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THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY OF A WOMAN BETWEEN “THIRD WORLD” AND “FIRST WORLD” IN MUKHERJEE’S *JASMINE*¹

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Abstract

The physical and psychological journey of a person is an ongoing trip. Throughout this journey, the individual develops and searches for his/her identity. From this perspective, countries like USA have many people who experience physical and psychological journeys due to their immigrational past. Such is the case of Jasmine, the woman character in Bharati Mukherjee’s novel *Jasmine* (1989) who has this kind of past and searches for her identity which is stuck between the “third world” where her journey begins and the “first world” where her journey takes her. Therefore, this article aims at reveal the physical and psychological journey of a woman who moves from a so - called “third world” country to America, the importance of her ethnicity in this journey and her struggle to search her identity in her in between situation.

Firstly, due to the postcolonial background of the character, postcolonialism and its literary qualities will be emphasized as the theoretical background of the novel. In addition, ethnicity and identity theories will be further detailed upon and socio-economic conditions of the country Jasmine moves from will be explained in order to reveal the situation of the women there. Within the light of all this information, the article will focus upon a number of of specific topics such as: representations of the “third world”, America, women’s the struggle to survive, their ethnicity and search for identity.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Third World, First World, Identity, Ethnicity.

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Öz

İnsanın fiziksel ve psikolojik seyahati süregelen bir yolculuktur. Bu seyahatte, birey büyür ve kimliğini arar. ABD gibi ülkelerde, göçmen geçmişleri sebebi ile fiziksel ve psikolojik seyahatleri tecrübe etmiş bir çok insan vardır. Bharati Mukharjee'nin *Jasmine* (1989) romanındaki kadın karakter Jasmine böyle bir geçmişe sahiptir ve seyahatinin başladığı üçüncü dünya ile seyahatinin onu getirdiği birinci dünya arasında sıkışmış kimliğini aramaktadır. Çalışma üçüncü dünya olarak adlandırılan bir ülkeden Amerika'ya göç eden bir kadının fiziksel ve psikolojik seyahatini, yolculukta etnisitesinin önemini ve arada kalmışlık durumundaki kadının kimliğini arama mücadelesini ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır.

Karakterin postkolonyal durumundan dolayı, romanın teorik arka planı olarak, postkolonyalizm ile onun edebi özellikleri vurgulanacaktır. Etnisite ve kimlik teorileri ortaya koyulacaktır. Jasmine'in terk ettiği ülkedeki kadının durumunu ortaya koymak için, ülkedeki sosyo-ekonomik durum açıklanacaktır. Bu bilgilerin ışığında, üçüncü dünyanın, Amerika'nın temsili, kadının hayatta kalma mücadelesi, kadının etnisitesi ve kimlik arayışı açıklanacaktır.

Sonuç olarak, eserin analiziyle, kadının mücadelesi, yeni dünyada kimlik arayışı ve etnisitesinin önemi ortaya koyulacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Postkolonyalizm, Üçüncü Dünya, Birinci Dünya, Kimlik, Etnisite.

Introduction

Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989) is a postcolonial novel tackling the situation of immigrants, people from third world countries having integration difficulties into the first world in which they are continuously discriminated and marginalized with a special emphasis upon the situation of women in the new world they move into. Mukherjee's work which reflects the status of third world women in the first world and the issues they come across lays the foundation for a feminist perspective on the discrimination of women, especially of women coming from ethnic minorities.

From this perspective, people's physical and psychological journey is an everlasting trip in which they grow and search for their identities. In this context, countries like USA host many people who experience into physical and psychological adaptation problems due to their immigrational past. In Bharati Mukherjee's novel the protagonist *Jasmine* has such a past and searches for her identity between the so - called "third world" where her life and journey begin and the "first world" where her journey leads her. Thus, the article aims at revealing traumatizing effects of the physical and psychological journey of a woman who travels from a "third world" country to America as the first world country, the significance of her ethnicity in this journey and her struggle to search for her identity in her in - between condition.

Method

Firstly, due to the postcolonial background of the character, postcolonialism and its literary qualities will be emphasized as the theoretical background of the novel. These various approaches to literary texts were mostly dominated by Western critics and according to Toni Morrison, Edward Said and Judith Butler, these approaches and critics were Euro-American centered and did not meet the necessities for the analysis of different kinds of texts from different parts of the world. Their intention was to allow the dominated and marginalized voices to be heard and grouped together under the umbrella of cultural studies including gender studies, African – American studies, and especially postcolonial studies.

From this perspective postcolonialism

is an investigation of the literature written by authors other than those who represent mainstream British or American perspective. In America, these writers are African Americans, Jews, Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans or Chicanos, for example. (Cowles, 1994, p. 272)

As is it understood from these lines, the immigrant authors of America became the pioneers of the postcolonial writing.

Although each member of these countries has personal concerns, all want to be heard and understood as valuable and contributing members of their society. Their individual and public histories matter. They believe that their past and their present are connected. They think that by denying and suppressing their past, they would be denying or forgetting who they are. They want to express their feelings and concerns according to their cultures without being considered marginal or insignificant voices.

Feminism, Identity and Ethnicity

The feminist approach is important for the analysis of this novel too. According to Rishoi's perspective feminism implies recovering and honouring "the specificity of women experience, and cultural significance by making women's voices and stories heard" (2003, p. 23). Rishoi states that it is necessary to highlight the significance of women, their importance in society and make them visible and effective in society. Therefore, feminist discourse aims to narrate the functions of the patriarchal society and the condition of women in this male controlled world. Moreover, feminist perspective focuses upon gender issues. From this perspective, Butler emphasizes the idea that "gender is culturally constructed" (2002, p. 9). As Butler states, gender is not something physical, but something cultural because the perception of women depends upon certain cultural norms such as the ideology of the patriarchy which wants to control women, keep them at home doing housework and not interfering into the men's life and business.

On the same wavelength, men use many tools generating segregation and one of them is women's ethnicity. As a consequence, it is necessary to emphasize the ethnicity concept for the analysis of the novel. As a term "ethnicity is a cultural concept centered on norms, values, beliefs, cultural symbols and practices which mark a process of cultural boundary formation" (Barker, 2007, p. 25). As it is underlined in this definition, ethnicity is used for the segregation of women in society by means of the ethnicity codes which are culturally constructed to provide the boundaries men defined. Thus, women are discriminated and segregated again as it happens in the novel.

Women segregation which is applied by means of their ethnic background is related to their past as these women with different ethnic backgrounds are women of the postcolonial countries or so - called "third world" countries which is a term of the first world powers. Those women are the postcolonial women so their requests and voices parallel the postcolonial feminist approach. Rosemary Marangoly George emphasizes the idea that "[f]rom the early 1980s onward, postcolonial feminism in the West has been centrally concerned with the terms in which knowledge about non-Western women was produced, circulated, and utilized" (Rooney, 2006, p. 211). Women of the third world were shaped, controlled and oppressed by the first world men. As a result, this suppression and the subsequent resistance and revolt of the postcolonial writers becomes one of the central topics

of the postcolonial feminist perspective and the authors who come from the so - called third world embrace this point of view.

Like post colonialism, identity is another important concept in the feminist perspective. Tackling the concept of identity, Lacan considers that “identity is a construction of language” (Herman and Varvaeck, 2005, p. 108). This definition stresses the idea that that identity is a construction process and it parallels gender issues according to John Stoltenberg. He states that “under patriarchy, the cultural norm of male identity consists in power, prestige, privilege, and prerogative as over and against the gender class women” (Plain and Sellers, 2007, p. 187). Consequently, men define women’s identity so that they can control them.

Discussion

An Indian born American writer, Bharati Mukherjee reflects the life of Jasmine, a woman who emigrates from India to America. The novel turns into a Bildungsroman since it recounts Jasmine’s experiences, her journey and the personal development. Born in India like the author, Jasmine immigrates to America after she loses her husband in a terrorist attack in India and tries to adopt the first world as a third world woman; consequently, story develops around her physical and emotional journey which begins from India and continues in the United States of America.

Mukherjee’s work highlights the importance of the cultural past from a postcolonial perspective. Her characters pass through personal changes from one culture to another. The author explains this character change on the basis of her own experiences:

We [immigrants] have experienced rapid changes in the history of the nations in which we lived. When we uproot ourselves from those countries and come here, either by choice or out of necessity, we suddenly must absorb 200 years of American history and learn to adapt to American society. Our lives are remarkable, often heroic. [...] Although they [the fictional immigrant characters] are often hurt or depressed by setbacks in their new lives and occupations, they do not give up. They take risks they wouldn't have taken in their old, comfortable worlds to solve their problems. As they change citizenship, they are reborn. (Hoppe, 1999, p. 137)

The author tries to emphasize the idea that the characters want to forget their past and to embrace the culture of the new world. This new culture which is their future does not

guarantee their success but since immigrants, who don't give up their cultural past fail, the characters have to consider the possibility to change and reborn in this new world.

From this perspective Jasmine does more than giving up her past and her Indian culture. Jasmine tries to destroy her former Indian self and to create a new identity in America, but this does not become a solution for her. Her past still follows her. As a consequence, she prefers transformation and she is always in a transformation process. Even at the end of the novel, Jasmine tries to change and for this aim she prepares to leave Budd behind and go to California with Taylor, so that she could leave her past behind and embrace a new life, free from her past. Unfortunately, she cannot manage to accomplish this. She carries her past with her wherever she goes, she cannot transform into a complete new identity.

Throughout the entire text Jasmine rebels against her cultural impositions. For example, when she goes to a fortuneteller, this draws a passive future for her. She objects to this future and uses powerful women images from her culture such as a third eye on her forehead which shows that she is a sage, a wise, powerful character in her culture. In this way she transforms her passive position into an active "empowered seer" (Hoppe, 1999, p. 140). Jasmine tries to get rid of all these weak past identities. In different parts of the text, Jasmine sees herself as an astronaut or a ghost. Her deliberate choice of these identities comes from these characters' freedom to move between different places and worlds. Therefore, the author creates many different identities and she travels among these separate identities.

Similarly, another identity representation is provided by technology. Technology is the symbol of development for Jasmine and the author connects technology with the transformation of the Jasmine's identity. This is exemplified in the novel by the dialogue between Jasmine and the lady of the house she stays in. In this house, Taylor's wife Wylie shows her the microwave in the kitchen. Wylie says, "If you have a thing about radiation, you don't have to use it. [...] You just let us know when we upset you, all right?" Jasmine says, "I don't have a thing about radiation" (Mukherjee, 1989, p. 150). Mukherjee tries to emphasize how Wylie stereotypes Jasmine "as a primitive, Third World Other" (Hoppe, 1999, p. 146). According to Mukherjee, "the postmodern, post-colonial subject should be like an electronic component: functional, modern, and flexible" (Hoppe, 1999, p. 149). By this example, the author criticizes the addiction to the past, traditions and old things and at the same time praises the modern things. This situation is also exemplified by the character Bud

in the novel. He loses his life due to his connection to farming which is an old form of representation. A farmer who went insane due to changing economic conditions shoots him. From this perspective, other characters who exemplify the dangers of addiction to old forms and traditions are Khalsa Lions, Sikh terrorists who put the bomb in the radio to kill Jasmine as she does not respect the traditional clothing style of India. These examples show the contrast between the old and new world.

According to Mukherjee, Khalsa Lion's addiction to old forms and traditions leads to death, even to murder. However, Jasmine and Du adopt, change and transform into new conditions and their ability of transformation makes them American. The author exemplifies this by Jasmine's words. "'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'" (Mukherjee, 1999, p. 198). Jasmine points out their fast transformation and she emphasizes her changing identity.

Jasmine's transformation also fits into the postcolonial feminist perspective. The author enhances the colonization of immigrant and American women. Jasmine undergoes many changes during her journey in America and she transforms from Jyoti to Jasmine, from Jase to Jane. Among them, Jyoti is a city name which is given to Jasmine by her husband in India. According to Taylor, the academic Jasmine turns into Jase. When Jasmine arrives to Iowa, she undergoes another change by moving with a banker, adopting a Vietnamese son, getting pregnant and leaving with Taylor. In her story, she escapes from the violent and oppressive surroundings of India and arrives to America as an immigrant to have a better life there. Yet, she finds herself outside of American society due to her immigrant identity. However, she does not quail and she does her best to integrate into the American society. For this aim she changes and at the end of the novel becomes a complete American as an adventurer and goes on the road.

The author retells this journey as she redefines the identity of the immigrant character whose qualities are controlled and determined by the patriarchy, gender, ethnicity and culture. In such an environment the character has to create "a bicultural identity" (Aneja, :1993, p. 74). From this perspective, Jasmine becomes a sufferer in an environment which is under the control of third world patriarchy and first world colonialism. In "Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism" Chandra Mohanty "comments on the victimization of third world

women in the first, which, due to the burden of oppression, will not let the third world woman speak for herself” (Aneja, 1993, p. 75).

The oppression also exists in the first world as it is stated in the events narrated in the novel. She becomes the object of male desire and violence and men become obstacle to her freedom in society. From this perspective, the man who rapes her at the hotel is an obstacle to her journey which she expects to lead her to freedom from patriarchy. In this journey, when she was supposed to be confident and create an independent identity for herself, she waits for Taylor to go to the desert. Similarly, her choice of Taylor instead of Bud is not a choice between two men. It is a choice between two different kinds of life each of them leading to different cultural lives.

These cultural choices are reflected in the different variations of her name, Jasmine. Her names are constructed identities. These identities come from the transformation of the character during her journey. At the same time these names are a reaction to colonialism. She has to change in order to survive and continue her way. As a consequence, the narration style becomes the integration of the journey which is the integration of the third world into the first world like Jasmine’s integration of as a character of the third world put into a first world character. Besides, such a narration style is a symbol of the ongoing journey of the character as it shows an ongoing transformation.

In her narration the author also refers to gender related restrictions. The novel abounds in examples of this type. Jasmine is born into a culture where the daughters are considered as wrath so the daughters have less significance when compared to sons. However, Jasmine’s mother struggles to keep Jyoti in school for years and prevents men to force her to marry at eleven to a divorced landlord. When she gets married, she marries to Parakash Vihh. He is a man from city and his ideals are similar to Gandhi’s. He calls Jasmine by the name of Jyoti. This becomes a symbol for leaving feudal past behind and accepting an urban identity. This sudden identity transformation causes conflict in Jasmine’s inner life.

As a domestic woman Jasmine wanted to have children and get pregnant in order to perform her domestic women roles. Because in the postcolonial country she lives in, the role of women and their identities are connected to their pregnancy as they are expected to become mothers. In contrast to these traditional and cultural identities, Prakash helps the transformation of Jasmine’s identity and changes her ideas from being a mother to a business

woman so they agree upon opening a business. This idea becomes a threat to the economic order of Shik which is depended on male control and power. Therefore, such a business woman identity is not accepted by the patriarchal power of the community and there is a bomb attempt to kill Jasmine.

Instead of killing herself and obeying identity politics and the rules of patriarchy, Jasmine decides to kill the murderer. Jasmine becomes "the action of goddess, Kali" (Hoppe, 1999, 142). She transforms from a passive woman into an active woman. The novel's emphasis is on action and change, as it is happens in the case of Jasmine who becomes a means of change and renewal exemplified by the deaths and rebirths in the novel and the formation of her identity which changes from Jyoti to Jasmine.

As far as her ethnic, background is concerned, Jasmine embodies Hindu concepts and American frontier mythology, distinct traditions brought together to reveal Jasmine's personal experience:

They assumed I had a past, like them, about which I didn't tell too much. Most of them had children back in Jamaica or Trinidad or Santo Domingo. They assumed I did, too. I didn't have a child, but I had a past that I was still fleeing. Perhaps still am. (Mukherjee, 1989, 30)

The author points out the similarities and similar problems of third world women in the first world as the third wave feminism, which also focuses on the issues related to the postcolonial women, points out.

From this perspective, she talks about rebellious women in Lahore, in her previous country and describes the bad treatment they receive there: "All our district, bad luck dogged dowryless wives, rebellious wives, barren wives. They fell into wells, they got run over by trains, they burned to death heating milk on kerosene stoves" (Mukherjee, 1989, p. 36). The writer recounts how rebellious women are badly treated and the indirect message is that women should rebel but she knows that they will not be awarded for such an act but punished as it happens in her country. She directly points out the things that women should do and the obstacles they will come across.

She talks about the difficulty of a unity, of a harmony among different ethnic people. She talks about America and a university brochure. "Two young Indian or Pakistani men and two Chinese or Japanese women on the cover were standing under palm trees, smiling in their

white shirts” (Mukherjee, 1989, p. 82). It seems that there is harmony among ethnic people, but just a paragraph before, she talks about bombs. “Radios burst into flames on store shelves. Cars blew up on the street” (Mukherjee, 1989, p. 81). By binary oppositions, the writer indicates that the male dominated world is full of violence and that the ethnic unity and harmony, shown on the brochure is just on the brochure or in some parts of the world but not everywhere.

However, she also points out that women are everywhere and there is reincarnation for them. “The other lives are just fragmentary. She has been in many wars, wandered in many forests, borne many children. Her face is transformed as she tells [...] Theoretically, I believe in reincarnation” (Mukherjee, 1989, 112). Furthermore, she stresses the idea that women’s lives, duties, and problems have always been similar, so they may metamorphose and reincarnate.

Like many feminist authors do, Mukherjee points out that third world women not only suffer from being women but also suffer from being foreign. Beggars ask money from her and she refuses taking the risk of a violent response.

However, the writer praises women especially the hair of Indian women implicitly highlighting their purity.

Indian women are purist, they’re cleansing their hair with berries or yogurt only, they’re not ruining their hair with shampoos, gels, dyes, or permanents. American women have horrible hair – this I have learned since settling here. Their hair lacks virginity and innocence (Mukherjee, 1989, p. 136).

The author praises Indian women’s hair. She describes it as pure when compared to American women’s hair. She finds the new world corrupted and dirty. She identifies the third world women with purity.

What is more, the writer emphasizes the identity conflict in women. Jasmine asks herself. “How many more shapes are in me, how many more shelves, how many more husbands?” (Mukherjee, 1989, 190). The writer enhances the identity conflict the women pass through in this rapidly changing world, but she emphasizes that women must continue their journey. At the end of the novel Jasmine thinks that “Adventure, risk, transformation, the frontier is pushing indoors through uncaulked windows” (Mukherjee, 1989, p. 214). The

writer points out the idea that the male controlled world and its oppression on women will continue so the women should continue their journey and their struggle.

Conclusion

Finally, Bharati Mukherjee envisages the consequences of moving from the third world into the first world. She reflects how a woman who just identifies herself as a wife in a small feudal settlement at the beginning, changes and survives in the harsh realities of the first world. She portrays the power of women. Besides, the problems, the obstacles put forth by the male dominated world are presented in her novel *Jasmine*. Jasmine becomes an illustration of women who share a similar destiny. She represents post-colonial women and the means by which such women adapt to the world of the colonizer.

From this perspective, the author reveals the journey of the third world woman and the transformation of this woman's identity. She reveals the fact that this identity transformation process is not an easy process, but a process and period full of obstacles and difficulties set by the colonizer and the patriarchal society. In addition, this literary text shows how the woman character fights against all these obstacles which exist both in the third world she lives for a period and in the first world where she moves into. From this point of view, the author makes the struggle of women and the identities they created in this struggle explicit. As a consequence, the work becomes the voice of not only the women of the third world but also of the women of the first world and points out the ongoing search of women for their identities in all these countries.

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