

Role of Society and Events in Development of Individual's Personality: A Study of Bharati Mukherjee's Jasmine

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ABSTRACT

Bharati Mukherjee has been associated with the themes of identity crisis and cross culture conflicts. In this paper it has been attempted to study the character jasmine with a behaviorist approach developed by Watson and Skinner. The paper would focus on the encounter and events which led to the development and change in the psyche of the protagonist.

Key words: Bharati Mukherjee, Jasmine, Behaviorism, psychoanalysis.

Introduction

This study attempts to analyse the growth and development of the psyche of an individual depending on the surroundings provided to him. The study is based on the behaviorist theory of psychoanalysis established by John and Watson. In this study it is attempted to study the character 'Jasmine', the central character of the novel "Jasmine", composed by Bharati Mukherjee. Ms. Mukherjee is known for her writings which is heavily based on Indian Women particularly the problem of cross-cultural crisis and ultimate search for Identity. She also depicts the cultural clash between the East and West. In the novel Jasmine, Bharati Mukherjee takes up the theme of search for identity. She writes how the female protagonist tries to tackle the problem of loss of culture and endeavors to assume a new identity in the U.S.

The paper instead of focusing on the identity crisis of the character or the cross-culture conflict rather would at ease focus on the reasons for the change in the psyche of the individual character. It would be a close study of the incidents, encounters and decisions which led Jasmine, an Indian girl to transform and transcendence to Hindu American.

Introduction to Bharati Mukherjee

Bharati Mukherjee was an Indian-born award winning American writer. She explored the internal culture clashes of her immigrant characters in the award-winning collection "The Middleman and Other Stories" and in novels like "Jasmine and Desirable Daughters". Ms. Mukherjee, a native of Calcutta, attended schools in England, Switzerland and India, earned advanced degrees in creative writing in the United States and lived for more than a decade in Canada, affording her a wealth of experience in the modern realities of multiculturalism. She earned a bachelor's degree in English from the University of Calcutta in 1959 and a master's degree from the University of Baroda, in Gujarat, in 1961. After sending six handwritten stories to the University of Iowa, she was accepted into the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where she studied with Philip Roth and Vance Bourjaily in her first year. She earned an M.F.A. in 1963 and a doctorate in comparative literature in 1969 at Iowa. After years of short-term academic appointments, Ms. Mukherjee was hired in 1989 to teach postcolonial and world literature at the University of California, Berkeley.

Introduction to "Jasmine"

"One of the most suggestive novels we have about what it is to become American".

(The New York Times)

"The novel has delicious humor and sexiness that make it a treat to read".

(Journal, The Library).

Jasmine is a novel by Bharati Mukherjee set in the present about a young Indian woman in the United States who, trying to adapt to the American way of life to be able to survive, changes identities several times. Although the events of Jasmine are fiction, the author has stated that she was heavily influenced by her own experiences. The novel is based on an earlier short story in Mukherjee's earlier collection The Middleman and Other Stories, fleshed out and expanded to novel-length. Bharati Mukherjee's Jasmine, the story of a widowed Punjabi peasant reinventing herself in America, entered the literary landscape in 1989, the same year as Salmon Rushdie's Satanic Verses. Rushdie, also an Indian writer, received international attention for his novel when a fatwa (or death threat) was issued against him. The fatwa essentially proclaimed it a righteous act for any Muslim to murder Rushdie. Michelle Cliff's No Telephone to Heaven, Jill Ker Conway's The Road to Coorain, Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Condition, Jamaica Kincaid's A Small Place, and Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines were all published around this time. Each of these writers is a contributor to the

genre of postcolonial literature. Although there is considerable debate over the term "postcolonial," in a very general sense, it is the time following the establishment of independence in a (former) colony, such as India. The sheer extent and duration of the European empire and its disintegration after the Second World War have led to widespread interest in postcolonial literature.

Partly because of the abundance of such postcolonial works, some critics suggested *Jasmine* was part of a fad. The *New York Times Book Review*, however, named it one of the year's best works.

Mukherjee's time as a student at the University of Iowa's acclaimed Masters of Fine Arts program, the Writer's Workshop, almost certainly informed the setting of *Jasmine*. Though Iowa City is a small college town, the state is 95 percent farm land. In the 1980s, when *Jasmine* is set, many family farmers on the outskirts of Iowa City faced the same dilemma as Darrel Lutz, a character in *Jasmine*. The hard life of farming coupled with tough times economically persuaded many farmers to sell out to large corporate farms or to non-agricultural corporations. Other farmers struggled on determined to save the farm their fathers and grandfathers had built up, as well as to preserve this unique way of life.

Behaviorism at a glance

"Give me a dozen healthy infants, well-formed, and my own specified world to bring them up in and I'll guarantee to take any one at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select—doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant-chief and, yes, even beggar-man and thief, regardless of his talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, vocations, and race of his ancestors."

(Watson).

Behaviorism, also known as behavioral psychology, is a theory of learning based on the idea that all behaviors are acquired through conditioning. Conditioning occurs through interaction with the environment. Behaviorists believe that our responses to environmental stimuli shape our actions. According to this school of thought, behavior can be studied in a systematic and observable manner regardless of internal mental states.

It assumes that all behaviors are either reflexes produced by a response to certain stimuli in the environment, or a consequence of that individual's history, including especially reinforcement and punishment, together with the individual's current motivational state and controlling stimuli. Although behaviorists generally accept the important role of inheritance in determining behavior, they focus primarily on environmental factors.

Soul study of "Jasmine"

Jasmine who is not only the title character but also the narrator of Bharati Mukherjee's novel, was born approximately in 1965 in a rural Indian village called Hasnpur, Punjab. She tells her story as a twenty-four-year-old pregnant widow who is now living in Iowa with her crippled lover, Bud Ripplemeyer. It takes two months in Iowa to relate the most recently developing events. But during that time, *Jasmine* also relates biographical events that span the distance between her Punjabi birth and her American adult life. These past biographical events inform the action set in Iowa. Her odyssey encompasses five distinct settings, two murders, at least one rape, a maiming, a suicide, and three love affairs. Throughout the course of the novel, the title character's identity, along with her name, changes and changes again: from Jyoti to *Jasmine* to Jazzy to Jassy to Jase to Jane. In chronological order, *Jasmine* moves from Hasnpur, Punjab, to Fowlers Key, then Florida near Tampa, further to Flushing, New York, then again to Manhattan, to Baden, followed by Iowa, and finally is off to California as the novel ends.

The novel's opening phrase, "Lifetimes ago..." sets in motion the major motif, or theme, the recreation of one's self. *Jasmine* is seven years old. Under a banyan tree in Hasnpur, an astrologer forecasts her eventual widowhood and exile. Given the traditional Hindu belief in the accuracy of such astrological forecasts, this is a grave moment in the young girl's life. It foreshadows her first husband's death and even her move to the isolated Iowa farm town of Baden.

The action shifts, at the end of the first chapter, into the most recent past tense. This clues the reader into the narrative strategy of the novel. The twenty-four-year-old *Jasmine* currently lives in Baden, Iowa. The next four chapters provide details about her current situation. It is late May during a dry season, which is significant because the farm community relies on good harvests. She is pregnant. Bud, her partner, became wheelchair-bound sometime after the onset of their relationship. Bud wants *Jasmine* to marry him. The neighbor boy, Darrel Lutz, struggles to run his family's farm, which he inherited after his father's sudden death a year before. Darrel entertains the idea of selling off the farm to golf-course developers, but Bud, the town's banker and thus a powerful figure to the independent farmers, forbids it. Bud has close, though

sometimes strained, ties with all the farmers. Though change—technological, social, and sexual—seems inevitable, Bud resists it. Du, Jasmine and Bud's adopted Vietnamese teenaged son, represents this change. He comes from an entirely different culture than his sons-of-farmers classmates.

Jasmine describes her introduction to Bud and their courtship, introduces her would-be mother-in-law, Mother Ripplemeyer, and Bud's ex-wife Karin. She hints at sexual tension between her and Du, and her and Darrel. When Jasmine makes love to the wheelchair-bound Bud, it illustrates the reversal of sexual power in her new life. Desire and control remain closely related throughout the novel. Du's glimpse of the lovemaking adds another dimension to the sexual politics: there are those in control, those who are helpless, and those bystanders waiting to become part of the action. This resonates with ideas later chronicled about Indian notions of love and marriage.

In these early chapters, the narrator, Jasmine, alludes to more distant events. These hint at important people and events: her childhood friend Vilma, her Manhattan employers Taylor and Wylie, their child and her charge Duff. These allusions begin to create the more complicated and full circumstances of the story, but remain sketchy until later, when the narrator gives each their own full treatment.

The state of exile, a sense of loss, the pain of separation and disorientation makes Bharati Mukherjee's novel "Jasmine" a quest for identity in an alien land. Jasmine, the protagonist of the novel, undergoes several transformations during her journey of life in America, from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jane, and often experiences a deep sense of estrangement resulting in a fluid state of identity. This journey becomes a tale of moral courage, a search for self-awareness and self-assertion. Uprooted from her native land India, Jyoti does her best to introduce herself into the new and alien society as an immigrant; the culmination finally indicated in Jasmine's pregnancy with the child of a white man - Bud. Jasmine changes herself constantly, ferrying between multiple identities in different spaces and at different times. Jasmine shows the most predictable crusade towards Americanization and its obvious uncertainty and without feeling infuriated she survives to make a new start in the host country. Geographically, the story begins in India and takes off from Europe to America, where it bounces back and forth from Florida through New York to proceed to Iowa, then finally lands in California. The novelist deliberately transports her in time and space again and again to bring in a sense of instability into the novel. Born in Hasnapur in India, Jyoti has the distinction of being the most beautiful and clever in the family. She is seen against the backdrop of the rigid and patriarchal Indian society in which her life is controlled and dominated by her father and brothers who record female as follows,

"village girls are cattle; whichever way you lead them, that is the way they will go" (Mukherjee 46)

However, Jyoti seeks a modern and educated husband who keeps no faith in dowries and traditions, and thus finds a US based modern-thinking man, Prakash. Prakash encourages Jyoti to study English, and symbolically gives Jyoti a new name Jasmine, and a new life.

"He wanted to break down the Jyoti as 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 shuttled between identities." (Mukherjee 77)

Here starts her transformation from a village girl under the shell of her father and brothers to a wife of an American traditional husband who gives her all liberties. Jasmine's happiness is short-lived. She is widowed and returns to India to her family. She must now choose between the rigid traditions of her family and perform Sati, or continue to live the life of Jasmine in America. Jasmine sways between the past and the present attempting to come to terms with the two worlds, one of "nativity" and the other as an "immigrant". Hailing from an oppressive and a rural family in India, Jyoti comes to America in search of a more fruitful life and to realize the dreams of her husband, Prakash. Jasmine sets off on an agonizing trip as an illegal immigrant to Florida, and thus begins her symbolic trip of transformations, displacement, and a search for identity.

Jasmine undergoes her next transformation from a dutiful traditional Indian wife Jasmine to Jane when she meets the intellectual Taylor and then moves on to become Bud's Jane. It seems likely that as Jasmine leaves for California with Taylor and Duff, her identity continues to transform. The author depicts this transformation and transition as a positive and an optimistic journey. Jasmine creates a new world consisting of new ideas and values, constantly unmasking her past to establish a new cultural identity by incorporating new desires, skills, and habits. This transition is defined not only in the changes in her attitude, but more significantly in her relationship with men.

Analysis of the psyche of jasmine through her actions and dialogues.

As Jasmine moves from one place to another, she needs to constantly recreate herself. She knows it is necessary for her to change:

"There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself. We murder who we are, so we can rebirth ourselves..." (Mukherjee 29)

This quote shows how violently Jasmine's character is ready to recreate herself. She thinks that she needs to be rid of her old identity to adapt and become something new.

Jasmine's identity develops very noticeably during the novel. Her shifts in identity are made very clear to the reader as she does not only change who she is, but at each step of her journey she is given a new name. Even Jasmine is not the name that she was born with. Jasmine's story begins in a small town of Hasnapur in India, where she is born and given the name Jyoti. As a teenager, she is married to Prakash Vih and moves from her small village to a large urban city in India. This is where her transformation begins:

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. (Mukherjee 77)

The new name Jasmine represents a new idea of herself. She is no longer the small humble village girl, but is forced into a new role of a modern city woman. Even at this very early point in the story, we are introduced to a character who in her own words "shuttled between identities." (Jasmine 77) Prakash is an ambitious, strong willed engineer who dreams of moving to America with Jasmine: "I want for us to go away and have a real life. I've had it up to here with backward, corrupt, mediocre fools." (Jasmine, 81) Prakash is accepted into Florida International Institute of Technology and their vision for better life in America is starting to become real. He wants them to be able to achieve something better than what their lives can offer in India. But just before they set for America, Jasmine is tragically widowed.

As an illegal immigrant she must fight to survive on her own and must try to quickly adapt to her new life. When first arriving to American she is raped by "Half-Face", a man who helped the illegal immigrants into America. She ends up killing her rapist, violently transforming away from her former self to survive. This part of the story shows very brutal violence which is not seen so evidently in other parts of the story. Mukherjee has created this dramatic beginning to Jasmine's life in America to portray how the illegal immigrant must give up everything she has. She felt as if her "body was merely the shell" (Mukherjee 121) and there was nothing left of her former self. This tragic beginning also reveals "the fighter and adapter" which the reader will soon after becoming acquainted with. Even though this part is very striking and shocking to the reader, Mukherjee has introduced it as merely one tragic event in Jasmine's life. The rape and murder are events that shape Jasmine's identity and enforce the idea of Jasmine as a fighter. Before the rape Jasmine had thought about committing sati, the act of a Hindu widow of immolating herself on her husband's funeral pile, while burning her husband's suit.

"I had not given even a day's survival in America a single thought. This was the place where I had chosen to die, on the first day if possible... Under the... tree I had dreamed of arranging the suit and twigs. The vision of lying serenely on a bed of fire under palm trees in my white sari had motivated all the weeks of sleepless, half-starved passage..." (Mukherjee 121)

Her aim was to be able to join her husband in spirit and not having to live the life of a widow. After the rape Jasmine "felt a sudden sense of mission." (Mukherjee 117) She felt that there was a reason she has survived and was then willing to continue as a fighter. she openly changes her identity and appearance according to the situation. Lillian Gordon guides Jasmine in her attempt to appear like an American woman. Jasmine begins to adopt the ways of American life and culture to survive. Walk American, she exhorted me, and she showed me how. I worked hard on the walk and deportment. Within a week she said "I lost my shy sidle... I checked myself in the mirror, shocked with the transformation. Jazzy in a T-shirt, tight cords and running shoes" (Mukherjee 133). It is essential for Jasmine to look American so that no one would be able to tell that she is an illegal immigrant. She must noticeably and radically change her appearance from the shy Indian girl. "Now remember if you walk and talk American they'll think you were born here. Most Americans can't imagine anything else." (Mukherjee 134-135) These examples from the novel show how in this case the immigrant is forced to change herself very drastically to be able to begin her new life. She is no longer Jasmine from India, but "Jazzy in a t-shirt... and running shoes." She does not only have a new appearance, but has an entirely different identity. Again, it is evident how Jasmine's new identity is created for her. Her new name, Jazzy, is given to her by Lilian and Jasmine only must follow along. She assumes an identity that someone else asserts on her and does not object, as it is the only things that she can do to survive. Jasmine's journey continues in America very optimistically, even though her first days in the new

country were tragic. She seems to gain everything she needs to start her new life. She is quickly employed as a caretaker for an American family and continues developing her new American identity. As being a caretaker, she goes by the name Jasmine, but Taylor, the husband of the family, starts quickly calling her Jase. Jasmine begins falling in love with Taylor and the idea of herself as Jase.

"The love I felt for Taylor that first day had nothing to do with sex. I fell in love with his world, its ease, its careless confidence and graceful self-absorption. I wanted to become the person they thought they saw: humorous, intelligent, refined, affectionate. Not illegal, not murderer, not widowed, raped, destitute, fearful." (Mukherjee 171)

Jasmine begins falling in love with the idea of herself as Jase, a courageous American woman who is capable of anything. She begins seeing herself as worth something and begins enjoying her new life. Jasmine seems to be very happy with her new identity:

"For every Jasmine the reliable caregiver there is a Jase, the prowling adventurer. I thrilled to the tug of opposing forces." (Mukherjee 177)

After accidentally seeing a ghost from the past, the killer of her husband in India, Jasmine feels the need to escape. She feels that she is not safe in New York and leaves for Iowa. In Iowa she meets an American banker called Bud, who she promises one day to marry. She becomes pregnant to Bud and seems to be living the American life. She feels that Bud is in love with the American part of her, and does not need to know who she used to be. Jasmine is abandoning her own cultural background and traditions and replacing them with American ways and values. This can be seen in their daily life as Jasmine strives to be a very normal American wife to Bud and does not bring about her colorful past in any way. In Iowa Jase becomes Jane Ripplemeyer. Bud calls me Jane. Me Bud, you Jane. I didn't get it at first. He kids. Calamity Jane. Jane as in Jane Russell, not Jane as in Plain Jane. But Plain Jane is all I want to be. Plain Jane is a role, like any other. (Mukherjee 26)

Bud has given Jane a very normal and unexciting name, making her an American woman one step further. In a way Bud is afraid of Jasmine, as her "genuine foreignness frightens him" (Mukherjee 21) and by calling her Jane, she becomes less frightening to him and she does not need to think about her Indian past.

Conclusion

"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... 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?" (Mukherjee 121)

Behaviorism – a major theory within psychology which holds that behaviors are learned through positive and negative reinforcements. The theory recommends that psychological concepts (such as personality, learning and emotion) are to be explained in terms of observable behaviors that respond to stimulus.

"The infant begins life without the basic behavioral repertoires. They are acquired through complex learning, and as this occurs, the child becomes able to respond appropriately to various situations." (Holth)

Whereas at the beginning learning involves only basic conditioning, as repertoires are acquired the child's learning improves, being aided by the repertoires that are already functional. The way a person experiences the world depends on his or her repertoires. The individual's environment to the present results in learning a basic behavioral repertoire (BBR).

Through the various incidents faced by the subject, i.e. the central character of the novel it is not the identity crisis or a cultural conflict which led to change the identity of the character rather it was the vulnerable situations, circumstances and encounters of life which forced or compelled for the action or alienation of the character.

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