



THE MULTIPLICITY OF IDENTITY IN BHARATEE MUKHERJEE'S JASMINE AND NORA OKJA KELLER'S COMFORT WOMAN

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Abstract

Multiplicity of identity can result from the displacement that immigrants are exposed to. Those immigrants can be forced or they vulnerably leave their homelands seeking a better life. To overcome the cultural differences and to reach assimilation, immigrants need to dress up into multiple selves whenever needed. It is their way of gaining a voice because they become uprooted in the path of seeking a sense of belonging. Hence, the change of identities mirrors the dilemma of those who suffer from dislocation. The purpose of the present study is to inquire the theme of multiplicity of female identity in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989) and Nora Okja Keller *Comfort Woman* (1997). Between chasing the American dream to get rid of the society's restrictions which imprison the female's true identity and to the migration for the sake of gaining back an erased identity, both novels address the dilemmas that female immigrants face. Hence, the main characters' multiple identities will be examined with the emphasis on how they can be caught in-between cultures and create a "third space". Moreover, how do the protagonists keep changing their identities to cope with the difficulties implied on them as third world women immigrants and to prevent being labeled as exotic and the Other.

Key words: Multiplicity of identity, Immigration, Comfort Woman, Third Space, Other.

Introduction

Multiculturalism is considered to be a relief for people who refuse to follow the norms of the dominant culture. However, it is regarded as an imprisoning weapon for others who believe in the necessity to melt into the host culture. Bharati Mukherjee is one of the strongest opponents of multiculturalism. She supports the complete assimilation and integration. Though Mukherjee is born and raised in India, she does not consider herself as an Indian American and refuses to be hyphenated. She is proud to be an American writer, refusing the racial discrimination. One of the novels that this article deals with is Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989) where she directly reflects on the notions of assimilation and preservation. Mukherjee's beliefs are concretely mirrored in her work and clearly depicted through the use of an Indian female character. The protagonist seeks change and acceptance without looking back to the past, to the origins and the truth of being between two different worlds. The atrocities that the protagonist is subject to lead her to take the decision of moving from a life of an ignorant Indian to achieve her dream of Americanization through the continuous recreation of new identities.

In the first half of the 20th Century, W.E.B Du Bois used multiplicity of identity in his *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), as a term that describes the African American person who has an identity which is divided into different and many facets. The expression "multiplicity of one's identity" means that our identities are intrinsically multiple, they are constituted of different layers or selves. A person is not naturally born with a plurality of selves. However, they are acquired by the surrounding conditions which trigger the birth of multiple identities. The person may extend the borders of his/her personality which can lead to the dislocation and fragmentation of selves. In return, people tend to opt for multiple identities seeking societal approval and acceptance. The highlighted reasons behind the individual's identity fragmentation in this article are colonization and immigration. Colonizers usually inferiorize the colonized which result in their sense of the need to urge different identities hoping that they will get rid of the exclusion and marginalization imposed on them. They end up being labeled as exotic and the other. On the other hand, immigrants all over the world have to overcome the intertwined obstacles they face in the host country. Consequently, the conflictive contact with the new atmosphere makes it even harder for the immigrants to determine whether to fit into the main stream society or to maintain their own traditions.

Furthermore, immigration can be the only way to survive for some people. Nora Okja Keller depicts the case of a Korean comfort woman who was obliged to flee to the United States in order to escape the societal rejection and judgments after the Japanese' withdrawal from Korea. The protagonist in *Comfort*

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Woman (1997) goes through a traumatic period inside the Japanese military comfort stations which forces her to create new identities. These multiple identities empower her to continue her life in a different country facing all the sudden and drastic changes. The inability to fully belong to a given place leads to the creation of what Homi Bhabha termed as the “third space” where the person escapes from the unbearable reality. His concept was further explained by Buden et al (2009)

Bhabha proposed the concept of the “third space”, as the space for hybridity, the space for subversion, transgression, blasphemy, heresy, and so on. But hybridity is also the space where all binary divisions and antagonisms, typical of modernist political concepts including the old opposition between theory and politics, cease to hold. Instead of the old dialectical concept of negation, Bhabha offers the idea of negotiation or cultural translation, which he believes to be in itself politically subversive, as the only possible way to transform the world and bring about something politically new. In his view, then, an emancipatory extension of politics is possible only in the field of cultural production, following the logic of cultural translation. (201)

The racial, economic and sexual challenges that immigrants face in the host country lead them to constantly reconstruct their identities to manage the new atmosphere creating an in-between space to adjust and stabilize their life “the production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space” (Bhabha, 1994, 36).

Stuart Hall highlights the importance of constructing one’s subjectivity freely without limiting the process of identity formation to the boundaries set by the society. In his essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” (1996), he notes that “identity is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as ‘being’... It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history, and culture” (112). Immigrants cannot completely detach themselves from their surroundings in order to shield protect their identities. However, it is believed that identity can be tremendously affected after displacement. Eze Chielozona (2014) notes that “identity is no longer shaped exclusively by geography or blood, or culture understood in oppositional terms. On the contrary, identity is now relational” (235).

1. Jasmine as the Chameleon

Jasmine is the story of an Indian young girl who fights the society’s restrictions to change her fate. Jasmine is a daughter of a poor family living in a small village called Hasnapur. Despite her situation, she is an intelligent girl and a good student. Girls in India are living under a patriarchal society with all its subjugation, oppression and discrimination. Patriarchy signifies a legal, justified imprisonment of females under the mercy of the males who dominate every aspect of the girls’ lives. Mukherjee brought to light the injustices of the Indian patriarchal society where girls do not even have the privilege of attending school. Jasmine marries an open-minded Indian man called Prakash who becomes her savior. He is against all Hindu traditions and his dream is to migrate to America. He changes his wife’s name from Jyoti to Jasmine and encourages her to give up the feudality of Hasnapur. Even their marriage is not that traditional since it is a dowerless one “ours was a no-dowry, no-guests Registry office wedding” (Mukherjee, 1989, 75). His treatment to his wife does not identify him as an Indian man; he respects and appreciates her. Jasmine is allowed and urged to call him by his first name, “he wanted me to call him by his first name. He says, “Only in feudal societies is the woman still a vassal” (77). Prakash wants her to be his partner as well, a partner that he is very proud of, “Prakash. I had to practice and practice . . . so I could say the name without gagging and blushing in front of his friends. He liked to show me off” (77).

After his death, Jasmine migrates to America to carry on the dream of her husband. She manages to escape illegally using a fake passport. However, her journey takes an unexpected turn when Half-face, who helps her to escape, rapes her in a hotel room. Jasmine could not swallow the shocking, traumatizing and shameful incident of rape and she starts thinking about putting an end to her life. Instead, she kills him and maintains her plans for a radical change. The scene of rape shows that the violence towards women especially third world women is universal. Her displacement from India to America was mainly for the sake of committing Sati after her husband’s death. Mukherjee changes what is understood to be a doomed fate to a fate of transformation and hope. She deliberately transforms Sati from being a negative performance that would end women’s lives to an act of positive change. Eventually, Jasmine decides not to give up on her life and continues her journey. Mukherjee asserts through Jasmine that Sati can be performed as an act of personal freedom or personal expression. A series of changes hit Jasmine in her mother country, enabling her to stand out as a strong character that defies all the rules. Jasmine’s resistance and rebellion against the Indian traditions enabled her to gain her voice and strength in order to pursue her dream. Though her future may seem doomed, Jasmine transformed all the restrictions she faced for her own benefit to carry on the



path of drastic changes. She starts by burning her dishonored clothes which symbolizes a life time transformation, the death of her older self and the rise of her new self out of the ashes. Mukherjee succeeds in showing how women can be steady, strong and assertive by nature. Their silence should not be interpreted as a sign of weakness and submission.

In her journey, she meets an American woman called Ms. Lillian Gordon. She teaches her how to become a real American woman and gives her the first American identity by renaming her Jazzy. At this stage, Jasmine undergoes a physical transformation as well. A new American identity and American clothes change her behavior in such a way that even Jasmine herself can never predict, "I checked myself in the mirror, shocked at the transformation. Jazzy in a t-shirt, tight cords and running shoes. I couldn't tell if with the Hasnapuri sidle I'd also be abandoned by Hasnapuri modesty" (133). Bhabha (1994) asserts that "space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion" (1). Consequently, as a female immigrant, Jasmine feels the impulse to assimilate into the surrounding culture to avoid the unbearable exclusion that she will face if she insists on keeping her Indian culture. Therefore, Jasmine begins her series of transformations towards the new horizon of Americanization. Jyoti, Jasmine, Jazzy, Jase and Jane are the different selves Jasmine moved through whenever she moves from one place to another. Mukherjee succeeds in challenging the preserved concepts of the patriarchal society where women are silenced and have no choice. She deliberately switches the end of the novel creating a more confident, resilient and strong character who does not conform to the rules of society. Jasmine leaves her husband Bud Ripplemeyer for Taylor who she met and fell in love with back in Manhattan. Regardless of her pregnancy, but she consciously makes the decision to leave her marital life without being entrapped by any societal rules or norms.

When Jasmine changes herself, she creates a third space, in-between the Indian and the American cultures. Homi Bhabha argued that

The migrant's survival depends, as Rushdie put it, on discovering 'how newness enters the world'. The focus is on making the linkages through the unstable elements of literature and life - the dangerous tryst with the untranslatable - rather than arriving with ready-made names. (1994: 227)

The third space emerges when an immigrant tries to establish different relations within the new society. The mixture of the Indian and the American cultures lead to the birth of a new space. In the "Third Space" interview, Homi Bhabha declares, "This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives" (Rutherford, 1990: 211). This third space belongs neither to the Indian tradition nor to the American; it is a formation of new ideas and principles out of both cultures. Jasmine shuttles between two worlds, the old world where she once belonged and the new world where she seeks a sense of belonging "I am caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness" (Mukherjee, 1989, 240). Jasmine uses the third space to reconcile between the two different cultures and she tries to assimilate by melting into the American world "I became an American in an apartment on Clermont avenue" (165). Although the multiplicity of identity is considered as a way to defy stereotypes that an immigrant may face. However, they cannot totally escape from who they really are. They will always be tied to their past, culture and physical appearance which identify them wherever they go. As a result, Jasmine is perceived by the Americans as different, exotic and she represents the other. Jasmine herself is aware of the fact of being the other and tries to internalize it, "Bud courts me because I am Alien. I am darkness, mystery" (200). San Juan (1998) explains that "The Other is often acknowledged as the woman, people of color, whatever is deemed monstrous and enigmatic: all are excluded from humanity (to which, it goes without saying, the definer belongs) by being so categorized" (83).

According to Virginia D. Lively (1999), "Mukherjee uses three types of immigrants . . . the refugee, the hyphenated immigrant, and the chameleon" (par, 1). Jasmine believes that "there are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself. We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams" (Mukherjee, 1989, 29). Thus, Jasmine is the chameleon, "This chameleon-type behavior is typical for Jasmine throughout the novel. She constantly reinvents herself in order to fit whatever situation she currently finds herself in" (Lively, 1999: para. 8). Jasmine has proved that she can use the oppressed patriarchal traditions in her favor. Although she has encountered a lot of difficulties during her life in India, she uses her experiences as a platform for her new life in America. A series of changes hit Jasmine in her mother country, enabling her to stand out as a strong character that defies all the rules. Jasmine's resistance and rebellion against the Indian traditions enabled her to gain her voice and strength in order to pursue her dream. Though her future may seem doomed, Jasmine transformed all the restrictions she faced for her own benefit to carry on the path of drastic changes.



2. History of Comfort Women

During the WWII, the Japanese established military brothels to recruit girls who serve the soldiers as sexual slaves and they were called comfort women. The greatest number of these girls were Koreans. Some were kidnapped and threatened to kill their families, others were promised to work in factories and some girls were sold by their family due to extreme poverty. The Japanese colonialism opted for the radical erasure of the Korean identity and adopted the *naisenitai* policy which stands for the infusion of both countries. Their main goal was to ensure the Koreans' loyalty for the Japanese Emperor and they managed to achieve this through different strategies. One of the most affected policies is the radical change in the educational system. This latter attempted to reshape the Koreans' identities and to gradually make them give up on their cultural and national identity. Koreans witnessed profound transformations caused by the Japanese regime which obliged them to adopt Japanese names. Hence, Koreans often developed multiple identities and they suffered to handle the drastic changes they were subjected to. They were not allowed to use their language otherwise they would undergo harsh punishments (Yung et. al , 2013, 6). During wars, the colonizers do not only exploit the colonized country economically and culturally, but they extend their cruelty to the use of sexual exploitation as a weapon to destroy the community and terrorize people. They instill fear into the souls of women especially as they are the colonizers' first target because they are the ones who can satisfy their sexual needs. The consequences of sexual violence are not just temporary nightmares that women endure during the war but they extend to the aftermath of the war. The sexual exploitation brings unbearable stigmatization to the community who blame the victim instead of the colonizer; unwanted pregnancies may occur and most frequently result in mixed raced babies who suffer all their lives, and sexual transmitted diseases which can hardly be cured regarding to the miserable situation of the colonized countries even after war.

The ignorance of the sexual violence's serious threat to the wellbeing of women all over the world and in colonized countries specifically lasted through ages. The UN Security Council regarded the mass rape of women as an international war crime which should be surmounted because of the atrocities committed against Muslim women in Yugoslavia in 1992. The widespread of sexual violence was a wakeup call to start taking serious reactions to put an end to this phenomenon or at least prevent it from happening again. Hence, rape was initially labeled as a crime against humanity according to the Statute of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY, 1993) and The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR, 1994) (Bangura, 2014: 1-2).

The China's Nanking mass rape atrocity in 1937 urged the Japanese military forces to adopt the sexual slavery system and intensify the building of comfort stations. They drafted girls of different ages from their homes to enslave them under the command of the Emperor who imposed his loyalty on the subjects otherwise they will face death. Those brothels were established in every Asian country the Japanese invaded and the enslaved women were mostly Koreans and others from Malaysia, Philippines, China, and Indonesia... etc. Yoshimi Yoshiaki, a Japanese historian, provided documents in his book *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II* (2000) as a proof of the existence of comfort stations where approximately 200,000 women were captivated as sexual slaves. Whether being falsely promised to work in factories, kidnapped or sold by the family, the victims went through a shared tragedy which was buried by the Japanese. By the end of the war, the Japanese killed most of the comfort women and burned the convictive files erasing all the traces of their crimes so that they will not be condemned internationally.

The surviving enslaved women nurtured their anguish with silence while the ghost of comfort stations kept haunting them. It was not until 1991 when a former comfort woman broke the wall of silence and revealed the ugly truth behind the Japanese occupation. The survivors' testimonies were denied by the Japanese government who wore the innocence mask in order to cover the war atrocities committed during World War II. This testimony encouraged other survivals to come out of the closet and let the world hear their voices while telling terrible stories about the enslavement and describing the unbearable pain that they endured for years. Comfort women gained international support and empathy but they suffered to get an official apology from the Japanese government which insisted on ignoring the fact of sexually enslaving women and forcibly keeping them in comfort stations. The lack of concrete evidence was the Japanese' excuse to free themselves from announcing an apology for breaking the military rules and committing crimes against humanity.

The end of the war marked the start of another journey for the comfort women who survived the inhumane treatments by the Japanese but it was tough for them to survive the disgrace and the harsh



accusations by the society. Therefore, the suffering was extended beyond the sexual enslavement to reach a different level of psychological torture. They had to swallow their agony to save what is left from their reputation and protect themselves from being further dissociated from the society. The survivors blamed not only the Japanese but the Korean government as well. Despite their awareness about the sexual exploitation that Korean women were going through, but they did not protect them from the colonizer fearing the stigmatization and caring more about the national pride. Consequently, the tragedy that these women undergo results in having psychological distress such as the post-traumatic stress disorder, low self-esteem, sense of loss and unworthiness. Instead of getting some support, they were judged by the unforgiving society which blames the victim instead of the wrong doer. This fact made their lives so hard to cope with the harsh criticism of people who considered them as prostitutes and refused to believe their innocence. The survivors were faced with extremely frightening conditions after the war which was challenging because the freedom from the Japanese did not end up as they had always dreamed of. Comfort women found themselves trapped in a world where no society accepted them.

3. Comfort Woman as a Refugee

In Okja Keller's novel *Comfort Woman* (1997), the main character Kim Soon Hyo was sold by her selfish sister after their parents' death to guarantee a dowry for her marriage "I was her dowry, sold like one the cows" (Keller, 1997, 18). The recruitment of Kim Soon Hyo to the comfort station marked her journey toward a future full of drastic changes and traumatic experiences. A new name, Akiko 41, was imposed on her by the Japanese who made sure to erase the comfort women's Korean identities and replace it by all what is Japanese. Initiating this transformation by giving them new Japanese names "I had no right to use the name I was born with. That girl was dead" (93), and forbidding the use of their native language otherwise they would be harshly punished and tortured. As female colonized subjects, comfort women were silenced under the Japanese colonial regime which deprived them from the right to rebel against the unjust treatments. Akiko 41 embodies what Gayatri Spivak termed as the subaltern in her "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1994). The subaltern represents women specifically who are oppressed and marginalized politically and socially. Under colonization, they are considered to be the "marginal, the underdeveloped, the periphery [and] the Other" (Hall, 1990, 227).

After escaping the comfort station, she marries a minister and flees to America. This marriage itself was a step which marked another start of Akiko's life, from a comfort woman to a minister's bride "you are born again... as a Christian, as a wife and as an American. Congratulations" (Keller, 1997, 104). At this stage, her name once again changes and becomes Akiko Bradely. Depending on the living circumstances, Soon Hyo found herself obliged to customize her identity to survive "hiding my true self... enabled me to survive in the recreation camp and in a new country" (153). According to Stuart Hall (1990), "Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. [...] they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power" (225). Soon Hyo keeps changing her identity due to the constant displacements and transformations that she endure during colonialism and immigration. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (2013) state that the "concepts of place and displacement demonstrate the very complex interaction of language, history and environment in the experience of colonised people and the importance of space and location in the process of identity formation" (197).

When she first moved to the US, she was unable to adjust to the new atmosphere and she had a tendency to preserve her traditions and refused to Americanize herself, "I wanted to taste the earth, metallic as blood, take it into my body so that my country would always be a part of me" (Keller, 1997, 104). Hence, Soon Hyo is a refugee immigrant since she changes her identity but she does not completely melt into the host society "you realize that you have no face and no place in this country" (110). This multiplicity of identity allows Soon Hyo to deal with her traumatized past which keeps haunting her "instead of hearing the broom or the water or the fat sucking glue on paper, my ears were filled with memories of the comfort camps" (64). However, the sense of confusion about who she really is can be noticed throughout the novel as she says: "I looked at my hands, trying to find a clue to my present identity, but as I looked, the hands melted, then dissolved into ash" (188). This ambiguity is a result of her rebirth of identity under each situation and her longing to her old self which she lost after being sexually enslaved during years "I was twelve when I was murdered, fourteen when I looked into the Yalu River and finding no face looking back at me, knew that I was dead" (15).

Many immigrants tend to construct multiple identities instead of having a unique and static identity. According to Bhabha, "it is in the emergence of the interstice - the overlap and displacement of domains of difference - that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural



value are negotiated” (emphasis in original, 2). Soon Hyo uses multiple selves to overcome her difficulties and rebel against the sexist and racial barriers she faces. Her physical appearance indicates her foreignness in a country where they do not accept the individual differences and they consider them inferior exotic and other. Even her husband tries to make her assimilate into the American society and to silence her from remembering her past “I ask you to protect our daughter, with your silence, from that shame” (Keller, 1997, 196). Her life changes when she gives birth to her American girl, Beccah, and she worked on her daughter’s strong feeling of belongingness to America so that she would not suffer from any sense of displacement and estrangement “When I was pregnant... I made tea with black dirt from the garden... I drank the earth, nourishing her within the womb, so that she would never feel homeless, lost... I rubbed that same earth across my nipples... she would know that I am, and will always be, her home” (113). For the sake of protecting Beccah from her foreignness, Soon Hyo attempted to adjust into the American society and make it her home “Induk told me to suck, to taste, to make this –the apartment, the city, the state, and America– home my own” (113). Despite the willingness of Soon Hyo to adjust into the American society, but she cannot fully belong there and become an American. Consequently, she creates her own third space where she escapes to the world of the spirits. This escapism permits her to gain back her subjectivity and voice which were lost since her recruitment to the comfort stations back in Korea. She breaks her silence by leaving a letter to Beccah so that she will learn about her mother’s past as a comfort woman “I know what I speak, for that is my given name. Soon Hyo, the true voice, the pure tongue... I speak of laying down for a hundred men” (195).

Conclusion

The issue of the multiplicity of identity was highlighted in this paper through the analysis of two different novels which vary in their time setting but still share the same struggles that third world female immigrants endure before and after immigration. The writers, Mukherjee and Keller, stressed the fluidity of identity and its impossibility to be fixed as it is subjected to external factors which boost the transformations of one’s identity whenever needed. They portrayed stories which are not far from real life, they showed us how much patriarchy affects third world women and how they are expected to peel off from their roots to seek acceptance in their new environment. Every character adopted a way to gain her voice and to overcome the displacement, dislocation and the psychological stress. The coping mechanism differs from one person to the other depending on the individual’s loss, replacement and the change of identities which mirrors the dilemma of female immigrants who suffer from exile.

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