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MULTIPLE IDENTITIES AND EMERGING SELVES IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S JASMINE

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Abstract: *The article continues my former analysis of "Social Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's Jasmine", focusing on new aspects related to the characters' multiple identities and how different factors (religion, race and ethnicity, customs and beliefs) shape these identities. It highlights Mukherjee's deviation from postcolonial and diasporic literature. In fashioning new identities, unlike the postcolonial lament for lost origins, Mukherjee argues for the optimism of the immigrant experience, in which the characters are both victims and survivors. Immigration, in her view, unfetters positive energies in the process of transformation. This positive attitude makes her characters oscillate between names and social identities, which seems to be the only way of entering and adapting to this new and unfamiliar world. 'Home' becomes a fluid notion, which is negotiated by her characters, a possibility you can define wherever you can feel at home. Binary –old and new- customs, traditions, and beliefs co-exist and negotiate the characters' cultural conflicts in a flexible manner.*

Keywords: *multiple identities, emerging selves, fluid identity, cultural negotiators, the immigrant experience.*

Introduction

The article highlights Bharati Mukherjee's deviation from postcolonial and diasporic literature. She rejects being labeled as a postcolonial writer. She argues for the optimism of the immigrant experience in which her characters are both victims and survivors. Mukherjee's writing is not a lament for lost origins. 'Home' is a fluid notion, a possibility you can define wherever you can feel at home. Immigration, in Mukherjee's views, unfetters positive energies in the process of transformation; this positive attitude, although it may seem idealistic and unrealistic, is the only way of entering and adapting to this new and unfamiliar world.

Mukherjee's writings "are largely honed by the multiple dislocations of her personal life, which itself has been described as a text in a kind of perennial immigration" (Ravichandran 552).

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With irony and humor, her characters, in fashioning new identities, act as middlemen, as negotiators of cultural conflicts in a flexible manner, depending on the cultural situations they face. They face "the dilemma of adjusting between two cultures" (Ravichandran 552) – Indian and American, "in constant negotiation and transformation because of the interaction between the past and the present" (Lazure 10, cited in Ravichandran 553).

Each stage in Jasmine's transformation is marked by a change in name and dressing. Jyoti, Jasmine, Jazzy, Jase, Jane – these are some names Jasmine uses to show her fluid state of identity. Jasmine oscillates between these Indian and American names and social identities depending on the situations she finds herself in: "I shuttled between identities" (*Jasmine* 77). She passes easily from one identity to another – Indian daughter, wife, widow, friend, mother, illegal immigrant, servant, employee, etc, which allows her, at least apparently, to adapt more easily.

When she marries Prakash, she is a compliant Indian wife. Her husband is the initiator of her transformation. He wants her to become a modern city woman. After his death, she is raped on the ship to USA, which is another act that triggers her transformation. She first wants to get away from her "naïve perception of herself" (Ravichandran 554) and part with her Indian past. However, she knows what she does not want to become and builds her new American identity on Indian myths, values, and traditions.

While she is aware of her Otherness, which makes her appealing, exotic, and tolerated for some, and frightening, abhorrent, and discarded by others, she manages to preserve her racial and social status even when she acts as inferior, e.g. a nanny. She experiences different kinds of acceptance and rejection, while different factors (religion, race and ethnicity, customs, traditions, and beliefs) shape her fluid identity. Being a novel from Mukherjee 's early period of writing, while *Jasmine'*s beginning seems more optimistic, the end is less optimistic. Her later writings are more infused with this idea of immigration as a gain, and not a loss. On her literary road, Mukherjee acknowledges the fact that no matter the efforts she has made in adapting to the new culture, it will not be enough. She constantly struggles to blend in, but, at the same time, longs to be accepted for what she is, a familiar face, a typical American, not an "alien", a native Indian woman, intelligent, ambitious, self-reliant but afraid of God, both affectionate and needing affection.

Social Identity Constructed Through Customs, Traditions, Beliefs, Religion

The novel begins with Jasmine telling a story from her childhood, a prediction made about her future as a widower living in exile. She was foretold by the village astronomer a life of "widowhood and exile" (Mukherjee 6). She will be haunted by these words, forever balancing between acceptance and refusal of a preconceived destiny. This interior dialogue between two contrasting aspects is something Jasmine goes through in her daily life. She has to constantly negotiate between her Indian values and her American ones.

Jasmine's transformation did not begin in America. Her journey started with her marriage to Prakash, a modern-minded man who valued independence and self-reliance in a woman. For a fourteen year girl, raised to respect and obey the men in her life, no matter how little respect they are worthy of, or how wrong they are, this is a big change. But Prakash perseveres, telling her: "Only in feudal societies is the woman still a vassal" (Mukherjee 161). This departure from the norm characterizes all of Jasmine's relationships in the novel. They are not the traditional ones, either in India or in America. Intelligent and ambitious, Jasmine understands and agrees with the principles her husband tries to teach her, but fourteen years of conditioning are not so easily discarded. In a world where child brides are the norm, she feels ashamed by her lack of children even when she agrees with the reasons for waiting a few years: "I didn't dare confess that I felt eclipsed by the Mazbi maid's daughter, who had been married off at eleven, just after me, and already had had a miscarriage" (Mukherjee 163).

Prakash patiently teaches her to see the difference between her natural instincts towards motherhood and the values she was taught while growing up: "you are confusing social and religious duty with instinct" (Mukherjee 164). Word by word, idea after idea, he builds the base of her future American transformation. Her metamorphosis starts here, in a small apartment in India, with a man who is not the rule, but the exception. He asks her to fight with him when she has different opinions and decrees: "We shouldn't do anything if we didn't both agree" (Mukherjee 166).

Religion, another factor employed in social identity labeling from an anthropological perspective, is present in the novel from the very beginning. Jasmine believes in "Gods with infinite memories" who punish "for sins committed in other incarnations" (Mukherjee 85). She bears a childhood scar on her forehead, which she calls her "third eye", and believes to be marked in this manner by the gods: "Now I am a sage" (Mukherjee 12). She tries to reason everything that happens in her life, using the same code. All happens for a reason: "Enlightenment meant seeing through the third eye and sensing designs in history's muddles" (Mukherjee 125).

It is hard for Jasmine to let go of all she was told at home in Hajnapur. She grew up hearing over and over again "God is cruel", so why should she believe that there is more to life than this? Throughout the book, these recurring words, "God is cruel" will haunt Jasmine's thoughts. For a long time, she doesn't allow herself to hope or enjoy life too much, always having her mother's words in the back of her head; religion is a powerful influence in her life that shapes her social identity both in India and in America.

In the first chapters, Jasmine's beloved husband, Prakash, is killed by religious extremists. This event marks the beginning of her American experience, convincing Jasmine to journey to America, and burn an effigy in his memory: "I am taking it to his school and burning it where we were going to live" (Mukherjee 185). This determination springs from her untold desire to throw herself on the burning pyre, like the women she grew up hearing about. She will discard these suicidal notions, romantic in her mind, after going through the traumatic rape experience, but the image of her white-clothed body burning alongside her husband's effigy will haunt her dreams for years to come.

Later on, she tries to explain her belief system to Taylor: "a whole life's mission might be to move a flowerpot from one table to another" (Mukherjee 99). In Jasmine's opinion, an entire existence, from birth, growing up, learning, suffering, laughing, all the years of one's life can sometimes serve to accomplish one simple act, and, in doing that, you accomplish God's mission for you. By this reasoning, everything bad that happened to her, all the hardships and tragedy she endured are accepted and interiorized as God's wish. She won't part from this certitude no matter how much America will change her. Taylor is astonished by this aspect of her personality. He doesn't believe the modern woman he fell in love withholds on to these antiquated values: "You don't believe that, do you?" (Mukherjee 122) He laughs and is amused by her reasoning. How could one's life be reduced to one singular purpose, one singular, insignificant moment? He is too American, too individualistic to accept such a notion.

Another interesting aspect depicted in the novel, which is also used by cultural anthropology to study social identity, refers to dress customs. Bharati often insists on the way Jasmine dresses at one point or another, helping the reader see each stage in her transformation, and understand the ways she internally changes by the way she externally dresses. Lillian Gordon, the kind woman who nurses Jasmine back to health, and guides her through her first steps in the process of assimilation, is the one that guides Jasmine into the dressing and speaking accordingly, helping her integrate into American culture. "I checked myself in the mirror, shocked at the transformation. Jazzy in a T-shirt, tight cords, and running shoes" (Mukherjee 218). In America, she assumes a new social identity: she is no longer a young Indian widow trying to fulfill her husband's dream, she is now a young woman looking for a

job, trying to fit in. Alongside this new identity, new clothes follow. They disguise her widowhood, helping her integrate with other youth of her age: "In a T-shirt and cords, I was taken for a student" (Mukherjee 236). Even while living with her deceased husband's professor, she feels the need to belong, not to India, but to America: "In this apartment of artificially maintained Indianness, I wanted to distance myself from everything Indian, everything Jyoti-like" (Mukherjee 236).

In a relatively short amount of time, Jasmine moves from one identity to another: she leaves the overbearing "Indianness" of her professor's house where she must "show a proper modesty of appearance and attitude" (Mukherjee 300) and moves on to Manhattan. Here, she works as a nanny for Wylie and Taylor Hayes. It is Taylor, with whom Jasmine falls in love, that springs in her, yet, another change, and for him, she becomes Jase "a woman who bought herself spangled heels and silk chartreuse pants" (Mukherjee 288). Dress code is an important part of the Indian culture; in a similar manner, to become American means to adopt a different dress code. In doing so, Jasmine proves able to adapt and assimilate into a different culture.

Social Identity Constructed Through Belonging to a Certain Group, Ethnicity, and Social Hierarchy

As previously stated, by definition, social identity is determined by a person's belonging to different social groups, either religious, ethnic, gender-based, work related, or even hobby influenced. From this perspective, Jasmine belongs to several social groups and her social identities are consequently multiple. She is an Indian woman, daughter and mother, an illegal immigrant, a servant, an employee, an American citizen and many others.

From an ethnic point of view, Jasmine's journey of self-discovery begins in earnest with her journey to America. This is her first contact with racism and abuse towards an immigrant. She did not live a sheltered life, she knows the realities of the modern world, but this is personal – she is the one being "roughly handled and taken to roped-off corners of waiting rooms where surly, barely wakened customs guards await their bribe" (Mukherjee 208). She experiences this "shadow world" of the human trafficker alongside other "refugees and mercenaries and guest workers", who sleep in airport lounges, and eat their lovingly wrapped native food while checking "for the hundredth time an aerogram promising a job or space to sleep" (Mukherjee 208).

Wearing "shreds of national costumes, out of season" (Mukherjee 208), these people have only one wish: "to be allowed to land; to pass through; to continue" (Mukherjee 208) in pursuit of the same American Dream. Jasmine is now the illegal immigrant forced to sneak through airports, taking uncharted night flights towards ever distant destinations. These travel days leave their mark on Jasmine: she is now aware of her own Otherness, of what makes her different, and of the real meaning of the word "home". A fellow refugee that works as a taxi driver will confess with bitterness one day: "In Kabul, I was a doctor. We have to be here living like dogs because they've taken everything from us" (Mukherjee 290). In his words, the reader recognizes Mukherjee's own opinions, exaggerated for artistic effect, but honest, nevertheless.

The first time Jasmine feels like she belongs to America is after she starts working in Manhattan for Taylor and Wylie Hayes. Here, she stays for over two years, taking care of their adopted daughter Duff. Taylor is the one who makes her feel accepted, simply by being a decent human, and not feeling scared by her differences: "He didn't want to scour and sanitize the foreignness" (Mukherjee 305). Her days living in New York are, yet, another step in Jasmine's integration; she may be a nanny, but she feels part of a family.

Living in Baden with Bud Ripplemeyer, a divorced banker in his fifties, Jasmine experiences another kind of acceptance and yet another social identity. For the first time in America, she is no longer a servant or an illegal immigrant, trying to pass for a legal one; she is working in a bank, has a bank account, lives with an American man as his future wife, and

bears his child. Her foreignness frightens and, at the same time, appeals to Bud. She is exotic and young, and represents life and vitality: "Bud courts me because I am alien. I am darkness, mystery, inscrutability" (Mukherjee 331). The house they live in, "small and ugly" is home, and, for a time, she feels that she is one of the Ripplemeyers.

Not everybody thinks the same as the Ripplemeyers, but "in Baden the farmers are afraid to suggest" (Mukherjee 72) that she is different. Bud represents stability, power, money for their small community; and so, even though they see how alien she is, "they want to make [her] familiar" (Mukherjee 72). There is one incident in a hospital waiting room, where Jasmine waits alongside other pregnant women that confirms her suspicions. Even though she helps another pregnant woman, giving her a glass of water, and speaks the same language as hers, visits the same gynecologist as hers, in one sentence, one simple remark, this woman makes Jasmine feel how different they are. She becomes more and more aware that, no matter the number of years that have passed, or the way she dresses, the language she speaks, she will always be the Other: accepted by some, tolerated by others, discarded by a few. "She shrugged her thanks. The sip she took was out of politeness. "You probably don't know what a Ricky doll is" (Mukherjee 71). This woman automatically assumes, just by seeing the color of Jasmine's skin, that she doesn't know what a Ricky doll is.

A friend gives her advice: "Now remember, if you walk and talk American, they'll think you were born here. Most Americans can't imagine anything else" (Mukherjee 282). And still, to walk and talk like an American isn't enough. Really belonging means for Jasmine to be loved, to be seen as the person she really is: "humorous, intelligent, refined, affectionate ... [and] not illegal, not a murderer, not widowed, raped, destitute, fearful" (Mukherjee 355). Bud's friends are slowly getting used to what Jasmine brings new to their world: they learn to enjoy her cooking "even if they make a show of fanning their mouths" (Mukherjee 31). Some, like their neighbor Darrell, fell in love with her exotic beauty and her musical language. "He comes from a place where the language you speak is what you are" (Mukherjee 23). She, instead, comes from a place where, who you are, is defined by a social hierarchy well delimited from birth. The caste you belong to determines how much education you are allowed to pursue, who you will marry and what your life will be like.

Her mother was "a modest and superior Lahori woman" (Mukherjee 112) but she didn't fit in with the other women from their village. Jasmine is cut from another cloth altogether: even then, she was capable of integrating and molding herself to whatever group she was exposed to. She used to accompany the other women from the village during their morning ablutions and learn from them. She confesses: "I liked to listen" (Mukherjee 112). But social hierarchy is important no matter where you are. Maybe in India more so than in America, but even here Jasmine encounters the same old patterns of behavior amongst her fellow Indian immigrants, who live in the country of all possibilities still separated by "language, religion, caste, and profession" (Mukherjee 303). They maintain a facade of friendliness but don't mingle outside their comfort zones. Pushed through life by the strong waves of her destiny, Jasmine feels "like a stone hurtling through the diaphanous mist, unable to grab hold" (Mukherjee 288). She experiences the constant pressure to fit in, but, at the same time, yearns to be accepted and loved for what she is. In the end, she will choose love over duty, leaving Bud without "shame or guilt, only relief" (Adams 136) following Taylor and Duff to California.

Conclusion

Mukherjee's deviation from postcolonial and diasporic literature is visible in the way she fashions her characters' new identities. Unlike the postcolonial lament for lost origins, Mukherjee argues for the optimism of the immigrant experience, in which the characters are both victims and survivors. Immigration, in her view, is a positive experience in the process of transformation. This positive attitude makes her dual characters oscillate between names and social identities, 'home' becomes a fluid notion, binary –old and new- customs, traditions, and

beliefs co-exist and negotiate the characters' cultural conflicts in a flexible manner. Adams proposes that by the end of the novel "Jasmine represents bicultural identity as a matter of choice, of wants fairly easily pursued" (133). Her identity integrates more than one culture – she is both Indian and American - she has chosen to be who she is today, and boldly pursues what she wants from life. How more American than this can you get?

Jasmine, the Indian migrant to USA has "an identity in motion" (Ravichandran 553). She "builds a new identity for every new situation", but each new identity is added to the previous one, it is not erased; for this reason Mukherjee uses multiple names. Jasmine's two different and fragmented identities/selves (Indian and American) eventually blend into one ambivalent identity, in which each has its own role and contribution. In the end, she becomes comfortable with her new racial categorization, her own sexuality, racial identity, her confidence. Her diasporic experience and survival skills transformed her into an individual with multiple identities.

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