

Volume-1, Issue-VI, Sept- 2017

Research maGma

An International Multidisciplinary Journal

CONFERENCE

of

**Thiruvalluvar University
College of Arts & Science, Arakkonam.**

on

**"EMERGING TRENDS IN ENGLISH
LANGUAGE & LITERATURE"**



Research maGma

An International Multidisciplinary Journal

ISSN NO- 2456-7078 IMPACT FACTOR- 4.520 VOLUME-1, ISSUE-7, SEPT-2017

THE TRANSFORMATION FROM SERVILITY TO SERVICE BY JASMINE IN 'JASMINE'

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an in-depth analysis of the leading woman character of the novel 'Jasmine' by Bharati Mukherjee and her immigrant experiences as a woman born and brought up in India, but one who wants to be an American. The course of journey from Jasmine to Jane is focused in relation with the place she moves at different time. She tries to adapt herself into foreign culture where she acquires new independent individual identity. Jasmine transforms herself to different selves by changing her names in turn changing her personality to each of the new places she acquaints with. It also deals with the struggles of the protagonist and how she overcomes all such and eventually becomes a care giver in the newly adopted land.

KEYWORDS:

Jasmine, protagonist.

"The relation between literature and society is reciprocal; both serve cause and effect to each other. A literary creation does not come into existence by itself; its emergence is determined by social situations. Literature is indeed the most explicit record of human spirit", says R. K. Dhawan.

Indian writings in English can be traced back to eighteenth century. The contribution of women writers for Indian fiction in English is fairly huge. The women writers share their views and opinions by portraying the society and human in different perspectives. These writers create their own world and characters are molded accordingly to fit into their world. There are different reasons for women writers to write on different themes. The empowerment of women can be seen in the works of women writers. Women writers have secured a safe and steady place in a male dominant society.

Bharati Mukherjee was born on 27 July 1940 to Sudhir Lal Mukherjee, a pharmaceutical chemist and Bina Mukherjee, a house wife. In 1947, soon after independence Mukherjee's father moved with

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the family to London. Mukherjee lived in London for about three years, where she became fluent in English. She lived in a quite comfortable circumstance since her father was a co-owner of pharmaceutical factory.

Bharati Mukherjee completed her B.A (Honors) in English at the University of Calcutta in 1959. She took her M.A degree in English from the University of Baroda in 1961. Finding his daughter's aptitude for creative work, Mr. Mukherjee encouraged her to join creative writing programme in the United States. She went to the university of Iowa's writer's workshop with a P.E.O. International Peace Scholarship and obtained MFA in creative writing in 1963 and Ph.D in English and comparative literature in 1969. It was during her stint at the University of Iowa that she met Clark Blaise, the Canadian novelist, professor and journalist and married him in North American style in September, 1963. "Until my lunch-break wedding, I had seen myself as an Indian foreign student who intended to return to Indian to live. The five minute ceremony in the lawyer's office suddenly changed me into a transient with conflicting loyalties to two very different cultures," (Shukla 192).

Bharati Mukherjee succeeded in both academic and professional career. She availed herself for Grants from Mc Gill University in 1968 and 1970 besides winning Canada Arts Council Grant twice in the years 1973-74 and 1977. She also received Guggenheim Foundation Award in 1978-79 and Canadian Government Award in 1982. She also won the first prize from Periodical Distribution Association in 1980 for her short story Isolated Incidents. Mukherjee has also been honoured with the National Book Critics Circle Award, for her short story collection, The Middleman and other stories in 1988. Her creative works comprise seven novels – The Tiger's daughter (1972), Wife (1975), The Holder of the World (1993), Leave it to me (1997), Desirable daughters (2002) and The Tree Bride (2004) and two collections of short stories – Darkness (1985) and The Middleman and the other stories (1988). She also co-authored with her husband for two non-fictional works.

Bharati Mukherjee in her third novel 'Jasmine' acknowledges the special significance of her protagonist Jasmine. Bharati Mukherjee admits in an interview that her characters are a kind of pioneers who have the spirit to forsake a predictable life in order to throw themselves into a new one. In 'Jasmine', she celebrates both the heroic spirit and zeal of a village girl who flourished out of an painful past into an inspiring personality and a complete individual and the state of immigration in the U.S., which facilitates the aliens not only to be acculturated but also be assimilated into their new land. A genetic transformation makes it for Jasmine to decide "to reposition the stars" (240).

Jasmine is depicted as optimistic and adapting to all kinds of situations. It is like a magical transformation, as how Jyoti becomes Jasmine, Jazzy, Jase and Jane. All the names in the novel suit her personality changes, with the place and people, she moves on. The character of Jyoti is traced from her childhood. The different stages of her personality are seen from a multi-dimensional perspective. She holds different roles that she plays. She is Jyoti as a child, Jasmine as Prakash's wife, Jazzy as illegal immigrant, Jase as the care-giver of Taylor and finally Jane as Bud's partner.

The portrayal of the character – Jasmine, displays the supremacy and shrewdness into the greatness of human spirit which Mukherjee projects in the most artistic way. Mukherjee does not give instant solutions to her women characters while facing incessant problems. She prefers showing them gaining the power in order to control their destinies. At times, they offer role models for several immigrant women. Fakrul Alam writes:

Once literature begins to serve as a forum illuminating female experiences, it can assist

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in humanizing and equilibrating the culture, value system, which has served predominantly male interests. A literary work is capable of providing role models, instill a positive sense of feminine identity by portraying women who are self-actualizing, whose identities are not dependent on man.

Jasmine's transformation from Jyoti to Jane has its own scars and strains. Jyoti is born in a feudal village of Hasnapur, eighteen years after the partition of India. The fifth daughter and seventh of nine children of her parents, she is dowry less, undesirable female child, and considered as a curse for the family. The prediction of the astrologer of her widowhood in the future is the next event. A non-conformist and a rebel as she is, she questions the predictions of the astrologer about her widowhood and exile in the harsh terms, "You are crazy old man. You don't know what my future holds" (3).

The irritated fortune teller chucks hard on her head and she falls on the ground getting a star-shaped scar on her forehead. This scar is seen as a curse by others, since it may be an obstacle onto the way of her getting married. "Now your face is scarred for life! How will the family ever find you a husband" (5). But she treats it as her third eye and feels like becoming a sage. To quote, "It's not a scar," I shouted. "It's my third eye". In the stories that our mother recited, the holiest sages developed an extra eye right in the middle of their foreheads. Through that eye they peered out into invisible worlds. Now I'm a sage" (5).

To find her path, Jasmine pierces her way through the dense jungle of problems. Each and every moment in her life, adds self-confidence to her. Her experiences track her future course of action. She shows the ability to change and to become comfortable at any place in order to survive. Indira Bhatt pertinently comments, "Jasmine takes a bird view of the American life and does not touch the deeper layers of value there" (176). She lives a life without touching the realities in deep, the immigrants especially the illegal ones, faces at every step.

Jasmine reflects her past, as bad as death. Jasmine comes out, not as a tragic character, but as one who is determined to transform her destiny and explore endless possibilities. She practices herself to strike her own roots in an alien land which is now her mother country. Jasmine is an exile from the old-world of India and old cultural values. Her sense and sensibility are vigorously engaged with the world outside her, leaving no time to replicate on the inner problems whether the life she lives is meaningful.

Jasmine, the protagonist of the novel, undergoes numerous transformations during her mission in America. She also experiences a deep sense of separation resulting in a fluid state of identity, where she becomes Jasmine to Jane. This journey becomes a saga of moral courage, a quest for self-awareness and self-assertion. Uprooted from India, Jyoti does her best to establish herself into the adopted land as an immigrant; the end finally indicated in Jasmine's pregnancy with the child of a white man – Bud. Jase praises:

Taylor didn't want to change me. He didn't want to scour and sanitize the foreignness. My being different from Wylie or Kate didn't scare him. I changed because I wanted to. To bunker oneself inside nostalgia, to sheathe the heart in a bullet proof vest, was to be a coward. On Claremount Avenue, in the Hayeses' big clean, brightly lit apartment, I bloomed from a different alien with the forged passports to adventurous Jase. (185-86)

To Jasmine, the United States is her dream-world and her strange mission is soon forgotten. She gives up her Indian name and adjusts herself easily to every circumstance of life. In spite of

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remembering her own past, she is not worried by the conflict of conventional Indian values and the American climate she faces. Mukherjee firmly believes that the multi-cultural country like America happily invites all immigrants irrespective of colour, caste and race. Therefore the heroine Jasmine, decides to settle in America feels no discrimination after the initial brutal attack.

Jasmine is loved by all for her Indianness which has made her a lovable and caring wife, an affectionate mother. She echoes her emotion again and again:

A good Hasnapur wife doesn't eat just because she is hungry. Food is a way of granting or withholding love. (216)

...

I'll wait supper for you. Indian wives never eat before their husbands. (213)

Jasmine is a rebel and revolutionary. She protests against rigours of its retentiveness, its particular way of partially comprehending the world. She resents against the 'Sati' system which compels Indian women to artifice their life although they want to live. Her hatred is against the artificially maintained ghetto which bars the non-resident Indians from recognizing themselves substantially the quality of her life. Jasmine is fluid and adjusting and justifies her each and every role. Mukherjee's following observations border on confessional note, "The kinds of women I write about... are those who adaptable. We've all been raised to lease, been trained to be adaptable as wives, and that adaptability is working to the women's advantage when we come over as immigrants".

Even Jyoti to Jasmine, to Jase and Jane may appear to be real transformation of the personality of the protagonist; from Hasnapur to Jalandhar to Florida, Manhattan, Iowa may appear to be moving from old world values to the brave new world. But the person we see at the end of the novel moving away with Taylor, is very much the same person we encounter at the earlier stages in the novel. (Kumar 121-22)

Sarah Curtis also subscribes to a similar view, "By the end of the book she is almost all American, but quintessentially she is still Indian" (Kumar 122). Given a world where "violence and bloodshed, exploitation and persecution are constants, Jasmine's plurality of selves is her only strategy for survival" (Kumar 123). Mukherjee's creative work manifests the transformation and the multi-dimensional roles of the protagonist which can be favorably analysed in the light of the making of her artist. Her idea of integration and fusion implies the transformation of Jasmine's different personalities, none of which can be wiped out, but all exist contained and metamorphosed in the new other.

From Jyoti as a village girl of Hasnapur, to Jasmine as a city woman, to Jazzy as the undocumented immigrant, to Jase as the Manhattan nanny, to Jane as the Iowan woman who centers the story, the letter 'J' represents the element of continuity within the transformation. As Elizebeth Bronfen writes:

This 'J' serves as a signifier for the dialectic of a progressive engendering of identities, putting them under erasure without consuming them. In so doing, Mukherjee's novel traces the parameters of the narrative discourse available to the muted subaltern woman. Jasmine's dislocated Other speaks out of a self-conscious and self-induced effacement in the voice of a resilient and incessantly self-fashioning hybridity. (Ponzanesi 93-94)

America has transformed Jasmine, but she has transformed America too. "Then there is nothing I can do. Time will tell if I am a Tornado, rubble-maker, arising from nowhere and disappearing into

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cloud. I am out of the door and in the pot holed and rutted driveway, scrambling ahead of Taylor, greedy with wants and reckless from hope" (241). These concluding lines release the tension, which runs like a red thread throughout the novel, between Jasmine's predicted fate and her desire to escape and transfer it.

Jasmine quickly acquires the new name and her new role and she makes it with ease by murdering her past self. The willingness of Jasmine and others of Mukherjee's characters to murder their past selves enables them to actively advance into mysterious but promising futures. The futures they propel themselves toward – even help to shape are not guaranteed to be successful, but do have the potential for personal, material and spiritual success.

Jasmine murders herself in order to create different selves. She can never deny, forget, or escape the previous selves completely. Even at the end of the novel, as she prepares to transform herself again by leaving Bud and going to California with Taylor and Duff and the baby she is carrying, her past is with her, "Watch me reposition the stars, I whisper to the astrologer who floats cross-legged above my kitchen stove... I cry into Taylor's shoulder, cry through all the lives I've given birth to, cry for my dead" (240-41). They are dead, but not gone, for they can never cease to frame, warn and influence Jasmine.

As a village girl from Hasnapur, she is "born to that kind of submission, that expectation of ignorance" (204). Her transformation of Jyoti to Jasmine represents her ability to escape from "a social order that had gone on untouched for thousands of years" (204). For Jyoti and the other women of Hasnapur, has a kind of submission towards patriarchal society which demands restricted education, arranged marriages, and constant reproduction. These kind of gendered restrictions are also configured along the lines of class and religion in Jasmine. Thus, Jyoti - from such submission in a male dominated society, her vision of the mission, supports her to survive in America against Half-face and with the help of Lillian Gordon, reaches Taylor's place and starts living as Jase and moving further to Iowa as Jane. She shapes herself to different characters, personalities and eventually she ends as a social care giver to Taylor's daughter, Duff.

CONCLUSION:

Bharati Mukherjee, in attempting to chart a woman's social and spiritual quest, has taken up each of above concerns and gives them elaboration and solid multi-dimensional shape through the portrayal of the experiences of her protagonist. In her fight to establish herself in society, dowry less fourteen-year old, Jyoti develops into a pretty lady with delicate taste. The next step is to become bride of an eminently eligible student of graduation from the city. When her husband dies, the shroud of widowhood cannot stop her progress for long just as future threats fail to curb her invincible spirit. Jasmine discovers new creative modes of appearance through her affiliation with her newly unfolding self and with others like Duff, Taylor and Bud by passing through the difficult stages of life – being raped by Half-Face, living on the charity of Lillian Gordon and as an unpaid servant in Professorji's house.

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