WOMEN OF EMERGING NATIONS IN BHARATHI MUKHERJEE’S JASMINE

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to explore the images of the third world women in the novel Jasmine. Jasmine is a novel written by Indian American novelist, Bharati Mukherjee. Bharati Mukherjee has insisted on being read not as an Indian, or expatriate writer, but as an immigrant writer, whose literary agenda is to claim America that is being improvised by newcomers from the third world. Evident in Mukherjee's self-definition is a refusal to be marginalized as a writer of alien material, an insistence that her themes are central - not marginal - to contemporary American society. Jasmine (1989) supports her claim, demonstrating Mukherjee’s evolving belief that expatriation [is] the great temptation, even the enemy, of the ex-colonial, once - third-world author. Jasmine is an ebullient novel offering a spiced-up version of the classic recipe of assimilation into the dominant culture. The reader is led from one consciousness to another as the illegal immigrant women from India, gets transformed to numbers of identity to play different role in America. If expatriations are the great temptation and enemy of the "one-third-world" author, the preferred state of impartation as it is described in Jasmine requires nothing less than the extinction of the "once-third-world" self.

Key Words: American society, Culture, Identity, Expatriation, Immigrant, Third world women, Liberal

I. INTRODUCTION

Caught in the dialectic between the Third World and the First, between the past and the present, Jasmine does not attempt a resolution by a complex synthesis; it simply dissolves the claims of the past. The novel bedazzles the reader with its protagonist's chameleon identities matching her changing locales: Hasnapur, Jullundhar, Florida, Queens, and Manhattan, Iowa. However, this quick succession of ever-progressive identities in Jasmine flattens what is, in effect, a long and complicated process of negotiating cultural dispositions, experiences, allegiances and memories (a process that has absorbed Mukherjee's own writing for nearly two decades). Proceeding through a series of jump-cuts, the narrative conceals the violent disjuncture at the heart of the novel: the (ill) logic by which the identity of Jyoti, a peasant woman who has only just made the transition to an Indian city, yields - without the benefit of the requisite elite education - to the identity of the narrator, Jane Ripple-Meyer, a Middle-American women consorting with a white banker. To the extent that the novel does not consider this an anomaly, it is complicit us with the myth of the American Dream: it suppresses the issue of class.

The motto of the novel is clear; "There are not harmless, compassionate ways to make one self. We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams" (Jasmine 25). This is the story of Jasmine who cuts her tongue, burns her past, sheds her cultural baggage, changers her clothes, alters her walk and her name, and instead of becoming in this violent process of nullification a nonentity, a husk void of self, she acquires the desired and desirable identity of Jane or Jane, the identity of a white banker's white banker's or professor's wife.

II. WOMEN OF EMERGING NATIONS

The account of the protagonist’s speedy and spectacular progression from Jyoti to Jane, from the farmland of Punjab to the other farmland of Iowa is the core of the novel. The first nodal point of change is Jullundhar, Punjab of her village, Hasnapur, and sets her on the emancipating path to self - assertion and self - reliance, America's self - proclaimed virtues. However, before he can take off for the engineering school in Florida, which was to have given them both new lives, he is killed in a Sikh terrorist bomb attack. Jyoti - Jasmine spends all her husband' savings on
The characters in Mukherjee's novels develop multiple consciousness, resulting in a self that is neither unified nor hybrid, but rather fragmented. As the protagonists perceive both their race and sexuality through new and difference lenses throughout the course of the texts, they come to realize that the diasporic experience is the indeterminacy of multiplicity. This multiplicity at times becomes a significant plight for the characters, for as their different consciousness contradict each other the character the character is left uncertain as to the nature of their identities not knowing where they fit in the American society. Finally, they become capable of living in a world where individuals exist not as a unified one, but as many, bound by no borders and infinite in the possibility of inventing identities.

Henceforth, all her encounters with strangers in the United States are miraculously benign: naturalism gives way romance. A kind Quaker lady Gordon, shelters her, calls her Jazzy teaches her how to walk American- style and sends her her way to Queens, New York, where Jasmine contacts an Indian professor who is well disposed to her husband. His home in Flushing, Queens, is part of a Punjabi immigrant ghetto; after spending five depressing months there and acquiring a fake green card, she leaves; Lillian Gordon's sympathetic daughter guides her to her new home in Manhattan; a young, liberal couple, Taylor and Wylie Hayes, employ her as an au pair and nanny to their adopted daughter Duff. Taylor, a physics professor at Columbia University, names her Jase, and during her two years with them she becomes an American. Then, Wylie leaves Taylor for another man and Taylor himself falls in love with Jase. However, the presence in New York of a Sikh terrorist from her village frightens Jasmine into returning away to Iowa, the next station of change.

In Baden, Iowa, she is fortunate to run into Mother Ripplemeyer, a Lutheran of German stock, who promptly takes her to her son's bank. The aging banker Bud Ripplemeyer is swept off her feet by the Indian princess; six months after working as a teller in his bank, she is named Jyoti, which means light, but she has become a fake green card, she leaves; Lillian Gordon's sympathetic daughter guides her to her new home in Manhattan; a young, liberal couple, Taylor and Wylie Hayes, employ her as an au pair and nanny to their adopted daughter Duff. Taylor, a physics professor at Columbia University, names her Jase, and during her two years with them she becomes an American. Then, Wylie leaves Taylor for another man and Taylor himself falls in love with Jase. However, the presence in New York of a Sikh terrorist from her village frightens Jasmine into returning away to Iowa, the next station of change.

The starkness of the rapid linear development from village to metropolis, of Jyoti reborn as June, is disguised by the nonlinear narrative techniques of montage and jump - cuts, shuffling us back and forth in time. However, from the opening page, the narrative constructs the native women, Jyoti, as a becoming figure marked for exile and deliverance from the dark and static Being of India.

The novel opens with two images that emblematically sum up the novel's representation of India. The first image is of an astrologer sitting under a banyan tree in a village; by predicting the doom of fate upon seven - year - old Jyoti, he symbolically and actually inflicts a star - shaped wound on her forehead. The second image is of this girl paddling furiously against fate in a dirty river carrying the stinking carcass of a dead dog. Recalling the stench, the young first - person narrator, Jane Ripplemeyer of Elsa country. Iowa defines herself by negation: she says that she knew what she did not want to become (3).

The narrating consciousness proceeds to dissociate itself not only from India but from Jyoti as well. Jane Ripplemeyer, the narrator, declares that she was named Jyoti, which means light, but she has transformed herself into Jane - a fighter and survivor (35). Thus, the survivor's spirit in Jyoti, insofar as she is a parent of Jane, is a singular character, superior to the other peasant women, who cannot look after for themselves. In a village scene Jane recollects, the village women are caught with their pants down as their morning toilet ritual in the fields is disrupted by the arrival of a mad dog; interestingly, while adult women-presumably hardy peasants - "crouch" or "crab - crawl" (48 - 49) before the reader, the girl Jyoti (in her capacity as Jane) dramatically fights the mad dog and rescues them from danger. Being a survivor, Jyoti is less like the Indian women, who "fell into wells," and "got run over by trains" (36); she is more like Jane. When she is herself (not Jane), Jyoti / light is powerless against the feudal darkness of India; likewise, Jasmine / fragrance is weak before the land 's stench.

Thus, in the portrayal of her immigrant heroine, Mukherjee reinforce images of the Third World Woman who is constrained by her gender and by the "backward" culture and economy of the Third World: she is ignorant,
traditional, domestic, in short a victim awaiting rescue. As Chandra Mohan has pointed out, such an image of the Third World Woman posits “western women as secular, liberated, and having control over their own lives” (81). Mukherjee is of course careful to suggest that America is no Eden: it is a brave new world that includes the violence of rape, murder, and suicide. However, America saves Jasmine from Yama. By laughing at Jasmine's mission of death (salt) and rendering it impure, the American rapist in Florida liberates Jasmine from tradition. Instead of burning herself, she throws her suitcase into a trash can and sets it on fire. Thus, it follows that when a self-immolating Third World Woman is an immigrant to America, she has nothing to preserve of her identity, which is symbolic of and synonymous with oppression.

In fact, the novel seems to suggest there are women who might travel half-way round the globe to the United States to commit sati. Jasmine has no other motive. Willing to suggest some obscure piety for Jasmine's different motivation, Mukherjee fosters a gross misperception. Reading Jasmine, one might think sati was being practiced as a matter of routine and choice by contemporary Hindu windows. For the Indian reader it is clear that Jasmine's desire for sati - let alone her desire for sati in America - is incomprehensible. The will to live that she exhibits at all other times is conveniently repressed; her husband's considerable saving that could have supported her are squandered on a passport to death.

However, apart from this affront to social and psychological realism, the symbolic performance of sati allows Mukherjee to mark the violent transition from the odd to the new. The intractable issue of continuity, from the past to the present, is literally trashed. The fire marks the extinction of an oppressive gender identity, for the notion of both purity (the virtuous women) and impurity (the raped women) is destroyed: henceforth Jasmine can define her own desires, unhindered by conventional duty or morality. Further, if a progressive immigrant identity is a matter of shedding Old World baggage and clothing, Jasmine now a tabula rasa upon whom the name of Jesse and Jane can be inscribed. Jyoti - Jasmine leaves Florida for Flushing, New York, but what gives her the sensibility or the disposition to stay aloof from the ethnic ghetto is never specified. She seems to have an antipathy to her culture's practices although, we are told, she came to America in allegiance to sati, the most orthodox of practices.

The two most critical points of change in Jyoti - Jasmine's life are awkwardly maneuvered. The first big shift is from India (Punjab) to America; the second move is from the Punjabi ghetto to Manhattan. Both are comparable in magnitude in that they require a transition to a Western world view, one for which Jyoti - Jasmine has not been prepared. However, it is not anomalous, within the novel's terms, that an Indian woman who can bring to America her vision of sati can discard that sensibility overnight and assume the consciousness of individualism. Changing world views appears to be a matter of changing clothes: Jasmine becomes Jase, and Americanized women who wear silk pants and glittering shoes.

The inscription of Indian women into the frontier pattern is exotic as well as heroic and makes for some dramatic moments. Some readers may commend Mukherjee for creating a vital female figure who combines the force of the Hindu trinity with her own uninhibited powers of feminine creating, wrath and sexual desire. "I feel so potent, a goddess" (12). Says Jane Ripplemeyer. As the female Brahma, she is her own creator, pregnant with new life; as caregiver, she matches Vishnu, he preserver: as Siva's counterpart, Kali, she has killed the demon Half - Face, her rapist.

However, Jasmine's active, willful, individualistic person notwithstanding, the reader must examine to what extent Mukherjee character is a self-defining immigrant woman. As exotic caregiver, homemaker and temptress, Jane is the model immigrant women who says and does nothing to challenge the authority or ethnocentrism of the white American male. She makes no mention of her past because it is unacceptable to Bud has never shown any interest about her life in India which frightens him; in fact, he construes Jane's memories as a mark of disloyalty to him. However, he endows her with a predictable foreignness; Jasmine points out that is her mysterious and inscrutable exoticism that entices Bud so much. Although a case could be made for the ambivalence and irony of this statement (as of many others). Jasmine readily complies as the exotic other. In fact, this compliance is her ticket to the American Dream. As Rich notes, of non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants in "quest of a middle - class standard of life, "the" "pressure to assimilate" could say various things: "change your name, your accent," "don't make trouble, " "defer to white men," and "be ashamed of who you are” (142). Mukherjee's heroine complies.

Jane Ripplemeyer, pregnant with new life, asserts that she hardly sends out or receives any mail because she wants to disconnect herself from her past (185). Maintaining a life of continuity implies carrying the burdens of history; Jane only carries her own new life. It is significant that Du, the adopted son, is not considered twice-born. In making
a distinction between the Vietnamese-American Du and herself, Jane makes the perplexing statement: "My transformation has been genetic; Du's was hyphenated " (198). While the "hybrid" Du departs for the frontier to work on behalf of his Vietnamese family and community in America, the singularly Americanized Jane, pursuing "adventure, risk, transformation, "has on responsibility to anyone.

On the first glance, Jyothi/Jasmine/Jase/Jane's names seem to map a progression of identities imposed upon her by men and by older, powerful woman in the interest of keeping her fixed in place within the name giver's own sense of nationality. Indeed, the narrator comes close to acknowledging this, saying "I have had a husband for each of the woman I have been. Prakash for Jasmine, Taylor for Jase, Bud for Jane” (175).

The acquisition of each of her names occurs in the retrospective portions of the narrative, beginning with her childhood in India. Jyoti is her father's daughter, a Punjabi traditionalist whose early widowhood is supposed to mean the end of her own existence. She is named Jyoti, which means "Light," by her paternal grandmother, a fanatical adherent to the subordination of woman. To accept her husband's renaming, her Jasmine, however, she must adjust her relationship to Indian tradition, modernizing and globalizing her expectations to live up his vision of Vijdh and Wife, that mythical corporation that was to take the couple out of Indian and into the Western world. Even after her husband has died she refers to herself in terms of Vijdh and Wife, particularly during the period where she is learning to adjust to life in America while living with the Indian immigrants in New York.

Once Taylor has renamed her "Jase," she begins to entertain the possibility of an American identity, which would seem to have solidified once she becomes settled, pregnant, Midwestern, plain Jane. Off course, there is nothing plain about her in the rural Iowa setting; Bud compares her looks to those of a maharani; Du's friends and Bud's neighbours are enchanted by the curries she cooks. "They get disappointed if there is not something Indian on the table” (7). Jane is certainly no longer simply Indian, but she is not Indian either: she is like the other woman in her Iowa community and her different.

The specificity of her national difference does not matter to her Iowa neighbours. "To them.... I'm a 'dark - haired girl in a naturally blond country. I have a 'darkish complexion' (in India, I'm 'wheatish'), as thought I might be Greek from one grandparent, I'm from a generic place, 'over there' which might be Ireland, France, or Italy. I'm not a Lutheran, which isn't to say I might not be Presbyterian” (29). The neighbours acknowledge a difference, but they are not interested in what it might mean about who "Jane" is.

That the heroine can in the end so lightly shed the "Jane" identity in favour of a return to "Jane" suggests the text's awareness that just as there are many more ways than one for a woman to be Indian in Lahore, poor in Hasnapur; Hindu, Sikh, Muslim; Jyoti, Jasmine, the "wife" of Vijdh & Wife), there are also limitless ways for an Indian woman to be American (Jazzy, Jasmine, Jase, Jane, Mrs.Ripplemeyer, Mom, and Jase again).

Ethnic and national identities are, like gender identity, an effect, constituted by repeated actions. Jyoti/Jasmine/Jane is consistent in her willingness to have identities lent to her by the men or older woman in her life, but it is her own agency that keeps her identities fluid. By the novel's end she may appear to have been assimilated into American womanhood, but "Jase"-the identity on which she ends her story- is different from "Jane" in that it is still a variant of "Jasmine", the name Prakash gave her in India in anticipation of her becoming a woman of the world.

Jasmine is neither Indian nor American, both Indian and American: she enacts a cosmopolitan identity. Again in contrast to Jane Eyre, Jasmine ends not in serene retrospective contemplation of the fruits of a long - settled denouement, but in breathless mid- action as she scrambles down the frozen, rutted driveway to Taylor's waiting, California - bound car. The novel's end gives no suggestion that "Jase" is an ultimate identity, or that this heroine would not go on shifting her relation to nationality - if not to gender and sexuality - indefinitely.

III. CONCLUSION

Jasmine and Du symbolize the new human being who has emerged from the East- West encounter. The introduction of new Western technologies into the centuries - old stable societies of the East has caused turmoil and roused desires and created wants that are difficult to fulfill. The discontent has resulted in violence at all levels - personal, social and international. Bharati Mukherjee, in Jasmine, seems to use symbolism purposely to underscore the thematic concern of clash of cultures which results in confusion and chaos.
The old stable societies crumble under the weight of new technologies engendering violence and discontent. An individual can neither attain personal integration nor maintain harmonious relationship with others and often gets crushed under the juggernaut of impersonal forces. It is not a coincidence that all deaths in Jasmine are violent and most marriages breakup. The recurring symbol of Jasmine's third eye alludes to her attempts to synthesize her diverse experiences and knit her various selves into a single identity. The novel and on a clear note the astrologer's prophecy but it is obvious she cannot escape her Karma.

REFERENCE