

Bharti Mukherjee's *Jasmine*: A Journey from Majority Existence to Marginal Experience

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1. Introduction

The concept of marginality, express the condition of socially excluded people due to a dominant culture or power mechanisms. Basically, the emergence of being "other" or "marginal" within the European culture has a unique history. On the global level, immigrants are identified as marginal due to the disparity arising out of transition of industrial society. The marginal person is dragged between two or more social worlds, either he embrace the new culture and selects it as his chosen homeland or experiences a sense of suppression and frustration. Marginality can be considered on three levels as cultural, social and structural marginality.

Cultural marginality is a process of intercultural communication and assimilation in which the values of the individual are determined and compared hierarchically.

Social marginality is a state of exclusion that derives from a failure of not being included in a social status, position or class existing in the current status quo. Just like the isolation of women emphasizing their career choices, it is in one sense of social loneliness brought about by success.

Structural marginality is the exclusion of some groups that constitute the more disadvantaged and powerless segments of the society in political, social and economic terms.

Present paper seeks to study Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* as a perfect example of a journey from majority experience to that of marginal experience. *The New York Times* has this to say about the novel:

Mrs. Mukherjee is less interested in giving us a realistic depiction of one women's peripatetic life than in creating a fable, a kind of impressionistic prose poem, about being an exile, a refugee, a spiritual vagabond in the world today.

The novel presents its heroine in Jasmine who, in the beginning, is a part of the majority society and culture but with the development of the plot she observes the experience of marginality. She is attracted towards a multicultural society like America. She embraces marginality as a part of her rebellious and adventurous nature from her childhood and becomes a part of what is called as a marginal in multicultural and multi-ethnic society.

The novel also presents this journey from one generation to the other. The grandparents' generation, in the novel, a small village, Hasnapur, Punjab. Before the independence of India, they were the part of Lahore, Pakistan. They enjoyed each and every luxury in Lahore. They become a part of India so as to embrace the egalitarian culture over here but what they experienced here is nothing better than living the life like beggars. They came to India abandoning farmlands and business-shops; they had temptation that they will get majority identity in India. The process of cultural marginalization includes the process of intercultural communication in which grandparents' generation seem to fail. There seems no

assimilation of the old generation to the migrated land. As a result, they become a marginal part of the Indian society.

The other generation presented in the novel is that the heroine, Jyoti. Though her grandparents had lived a marginal existence in India but Jyoti establishes her identity a part of majority culture. The display of her being majority existence is evident from her rebellious nature from her childhood days. She has a sense of adventure within herself. She rebels against the conventional set up. She attempts to communicate interculturally so as to assimilate herself in the majority culture. What she experiences and realizes is the sticking up of people to convention and tradition. Her rebellious nature is revealed in her reactions to the astrologer who foretells against her unhappy marriage, her killing of a mad dog, finding of cheating of ignorant women by the vendors, her interest in English language, her decision to marry such a boy who at least may know or speak English, her determination of becoming a doctor and start a clinic in some big city where women were treated like cattle.

Her inter-caste marriage with Prakash brings hope for her to abandon the majority existence and to embrace what is called marginal experience in the U.S.A. After the marriage, prakash renames her as Jasmine. Punjab witnesses a rise of Sikh nationalism and stray incidents of violence and extremism. Jyoti falls in love with Prakash, a graduate and a good student keen on going abroad not just for the sake of a job but "to be a part of it" (Mukherjee, 1991, p. 67). On the eve of their departure to the States, Jasmine and Prakash go out shopping and the astrologer's pronouncement is fulfilled. Prakash becomes a victim of a comb attack by extremist Sikh nationalist and their dreams about going abroad shattered.

After the death of Prakash, Jasmine decides to fulfill the plans of her husband as Prakash's voice exhorts from every corner of her room:

There is no dying, there is only ascending or a descending, a moving on to other plans. Don't crawl back to Hasnapur and feudalism (p. 86).

This is when Jasmine, a mere seventeen-year old, decides to take control of fate and look for alternate realities. She dares to take the risk of entering multicultural and multi-ethnic America illegally with the help of her brother. Her journey from majority existence to marginal experience is full of difficulties and hurdles. At the coast of Florida. She is encountered by Half Face who attempts to rape her twice. After reaching the coast of Florida, her marginal experience becomes dominant. On one hand she seems to be happy to have reached the dream land of her husband's dream. On the other she feels sorrowful because in the attempt of fulfillment of her husband's mission, she has spoilt her chastity. This critical situation, she faces bravely. Helpless in an alien land, she thinks to commit suicide but after some prayers and thinking, she realizes that her

mission is more important to her than her dishonor. She seems to agree Bharati Mukherjee when she decides to accept the existence of alternate. Mrs. Mukherjee also says:

I believe in the existence of alternate realities, and this belief makes itself evident in my fiction. (Qtd. in Span, p. 35)

She slits her tongue and with a bleeding mouth attacks Half Face and kills him. Jasmine has been rescued by Lillian Gordon, a kind Quaker lady, provides her food, gives Jasmine her daughter's clothes. Jasmine seems to assimilate with the American culture. Though an immigrant, she longs to continue to live a majority identity in America. She doesn't seem to believe in:

In America, nothing lasts. 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 (Mukherjee, p. 181).

Her thinking about American culture proves its flexibility that with in short time she leaves Lillian Gordon and goes to Prof. Vadhera, Prakash's ideal professor. With him, Jasmine doesn't find anything attractive. For her, he is not at all a professor but a sorter and importer of human hair. Living with Vadheras for five months seems to Jasmine as if five years. The motive with which she has come to America is shattered still she doesn't appear shaken her determination. She realizes her marginal identity and strives to maintain it.

Jasmine comes in contact with Taylor, a real professor, and his wife, Wylie, Jasmine worked as a caregiver

for the household for two years. Her duty is to look after Duff, the adopted daughter of Taylor and Wylie. With Taylor, Jasmine falls in love at the first meeting. She loves and appreciates Taylor's democratic nature and behavior even with the servants. Taylor's part is important in making her an American. He renames her as Jase from Jasmine.

Some unavoidable situation compels her to abandon Taylor. Jasmine meets Mother Ripplemeyer who takes her to Baden Iowa where she becomes Jane Ripplemeyer. Jasmine seems to assume the role of a majority American existence. She influences Mother Ripplemeyer's 53 years old son, Bud Ripplemeyer with whom she becomes pregnant. Not only has this, but her entry in Baden Iowa created a new life all around. She also affects Du—a Vietnamese refugee in America adopted by Bud Ripplemeyer—and develops within herself a sense of affection towards him. At his departure, Jane feels that it is not departure but her own miscarriage.

Jasmine's journey teaches her more than she already known about the world and life in general. Unknowingly she becomes a part of American culture and society. The journey from majority existence to marginal experience is a threefold journey including cultural, social and structural marginalization. Jasmine's act of initiating the journey from majority existence towards immigrant experience is an act of voluntarily embracing marginality. Her transformation of identity from Jyoti to Jasmine, from Jasmine to Jase and from Jase to Jane is the example of her being treated as marginal everywhere. People in majority culture even don't bother to change the identity of the marginal individual.

References:

1. Mukherjee, Bharti. *Jasmine*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1991.
2. Span, Vol. XXXI, no.06.
3. *The New York Times*