jasmine which is invariably which is constantly evolving in New York and with the help of Kate Gordon-Feldstein, Jasmine begins to experience a new American way of life: "I became an American in an apartment on Claremont Avenue across the street from a Barnard College dormitory." But just when Jasmine has begun to find happiness, she spots the murderer of her husband, Prakash, and flees to Iowa to protect the people in New York that she loves. In rural Iowa, Jasmine adopts a new name, Jane: "Bud calls me Jane. Me Bud, you Jane. I didn't get it at first. He kids. Calamity Jane. Jane as in Jane Russell, not Jane as in Plain Jane. But Plain Jane is all I want to be." In Iowa she becomes Jane.

Oscillating between difficult circumstances, Jasmine changes her name accordingly. But even when she changes her name her past identities never change. They emerge in specific moments and aggravate the tension which results in disintegration, thereby causing Jasmine to create another more dominant identity, different from all those that came before. She constantly moves between childhood memories and adulthood, from despair to hope, compassion and love. The inevitability of memories and limitless nature of time is emphasized here. Jasmine finds her life entangled by different situations and hence, she prepares herself to go to Iowa to start her life anew. Here too, she prepares herself mentally and physically for a new identity.

Jasmine is portrayed as a phoenix rising from her own ashes every time she is destroyed. Jasmine fights tooth and claw to survive in a cruel world. Jasmine can face all challenges, whether it is killing a mad dog in Hasnapur, or travelling round the world as an illegal immigrant, being repeatedly raped, without suffering any bad consequences she calmly takes on a new name for each role. In this novel the womanhood has been depicted not as an incarnation of weakness but as a personification of strength. Jasmine assimilates herself by constantly changing her identities and turned out to be a sole survivor. From her very childhood she proved herself to be a fierce character ready to fight against her fate. Bharati Mukherjee has carved out the assimilation of Third World immigrants into the American 'melting pot' which is enriched by those, she describes as pioneers.

Jasmine's struggle in the novel is symbol of a rootless person's fight against isolation. Jasmine is alone in her fights, yet she manages to emerge out of it victorious. This shows how easily Jasmine assimilated herself into the American Dream. Her journey through life leads Jasmine through many transformations in various locations. In her 'Land of Opportunity', Jasmine 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. Jasmine creates her own text from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jase to Jane for each new encounter.

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