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THE IMMIGRANT IDENTITY AND EXPERIENCE IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S NOVEL *JASMINE*

Abstract

The present paper discusses the representation of immigrant identity and experience in Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* (1989) drawing on the ideas of McGowan, Lange, Baumeister, and Isajiw. In *Jasmine*, Bharati Mukherjee (b. 1940) explores the idea of the mixing of the East and the West with a story of a young Hindu woman who leaves India for the United States, depicting the young woman's desire for freedom and her search for identity as she illegally travels and is influenced by the experiences she has in each of her new locations, moving from Punjab to Florida to New York to Iowa and finally to California.

Key words: immigrant identity, cultural dialogue, India, America, illegal travels

In her works, writer Bharati Mukherjee (b. 1940) focuses on the "phenomenon of migration, the status of new immigrants, the feeling of alienation often experienced by expatriates" and on the expatriate's quest for identity in a foreign land (Alam 1996:7).

The concept of identity may be analyzed from many different perspectives, such as cultural, political, social, ethnic, and personal or individual identity. Personal identity is closely related to social or cultural identity. As Donald Macraill and Avram Taylor note, "the problem of identity is especially important nowadays, so it may be considered a postmodern

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subject matter. [...] It is concerned with particular styles, description of the world and the nature of ‘truth’” (Macraill and Taylor 2004: 76). In *Postmodernism and its Critics*, John McGowan argues that

Individual identity, like communal identity, is a construct and, more particularly, a construct created through constitutive action [...] a self identity must be constructed by any individual who is ‘thrown’ (to use Heidegger’s term) into a network of intersubjective relations. The resulting self is the product of a process, radically nonautonomous, but is differentiated from other selves and possesses an identity that unifies its disparate experiences, guides the presentation of the self to others, and forms the context for the various choices that the self makes. (McGowan 1991: 243).

Thus, following McGowan it is possible to state that identity is constructed in the context of relationships with others and with the environment, it changes or is caused to change depending on the situations or ‘intersubjective’ settings one is ‘thrown’ into, independently of one’s will or wish. Since it is a process, self-construction is never complete, and the self may acquire a number of identities which, in their turn, are responses to different life situations or settings. McGowan also emphasizes the importance of one’s past and its influence in making choices: “choice can only be made in relation to the self’s commitment to its past and to *its sense of itself*. Choices are self affirming and serve to reinforce identity by enacting it” (McGowan 1991: 216-17). In relation to the relevance of one’s past to identity change, the scholar claims that “because an identity is constructed in an intersubjective process that takes place in the self’s earliest years, the self, at a later time, can easily experience that identity as imposed or as inadequate to some other sense of self. [. . .] the experience of alienation from the earliest identity (or earlier identities) stems from the creation of new identities in new intersubjective contexts, not from some existential split between the social and the true self “ (McGowan 1991: 245). Thus, the scholar seems to emphasize that even though past experiences are important in shaping one’s identity, the individual’s past is just one aspect in the lifelong identity formation process.

1. Jasmine's search for identity

The element of autobiography in Mukherjee's writings, her own struggle with identity, first as an exile from India, then an Indian expatriate in Canada, and finally as an immigrant in the United States are reflected in her works and bear out, to use Suleiman's phrase, "the power of the personal voice" (Suleiman 1998: 5). In the United States of America, Bharati Mukherjee sees herself as an immigrant writer who conceptualizes the image of the immigrants, speaks of their duality and flexible identity and presents their struggle to re-root themselves in a new cultural context. Talking of her own immigrant identity and its relation to her writings in an interview with Tina Chen and S.X. Goudie, Mukherjee remarks:

I'd say I'm an American writer of Bengali-Indian origin. In other words, the writer/political activist in me is more obsessed with addressing the issues of minority discourse in the U.S. and Canada, the two countries I have lived and worked in over the last thirty odd years. The national mythology that my imagination is driven to create, through fiction, is that of the post-Vietnam United States. I experience, simultaneously, the pioneer's capacity to be shocked and surprised by the new culture, and the immigrant's willingness to de-form and re-form that culture (Mukherjee qtd. In Chen and Goudie).

In her novel *Jasmine* (1989), Bharati Mukherjee depicts a young Hindu woman's immigrant experience and search for identity, the stages of which are revealed through the change in the heroine's name: from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jazzy to Jase to Jane and through the change in the roles she assumes as she illegally travels and is influenced by the experiences she has in each of the new places she finds herself in, moving from Punjab to Florida to New York to Iowa and finally to California. Jyoti is a naïve girl in the village of Hasnapur, Jasmine is a young wife and then a widow in the city of Jullundhar, Jazzy is an illegal immigrant in Florida and New York whose main aim is to survive in a foreign environment, Jase is a timid *au pair* learning and trying to adapt to the American culture represented by the host family, and Jane is a self-confident lover and partner of a middle-aged banker in Iowa who dares to reach for her dream and leave for California with the man she really loves. As Ralph J. Crane notes, "Bharati Mukherjee uses the metaphor of a journey, in this case through three continents, to

emphasize the distance Jasmine, and by extension all womankind, has to travel in search of her true self“ (Crane).

The first shift in the heroine’s identity takes place when at fifteen she marries a twenty-four-year-old student Prakash and is renamed Jasmine by him:

Pygmalion wasn’t a play I’d seen or read then, but I realize now how much of Professor Higgins there was in my husband. He wanted to break down the Jyoti I’d been in Hasnapur and make me a new kind of city woman. To break off the past, he gave me a new name: Jasmine.[...] Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttle between identities (Mukherjee 1989:77. Subsequent page references to the novel will be given in parentheses following quotations).

After her husband is killed by a religious fanatic, Jasmine, a seventeen-year-old widow, leaves India for the United States. The aim of her journey is to take her husband’s suitcase to Florida, in this manner symbolically fulfilling her husband’s dream to emigrate, set a ritual fire to it and commit *sati*. After a long and tiring illegal journey, the first day on American soil ends in violence for the young woman: Jasmine gets raped by the captain of the ship and, by assuming the power of Kali, the goddess of destruction, kills him in a rage. After committing the act of revenge, Jasmine closes the door of the cheap motel behind her, sets a fire in a trash bin and burns her husband’s suitcase together with her clothes stained with the dead man’s blood. As Jaspal Kaur Singh notes in this connection, “When Jasmine burns her clothes in the trash bin, Mukherjee seems to suggest that Jasmine can symbolically trash the old traditions and, hence, her traditional identity” (Singh 2008:71). After leaving the deserted motel, alone, without money, hungry and feeling sick, Jasmine follows a highway north. In the novel, she becomes the epitome of the immigrant whose feelings of desperation and hopelessness, the sense of loss and disorientation, are expressed in the following passage:

We are the outcasts and deportees, strange pilgrims visiting outlandish shrines, landing at the end of tarmacs, ferried in old army trucks where we are roughly handled and taken to roped-off corners of waiting rooms where surly, barely wakened customs guards await their bribes. We are dressed in shreds of national costumes, out of season, the wilted plumage of intercontinental vagabondage. We only ask one thing: to be allowed to land; to pass through; to continue (101).

Rescued from her wonderings and desperation by an elderly American woman, Jasmine becomes Jazzy: "Lillian called me "Jazzy". [...] Jazzy in a T-shirt, tight cords, and running shoes. I couldn't tell if with the Hasnapuri sidle I'd also abandoned my Hasnapuri modesty" (133). Helped by Lillian with money and advice ("Let the past make up you wary, by all means. But do not let it deform you", Jasmine travels to New York, "an archipelago of ghettos seething with aliens" and becomes a live-in housekeeper for Professorji's family. Living with the Indian family, Jasmine experiences an identity crisis which, according to Roy F. Baumeister, takes place when there is "a strong personal and emotional commitment to two distinct identity components that become incompatible" (Baumeister 1986: 211). In *Identity: Cultural Change and the Struggle for Self*, Roy F. Baumeister argues that in the situation of an identity conflict, the two components that have always been compatible "suddenly make conflicting recommendations for action" or "circumstances or choices dictate the acquisition of a new identity component that is soon found to be in conflict with long-standing components. The case of the immigrant illustrates that process. [...] The conflict arises because the person gets into a situation in which the different components prescribe different, incompatible behaviors" (Baumeister 1986: 211-212). Following Baumeister, Mukherjee's Jasmine may be seen as experiencing "an adjustment problem following change or transition of identity" (Baumeister 1986: 211):

In this apartment of artificially maintained Indianness, I wanted to distance myself from everything Jyoti-like. To them, I was a widow who should show a proper modesty of appearance and attitude [...] I felt myself deteriorating...I was spiraling into depression behind the fortress of Punjabiness. Some afternoons [...] I would find myself in the bathroom with the lights off, head down on the cold, cracked rim of the sink, sobbing from unnamed, unfulfilled wants. In Flushing I felt immured. An imaginary brick wall topped with barbed wire cut me off from the past and kept me from breaking into the future (145, 148).

The above episode, referring to John McGowan, may be also seen as Jasmine being "inadequate" to the sense of self and the new identity she aims to achieve, i.e. to forget the past and leave everything behind that reminds of Jyoti and to create a new, American, future for herself. Kuldip Kaur Kuwahara notes in this connection that "the heroine of Bharati Mukherjee's

Jasmine experiences “the tug of opposing forces” as she travels from India to America. This conflict sets up a constant pattern of “Hope and pain. Pain and hope”. [...] Hers is a conflict between two worlds, and the essence of her struggle is both to survive and to fulfill herself” (Kuwahara). This conflict, as Singh puts it, is necessary in order to “remake the self in terms of the new immigrant aesthetics” (Singh 2008:78). It is interesting to note in this connection that when asked, “Do you see immigration as an experience of reincarnation?” Mukherjee’s answer was, “Absolutely! I have been murdered and reborn at least three times” (Connell 1990:18). In the novel, this idea is expressed by the heroine as follows: “There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself. We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of our dreams” (29).

In discussing ethnic identification and conflicts in identification, Karmela Liebkind notes that identification is one of the central concepts within the tradition of identity theory (Liebkind 1992: 168). Following Lange, Liebkind distinguishes two senses of identification: “identification as identification *of*, and as identification *with*” (Lange qtd in Liebkind 1992: 169). According to Lange, identification *of* refers to recognition and classification of somebody, including oneself, as a possessor of a particular labeled identity while the most outstanding feature of the identification *with* is a wish is “to increase whatever similarity has been perceived” and “to become maximally alike the positive model” (Lange qtd in Liebkind 1992: 169,170). *Jasmine*’s attempt to become an American during the next stage of her life, i.e. when she takes up the position of an *au pair* with the Hayes family and falls in love with Taylor, the host, may be seen in terms of “the identification *with*” and as another shift in the young woman’s identity:

I became American in an apartment on Clermont Avenue across the street from a Bernard College dormitory.[...] I wanted to become the person they thought they saw: humorous, intelligent, refined, affectionate. [...] Language on the street, on the forbidden television, at Hayeses’ dinners, where I sat like a guest and only helped with the serving (and, increasingly, controlled the menu), all became my language, which I learned like a child, from the first words up. The squatting fields of Hasnapur receded fast (165,171,174).

After having been recognized by her husband’s assassin, fearing for her and her hosts’ family safety, *Jasmine* (now *Jase*) flees to Baden, Iowa. There

she takes on a role of Bud Ripplemeyer's lover and, after he gets crippled, his caregiver. Even though at this stage of her life Jasmine, pregnant with her lover's child and called Jane by him, is much stronger as a personality and aware not only of the great change she has undergone herself ("I feel so potent, a goddess") but also of her own power to make changes in other people's lives ("Asia had transformed him, made him reckless and emotional"), she is still in the process of coming to terms with her painful past, in the process of 'becoming':

Jyoti of Hasnapur was not Jasmine, Duff's day mummy and Taylor and Wylie's *au pair* in Manhattan; that Jasmine isn't this Jane Ripplemeyer having lunch with Mary Webb at the University Club today. And which of us is the undetected murderer of a half-faced monster, which of us has held a dying husband, which of us was raped and raped and raped in boats and cars and motel rooms? (127)

The novel, however, ends on a positive note. In *Jasmine*, Bharati Mukherjee depicts a portrait of an incredibly strong and at the same time fragile immigrant woman who, "greedy with wants and reckless from hope", is strong and confident enough to leave the security that her life in Baden procures in order to follow her heart and move to California. Having gone through several extreme transformations, the protagonist is "still open to many more self-inventions" in the future (Mukherjee qtd. in Chen and Goudie).

2. Immigration as exile

Jasmine is not just about the protagonist's change, it has many different points of focus and "compresses the immigration histories of many minor characters" (Mukherjee qtd in Chen and Goudie). The experience of the immigrant is conveyed through the characters of the Guatemalan women in Florida, Professorji, his wife and his elderly parents, the Caribbean housekeepers in Manhattan, and the Vietnamese boy Du and his friend in Iowa. Each of the immigrant character plays out the drama of dislocation and relocation and has his or her own personal response to the experience.

For the Guatemalan women, as well as for all other immigrant characters in the novel, immigration means, as Salman Rushdie has it, "a

triple loss”: the loss of roots, the loss of language, and the loss of cultural codes. According to Rushdie, “roots, language and social norms have been three of the most important parts of the definition of what is to be a human being. The migrant, denied all three, is obliged to find new ways of describing himself, new ways of being human” (Rushdie 1991:124-125).

For Professorji and his family, immigration equals exile, which is, per Edward Said, “the unhealable rift between a human being and a native place, between the self and the true home” (Said 2000: 173). Professorji, his wife and his elderly parents try to artificially maintain their Indianness and ethnic identity. They live in an Indian neighborhood “behind ghetto walls,” shutting themselves off from any possible influence of American culture and cherishing everything Indian, including traditions, food, clothes, language and neighbors:

They had Indian-food stores in the block, Punjabi newspapers and Hindi film magazines at the corner newsstand, and a movie every night without having to dress up for it. [...] Sundays were our days to eat too much and give in nostalgia, to take the carom board out of the coat closet, to sit cross-legged on dhurries and matchmaker marriages for adolescent cousins or younger siblings (146).

As Wsevolod W. Isajiw notes in “Ethnic Identity Retention”, this type of behaviour is very typical to the first generation immigrants (Isajiw 1999: 193). According to Isajiw, “the first generation, that is, those who arrived in the country of immigration as adults or, more specifically, those whose basic process of socialization took place before immigration tend to retain the traditional form of identity. [...] They try to “transplant” the culture of their homeland” (Isajiw 1999:193).

A different immigrant experience is reflected in the character of Du. Though the character of the adopted Vietnamese boy Du is a minor one, it condenses the pain and experience of an exile, a refugee and an immigrant. Having spent just three years in America, Du demonstrates the features of the second generation immigrant identity, the “doubleness”, to use Isajiw’s term (Isajiw 1991:193). Observing the changes in her adopted son after three years’ of immigrant experience, the protagonist of the novel notes:

My transformation has been genetic; Du’s was hyphenated. We were so full of wonder at how fast he became American, but he’s a hybrid, like the fantasy appliances he wants to build. His high-

school paper did a story on him titled: "Du (Yogi) Ripplemeyer, a Vietnamese-American..."(222)

In *Jasmine*, Bharati Mukherjee writes about the immigrant experience, the pain of dislocation and exile, the immigrants' search for safety and a sense of belonging, their struggles, aspirations and hopes. In place of the conclusion, it seems relevant to quote an excerpt from the writer's interview with Ameena Meer in which Mukherjee states:

For me, and perhaps for other immigrant writers, there's a death and a series of rebirths. It's very painful and traumatic letting go of the old self. [...] Then comes a reconstructing of oneself, which is very different. My Jasmine, or Mukherjee, have lived through hundreds of years within one generation, in the sense of coming out of a world with fixed destinies, fixed futures. And then taking on culture which, for us, is without rules. I'm making the rules up as I go along, because, in many ways, I and my characters are pioneers (Mukherjee qtd. in Meer).

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ИДЕНТИТЕТ И ИСКУСТВО ИМИГРАНТА У РОМАНУ
ЏАСМИН БХАРАТИ МУКЕРЏИ

Сажетак

У овом есеју расправља се о представљају идентитета и искуства имиграната у роману Бхарати Мукерџи Јасмине, 1989 (*Džasmin*) ослањајући се на идеје Мек Гауена, Лангеа, Баумистера и Исеџива. У роману *Џасмин*, Бхарати Мукерџи (1940) истражује идеју мешања истока и запада у причи младе индијке која напушта Индију и сели се у Америку, описујући девојчину жељу за слободом и њену потрагу за идентитетом у току илегалног путовања у току кога њен идентитет обликује искуство сваке нове средине од Пунџаба до Флориде, Њујорка и Ајове и најзад до Калифорније.

Кључне речи: имигрантски идентитет, културни дијалог, Индија, Америка, илегална путовања