Diasporic Identity in Bharati Mukerjee’s Jasmine

Dictionary defines the term ‘feminism’ as the advocacy of women's rights on the ground of the equality of the sexes and organized activity on behalf of women’s rights and interests. Defining feminism, then, is a somewhat perilous venture. Basic to feminism is the claim that women must not only be regarded as “equal” in dignity and worth, but also must be “equal” in opportunity to participate in every institution of human society at every level. Until the 1960’s, feminism was regarded as a subset of liberalism and socialism. The rise of radical feminism however changed this, they argued that gender imbalance was important to politics and this was something ideologies didn’t accept at the time.

Feminist activists campaign for women's rights – such as in contract law, property, and voting – while also promoting bodily integrity, autonomy, and reproductive rights for women. Feminist campaigns have changed societies, particularly in the West, by achieving women's suffrage, gender neutrality in English, equal pay for women, reproductive rights for women (including access to contraceptives and abortion), and the right to enter into contracts and own property. Feminists have worked to protect women and girls from domestic violence, sexual harassment, and sexual assault. They have also advocated for workplace rights, including maternity leave, and against forms of discrimination against women. Feminism is mainly focused on women's issues, but because feminism seeks gender equality, the author bell hooks and other feminists have argued that men's liberation is a necessary part of feminism and that men are also harmed by sexism and gender roles.

The term Diaspora refers to the dispersion of religious or ethnic groups from their established homeland either forced or voluntary. Initially this word was used for the dispersal of Jews when they were forced into exile to Babylonia. However, today it has come to mean any sizeable community of a particular nation or region living outside its own country and sharing some common bonds that give them an ethnic identity and consequent bonding.

The contribution of Indian Diaspora to the world literature cannot be denied. The diasporic writers belong to different category; they have Indian origins, but live in the west, mainly England, Canada and the U.S.A. A large number of these diasporic writers have given expression to their creative urge and have brought credit to the Indian English Fiction as a distinctive force. The phenomenon of migration of Indian people to U.S.A. and other
countries, their status there, and their nostalgic feelings for the mother country as well as their alienation to the new one is the major subject dealt by the Diasporic writers.

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. Her commendable works place her in the class of great diasporic writers like Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Jhumpa Lahiri, Bernard Malmud, Issac Babel, and Yashmine Gunaratne. The traumas and the agonies that people of Indian Diaspora face, in fulfilling their dreams, constitute the prime concern of Mukherjee’s literary oeuvre. She mainly focuses on her diasporic women characters, their struggle for identity, their bitter experiences, and their final emergence as self-assertive individuals, free from the bondages imposed on them. Hence, this paper is intended to explore the series of transformations that the protagonist of Bharati Mukherjee’s novel Jasmine undergoes, as an illegal immigrant to America and her regeneration after many transformations with disintegration.

Her most remarkable works reflect not only her pride in her Indian heritage, but also her celebration of embracing America. Her writing has gained significant recognition because she depicts the immigrant experiences, particularly that of the South Asian Diaspora in North America. In her writings she voices her own experiences to show the changing shape of American society. She describes herself as unhyphenated American and not the hyphenated Indian-American title: “I maintain that I am an American writer of Indian origin, not because I’m ashamed of my past, not because I’m betraying or distorting my past, but because my whole adult life has been lived here, and I write about the people who are immigrants going through the process of making a home here” (Carb, The Massachusetts Review 29.4: 645)

Published in 1989, the novel Jasmine replicates Mukherjee’s celebratory tone of violent refashioning of identity through radical negotiations in the dominant culture. Jasmine weaves the story of an illiterate Punjabi girl who comes to America to self-immolate herself in the name of her dead husband. She is raped the day she lands in the United States and finds herself totally ostracized in an all-white neighborhood. However, through her chanced encounters with good-intentioned people in America, she completely transforms herself from an ignorant, helpless immigrant to a confident working woman, an unwed mother, a reckless lover, and in the end, “greedy with wants and reckless from hope” (Jasmine 214). She denies the material comforts of her domestic life and succumbs to the mysterious calling of adventure by eloping with her former lover.

In Jasmine, journey is a metaphor that advocates the ever-moving, regenerating process of life itself. In India, as Jyoti, Jasmine is seen against the backdrop of the rigid and patriarchal Indian society. In America, her self-awareness is reflected in the relationships with Bud, Taylor, and Du. However, her first husband Prakash initiates her transformation from traditional Jyoti to self-assured emancipated American women, Jane.

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” (39) 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 superstitious. Breaking from the usual tradition she chooses Prakash Vijh, an educated, intelligent young man, who renames and reshapes her Jasmine. The renaming is to continue every time she becomes a new woman. He supports her and nurtures her spirits instead of suppressing them.

Jasmine appears to be jubilant sharing the ambition of her husband, intent to go to America, a land of her dreams and opportunities. But the fate snatches her husband from her when she had just started her life, leaving her shattered and heartbroken at the age of seventeen. Prakash is killed in a bomb blast on the eve of their departure to America. Grief stricken after his death, Jasmine hears his voice exhorting her from every corner of her room: “There is no dying, there is only an ascending or a descending, a moving on to other Planes. Don’t crawl back to Hasnapur and feudalism. That Jyoti is dead”. (86)

So, instead of succumbing to fate and leading a life of widowhood she decides to set off for America, of course with the help of her brothers. “Prakash had taken Jyoti and created Jasmine, and Jasmine would complete the mission of Prakash” (63). Mukherjee here sets her free from the claustrophobic and culturally absurd native place. She sets off for America with forged documents. Thus begins her journey of transformation with disintegration and regeneration in the alien land. As an attractive young girl, who arrives alone and unescorted on alien shores, Jasmine come across a series of shattering incidents during the adventurous journey. She meets Half-Face, the captain of the trawler in which she crosses over to Florida. Half-Face had “lost an eye and ear and most of his cheek in a paddy field in Vietnam.”(104). She is brutally raped by Half-Face in a motel. She disintegrates and becomes heart-broken at this incident and decides to commit suicide but at another moment American outlook redeems her and is enlivened with the spirit to survive through eliminating the American evil and is mad to emerge like Indian goddess Kali to slit the throat of her rapist as a symbol of complete eradication of evil of consumerist culture. Jasmine’s full transformation, from the victim into a vengeful Goddess, seems to be reinforced by imagining herself as the reincarnation of Kali.

Her Indian identity leaves her at this point; the desire to fulfill a mission which had seen her through the difficult passages to America is abandoned. The body becomes a mere shell, soon to be discarded and what she discards is her Indian psyche and is reborn in America as Jase and Jane. Shuttling between the past and the present, the first-person narrative reaches its
turning point. She is reborn several times. Hence Jasmine’s transformation of identity occurs not only through construction, but also by the destruction of her existing self.

Lillian Gordon, the first among Jasmine’s many rescuers, introduces Jasmine to the first concept of American life. Lillian bestows upon her the nickname ‘Jazzy’, a symbol of her entrance into and acceptance of American culture which she welcomes gladly. While staying with Lillian; she begins her process of assimilation by learning how to become American. Then, Jasmine lodges with Prakash’s Professor, Mr. Vadhera. But she feels uncomfortable in Professorji’s house which they have converted into a Punjabi ghetto. She wants to get away from the traditional ‘Indianness’ and Bharati Mukherjee brings out this contrast between tradition and modernity through the contrast between Professorji’s wife Nirmala and the protagonist, Jasmine: Nirmala only takes, Jasmine not only takes and but also gives. Jasmine in a state of utmost frustration because of the Indian ghetto in Flushing, Language in India decides to run away from another claustrophobic atmosphere at Prof. Vadehra to join the lonely and empty people of American consumerist society and culture.

Jasmine moves to Manhattan, New York to join a glamorous and emancipated couple, Taylor and Wylie Hayes and their adopted daughter Duff as a Caregiver. Jasmine is renamed as Jase by Taylor and starts her transformations into a sophisticated American woman. Jasmine transforms but this time the change is not from a reaction, but rather from her very own yearning for personal change. In becoming Jase, Jasmine gets increasingly comfortable with her sexuality which she always tried to repress earlier, more so, after her traumatic experience.

Though Jasmine creates a new identity for every new situation, her former identities are never completely erased. 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. Jasmine enters a personal continuum of time where events swing backwards and forwards from place to place and from childhood to adult, from despair to hope, compassion and love. The inescapability of memory, and the boundless nature of time is stressed here and Jasmine finds her life distorted by the different consciousness through which now she experiences the world. She loses even her sense of self-expression. Unable to live with this plethora of conflicting identities she flees to Baden County, Iowa to give her life a new beginning. She prepared herself physically and psychologically for another transformation of identity.

Bharati Mukherjee, through this affirmative novel, presents Jasmine as a Phoenix who rises from her ashes. 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.

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 is one of
these pioneers, a survivor with courage. The protagonists of her first two novels Tara and Dimple are completely dislocated both in India and in America, whereas Jasmine survives and reinstates herself to a new life. Finally she makes an outcry like her author, who defiantly announces to her American readers, “I am one of you” and in this assertion she has declared herself as an American in the immigrant tradition. The exuberance of immigration, which comes with the acquisition of Americanness and the immigrant Indianness as a sort of fluid identities to be celebrated, does not come easily.

In Jasmine, the protagonist’s struggle symbolizes the restless search of a rootless person irked by a depressing sense of isolation all around. 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. She realizes that she has become a drifter moving in a world of uncertainties: “I feel at times like a stone hurtling through diaphanous mist, unable to grab hold, unable to slow myself, yet unwilling to abandon the ride I’m on. Down and down I go, where I’ll stop, God only knows (139). Bharati Mukherjee ends the book on a novel note, and re-emphasizes the complex and alternating nature of identity of a woman in exile, “Then there nothing I can do. Time will tell if I am tornado, rubble maker, arising from nowhere and disappearing into a cloud. I am out the door and in the potholed and rutted driveway, scrambling ahead of Taylor, greedy with wants and reckless hope. (241).

References