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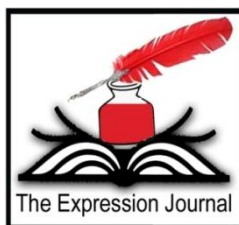
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DISSECTION OF FORAGE FOR SELFHOD IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S *JASMINE*

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Abstract

The novel *Jasmine* by Bharati Mukherjee is an incredible story about the transformation and life experiences of a Panjabi girl from India. The life of Jyoti is told from her point of view when she is twenty-four years old, and pregnant with the baby of Bud Ripplemeyer, a crippled banker who is more than twice Jyoti's age. During the span of two months in Iowa, Jyoti narrates her biographical experiences in Punjab and in America as she strives to become independent. *Jasmine* illustrates that when one's relationships go through changes, it will impact one's identity. She also depicts the cultural clash between the East and West. In the novel *Jasmine*, Bharati Mukherjee takes up the theme of forage (search) for selfhood (identity). She writes how the female protagonist tries to tackle the problem of cross culture crisis and endeavours to assume a new identity in the U.S. The protagonist-- Jasmine leaves her country to fulfill her wishes. On reaching the U.S., she begins to search for self-independence. She struggles hard to achieve it and at last she realizes that self independence is not to be an Indian or American but to be at peace within. Sumita Roy aptly remarks that "Consequently, to read Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* as an ambitious endeavour to outline the life of a woman engaged in a serious quest for values is rewarding." The novel is in fact, saga of suffering or immigrant women in an alien culture. Yet, it is journey towards the fulfillment of wishes what she cherished in her heart.

Keywords

Keywords: Cross-cultural crisis, Selfhood, Immigrant, Alien, Saga, Forage.

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Born in Hasnapur in India, Jyoti is said to be the most beautiful and clever person in her family. Unlike her sisters and other girls, Jyoti excels in school and continues her education until the 8th grade despite her father's disapproval. Education represents a way for Jasmine to separate from many girls her age including her sisters and to shape her identity. In other words, this allows her to break from the semi-feudal rural society in which she lives. Her life, like most Indian women in that time period, is controlled and dominated by her father and brothers, "Village girls are like cattle, whichever way you lead them, that is the way they will go" (46). Jyoti's opinions are often considered unnecessary. The role of women in villages was only to be a mother and to manage household affairs.

The first of many glimpses of Jyoti's varying identities occurs during her marriage to Prakash. The first time Prakash talks to Jyoti, he says, "She is a woman of fine sympathies..." (74). He sees her as a delicate, obedient woman who follows her family's wishes and societies restriction on women. After meeting Prakash, Jyoti was instantly fascinated as she never met anyone like him before. His individuality and strong presence was what attracted her to him. When recounting how Praksash wanted her to call him by his first name, Jyoti said, "In Hasnapur wives used only pronouns to address their husbands. The first months, eager and obedient as I was, I still had a hard time calling him Prakash" (77).

The conflict she has trying to call him by his name shows the difference between how she lived in Hasnapur before Prakash and how she is after she marrieshim. Prakash also insists on calling Jyoti, Jasmine. Prakash plays an important role in Jasmine's life because he is the first person who helped Jasmine become more conscious of the modern world and the opportunities it holds. Prakash is a modern man. He expects Jyoti to change her ways, "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 shuttled between identities".(77).

The narrator's gradual change in how she refers to herself from Jyoti to Jasmine shows how she is viewed by others and how she accepts this new identity. The commission I kept secret from Prakash". (79). Jyoti's keeping her income from Prakash by selling detergent door – to – door at three

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neighbourhood buildings (for she has no issues or in-laws to occupy all the day), shows how Jyoti changes after marrying Prakash. Before marriage, Jyoti would never have imagined keeping a job and a source of income secret from her spouse. Prakash helps Jyoti become more independent and helps her waver from the path of tradition.

As Jyoti's attitude towards life and her personality changes, she becomes less reliant on Prakash and imagines a better life for herself, Prakash, and their future family. As Prakash plans for his trip to the United States, many of Jyoti's insecurities start to appear when she starts to question Prakash's commitment to her. In response to her insecurities, Prakash says, "You're Jasmine now. You can't jump into wells" (92). Prakash believes that the new Jasmine he has helped emerge is capable of living on her own and being independent. Even though many of Prakash's actions are controlling, Jasmine realizes that she has changed in many ways due to Prakash. After Prakash dies by a radio bomb meant for Jyoti, she emerges as Jasmine. As Jasmine, she decides to go to the United States to fulfill Prakash's mission of studying in a university. Her journey is full of transformations and her search of identity.

When Jasmine arrives in the United States, she is raped by a man she calls Half Face, who is the Captain of the ship on which she travelled. After this traumatic event, Jasmine feels that she has been defiled and she decides to re-invent herself, "My body was merely the shell, soon to be discarded. Then I could be reborn, debts and sins all paid for" (121).

Later on, Jasmine kills Half-Face and prepares to die herself, but as she remembers sees Half-Face laughing at her and her mission, she decides she cannot die. Her identity once again undergoes a transformation as she is more determined than ever to complete her mission of traveling to Tampa to give her dead husband the peace she felt he deserved. Jasmine also gets a first-hand experience that life in the United States is not always pleasant and throughout the novel she will recollect the experiences she goes through. After leaving Half-Face dead in the hotel room, Jasmine travels by foot until she reaches the home of Lillian Gordon. Lillian is an American woman who helps undocumented immigrants survive and make a living in United States.

Like Prakash, Lillian wants Jasmine cut off from her past. With Lillian, Jasmine is prepared to forgo her past and make a new identity for herself in the United States. Lillian transforms Jasmine into an ordinary American girl when Jasmine exchanges her sari for Lillian's daughters American clothes, "I checked myself in the mirror, shocked at my transformation. Jazzy in a T-shirt, tight cords, and running shoes. I couldn't tell if with the Hasnapuri side I'd also abandoned my Hasnapuri modesty" (133).

With the change in clothes, Jazzy experiences a change in culture which causes certain aspects of her personality to start disappearing. With this change, Jazzy changes from being a minority to just another immigrant. Lillian changes Jasmine's name to Jazzy to make her appear more American. Jazzy obtains a positive outlook towards America after finding Lillian and through this she obtains a new identity for herself as she lets go of her past.

When Jazzy leaves Lillian Gordon, she is very hopeful that the rest of her life will be pleasant. However when she finally arrives in New York, her hope disintegrates and her new American identity she acquired collapses. Right as she steps into New York, Jazzy witnesses the poverty that people face. She says, "On the streets I saw only more greed, more people like myself. New York was an archipelago of ghettos seething with aliens" (140). For five months, Jazzy stays with Professorji and his family in Flushing, New York. Professorji and his family made Jazzy feel invisible and "His kind of generosity

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wasn't good enough...It wasn't Prakash's, it wasn't Lillian Gordon's" (143). Jazzy could not bear the circumstances she was living in and she "Wanted to distance myself from everything Indian, everything Jyoti-like" (145), however the apartment she was living in with Professorji and his family was an "Apartment of artificially maintained Indianness" (145). About Flushing, Jazzy says, "Flushing frightened me...I felt myself deteriorating" (148). Jazzy comes to find out that Professorji is not a professor in New York. He is just an "Importer and sorter of human hair" (151) from India. She realized that the Professorji "Needed to work here [wig maker], but he didn't have to like it" (153). Jazzy's experiences in New York allow her to see what she does not want to become, a hopeless Indian widow. In payment for Jazzy's silence about Professorji's job, Professorji loans Jazzy \$3,000 to get a fake green card. Jazzy wants to get a green card to become a permanent citizen of the United States because it will allow her to get a good job and it will help her start her American dream, "If I had a green card, a job, a goal, happiness would appear out of the blue" (149). One week after finding out the truth about the Professorji, Jazzy calls Kate Gordon-Feldstein. Kate gets Jazzy a job with her friend Wylie and Taylor who are looking for an au pair for their daughter Duff.

In the two years she spends as an au pair, Jazzy "Became an American" (165). She has gone through an identity change from when she was with Professorji and his family, and now she lives the American dream. Taylor Hayse gave the name Jase to Jazzy and she enjoyed the name because "Jase was a woman who brought herself spangled heels and silk chartreuse pants...Jase went to movies and lived for today" (176). The name Jase is a symbol that she has come a long way in her life and is everything that she has always wanted to be. Taylor Hayes represents to Jase what she has achieved in America after leaving her poor life in India and the openness of mind. Despite her happiness, Jase knows that everything must come to an end, "In America, nothing last. I can say that now and it doesn't shock me, but I think it was the hardest lesson of all for me to learn. We arrive so eager to learn, to adjust, to participate, only to find the monuments are plastic, agreements are annulled. Nothing is forever, nothing is so terrible, or so wonderful, that it won't disintegrate" (181). When Wylie Hayes fell in love with another man, Stuart Eschelmann, Jase knew that it would change everything.

When comparing her change in identity to the relationship between Taylor, her, and Wylie changed, Jase says, "Taylor didn't want to change me. He didn't want to scour and sanitize the foreignness. My being different from Wylie or Kate didn't scare him. I changed because I wanted to. To bunker oneself inside nostalgia. To sheath the heart in a bulletproof vest was to be a coward. On Claremont Avenue, in the Hayeses' big clean, brightly lit apartment, I bloomed from a different alien with forged documents into adventurous Jane" (185-186).

Because of her relationship with Wylie and Taylor, Jase was able to overcome her past and truly in every sense become an American. She was able to create her own dreams and become more confident in her actions. However, when Jase sees the murderer of her husband in New York, she is caught up with her past. In order to escape her fears and to keep Taylor and Duff safe, Jase decides to go to Iowa.

The final part of her identity change is when Jase goes to Iowa. Jase meets Bud, who is thirty years older than her, through Mother Ripplemeyer, Bud's mother. Jase is looking for a job at the University Hospital. Mother Ripplemeyer reminds Jase of Lillian Gordon, who was very instrumental in the identity change of Jasmine to Jazzy. Jase vows to someday be able to make a change in the world someday like Mother Ripplemeyer and Lillian Gordon. With Mother Ripplemeyer, Jase is not able to

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talk about the poverty she faced in India. In Iowa, Jase is forced to not recollect certain aspects of her past in conversations because it scares Mother Ripplemeyer to hear about her past.

Through Mother Ripplemeyer, Jase meets Bud and at the time of their meeting, Bud is still married to Karin. Later, Karin decides to divorce from Bud and Jase eventually becomes pregnant with Bud's child. Describing Bud, Jase says, "Bud's not like Taylor—he's never asked me about India; it scares him. He wouldn't be interested in the forecast of an old fakir under a banyan tree. Bud was wounded in the war between my fate and will" (12). Like in Jase's other relationships, Bud also changes Jase's name to Jane, "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. My genuine foreignness frightens him. I don't hold that against him" (26).

Jane wants to stay in Iowa forever and forget her past. However, Jane feels conflicted between her past and present, "In the white lamplight, ghosts float toward me. Jane, Jasmine, Jyoti" (21). Despite her insistence that the past does not matter in her relationship with Bud, Jane cannot forget her previous identities. When talking to Dr. Mary Webb, who "Teaches sociology or social work" (122), Jane admits that she has been reborn several times, and some lives she can recall vividly. Jane is reborn several times in her present life, she was forced to live a meaningless life and lost her native identity. Jane realizes, "I have had a husband for each of the women I have been. Prakash for Jasmine, Taylor for Jase, Bud for Jane. Half-Face for Kali" (197). Jane contemplates going back to Taylor because with him he enjoyed hearing her stories about India, and would encourage her to not forget her past. When leaving with Taylor, Jane feels, "It isn't guilt that I feel, it's relief. I realized I have already stopped thinking of myself as Jane...I cry into Taylor's shoulder, cry through all the lives I've given birth to, cry for all my dead" (240-241).

Jane realizes that she can still have dreams and maintain her own identity. She does not have to follow the limits that her relationships seem to put on her. Jane runs away with Taylor because he is an opportunity for a new future, in which she forges her own identity and still remains true to her roots.

In the novel *Jasmine*, Jyoti has conflicts with her past and the present as she attempts to combine her life as an immigrant and life in India. Jyoti comes to America in order to fulfill her husband, Prakash's dreams and to lead a more fruitful life. She undergoes her first transformation from an innocent, dutiful daughter to a modern wife when she meets Prakash who calls her Jasmine, then she becomes more American when she meets Lillian Gordon who calls her Jazzy. Later, with Taylor Hayse, who calls her Jase, she starts to accept her past and present together, however seeing her husband's murderer frightens her. She then moves on to become Bud's Jane. Jyoti tries to establish a new identity as she learns new American customs, skills, and aspirations. These transactions in her identity are apparent in her attitude towards life and her relationships with men and women.

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