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NOMADIC INSTABILITY IN THE LIVES OF JASMINE AND DEBBY DIMARTINO

NABASREE DATTA

Research Scholar

Department of English & Foreign Languages, Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences, SHIATS
Deemed University, Allahabad, U.P, e-mail:nabasreedatta@gmail.com



NABASREE DATTA

ABSTRACT

Bharati Mukherjee is an award winning Indian born American novelist. In her novels she mainly deals with the problems of immigrant life such as racial discrimination, cross-cultural conflict and identity crisis. Mukherjee creates identity crisis and a sense of nomadic instability in her novels *Jasmine* and *Leave It to Me* through the representation of the lives of Jasmine and Debby DiMartino respectively. The present study is focused on the comparative perspectives of nomadic instability, the basis and acuteness of identity crisis in the lives of Jasmine and Debby DiMartino. Both the protagonists travel frequently from place to place and this constant movement from place to place may be compared with the nomadic instability. Such a life of movement also generates an acute identity crisis. In the immigrants' lives identity crisis is a common phenomenon. They suffer from cross cultural conflicts and other immigration problems that lead, in maximum cases, to hyphenated identities and psychological turmoil. Both Jasmine and Debby have travelled from place to place like neo-nomads and experienced identity crisis of various kinds and degrees. Jasmine's move is towards adjustment with the American main stream culture while Debby's restlessness is related to the exploration of her genetic identity.

Keywords: *Jasmine*, *Leave It to Me*, Cross cultural conflict, Identity crisis, Nomadic instability.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* (1989)¹ is the saga of a rural Punjabi girl, Jyoti, who deliberately goes to America to fulfill the wish of her late husband. There she faces many difficulties as an immigrant, though finally, she can withstand these through assimilation to the foreign culture. Here, Jasmine, the main female character, travels several geographical locations. The continuous changing of her identity through repeated renaming conveys her sense of rootlessness and underlines her urge for a permanent identity. At this juncture, as an immigrant, Mukherjee gives importance to an Indian woman's uninterrupted struggles in America for assimilation into its mainstream culture. Jasmine's struggles, piqued by a depressing sense of

isolation all around, indicate the restless pursuit of a rootless person for an enduring identity in a new land. Samir Dayal describes Jasmine as “a perpetual nomad” who “shuttles between differing identities”². A traditional nomad roams or relocates place to place himself constantly in order to survive or according to the state of the pasturage or food supply or to learn about the surrounding environment within a known, defined geography, and limited space through a constructed path.

In the novel *Leave It to Me* (1997)³ the novelist gives importance to her protagonist’s problems of displacement, fluidity of identity and search for the genetic root. Revenge through violence also plays an important role here. The novelist includes revenge in the story of her novel as a way to find out the solution of the problem of loss of identity of the protagonist. In *Leave It to Me*, the protagonist, Debby DiMartino, is an orphan who is adopted and raised up by an Italian-American couple. Being haunted by the crisis of her own identity, she leaves her comfortable home and her loving Italian-American foster parents at the age of twenty three and decides, to find out her biological parents in order to get her real genetic identity in the society.

The aim of the present study is to explore the comparative perspectives of nomadic instability and the basis and acuteness of the identity crisis in the neo-nomadic lives of Jasmine and Debby DiMartino. The word 'nomad' proposes freedom, wandering, moving or roaming around and crossing man-made boundaries usually seasonally and often following a traditional route or circuit. In this study, the continuous wandering of Jasmine and Debby DiMartino and the stability of their movement are considered and compared with nomadic instability and at the same time they are compared with the neo-nomads. The neo-nomad aspires for freedom and expansion of his geographies for definite purposes. A neo-nomad explores, or forced to explore to build and recognize a comfortable place for him for a short span of time. Neo-nomads like victims of cross cultural encounters, and victims of globalization are also suddenly projected outside the realm of the known and the habitual and they are uprooted and disconnected. According to Yasmine Abbas:

A neo-nomad is a newborn nomad. He is someone that is not a complete nomad in that he has not achieved the development of his adaptation skills, meaning, learn a path, a way to recognize the environment or to explore the field he evolves in. The neo-nomad needs to build a sense of belonging, and at the same time, to move.⁴

The neo-nomads behave similarly to the traditional nomads. Both have no permanent abode and move from place to place, usually following economical reasons, or due to constraints. Both Jasmine and Debby have strong will-power and a definite purpose that lead them to start nomadic journeys. Therefore, both the protagonists of Mukherjee are with similar characteristics that perfectly qualify the neo-nomadic features.

II. Nomadic instability and the basis and acuteness of identity crisis in Jasmine’s life

The novel *Jasmine* is based on the themes of rootlessness and of search for identity in an alien land, the problems of adjustment between Eastern and Western traditions and the final absorption of an immigrant to her host country. This novel tells the story of a Panjabi rural girl, Jyoti, an Indian refugee who is empowered by the experiments of integration. The story opens with the prophecy of a village astrologer of Jyoti’s future widowhood and banishment. This is craftiness on the character to indicate the lifelong struggles of her protagonist. Jyoti marries Prakash Vih, an enthusiastic and liberal young man, in a court of law by refusing her grandmother’s advice to marry a widower. After marriage Jyoti comes from her village Hasnapur to the city of Jullundhar and is christened by her husband as ‘Jasmine’, a new kind of city woman. Jasmine always encourages her husband to secure admission in some American Institute of Technology and agrees to go to America which is a land of opportunities and prospects for most of Indians. But this dream is shattered while her husband, Prakash, is murdered in a bomb blast by Khalsa Lions on the eve of their migration. After the death of her husband, Jasmine desperately went to America with illegal documents to fulfill her husband’s mission without caring for consequences of her action, keeping aside all the miseries of the life of a widow. It may be said that her nomadic life is started after Prakash’s death. She ponders over her fate:

We are the outcastes and deportees, strange pilgrims visiting outlandish shrines, landing at the end of tarmacs, ferried in old army trucks where we are roughly handled and take to roped-off corners of waiting rooms where surly, barely wakened customs guards await their bribe. We are dressed in

shreds of national costumes, out of season, the witted plumage of intercontinental vagabondage.

We asked only one thing: to be allowed to land; to pass through; to continue.⁶

For her daring decision Jasmine loses her chastity on the way of her journey to America. She was raped by the captain of the ship on which she was travelling. She murders the captain and put her first step on the new land as an illegal immigrant. Incidentally she meets an old American lady, Lillian Gordon who provides her shelter and changes her from an Indian girl to an American girl by grooming her in American manners. Lillian Gordon calls her in the name of Jazzy, a Western name. Jasmine says about her transformation "I checked myself in the mirror, shocked at the transformation. Jazzy in a T- shirt, tight cords, and running shoes"⁷. Through Lillian Gordon's help she initiates her first amalgamation into the Western culture. Now Jasmine's nomadic life starts for survival in a foreign land. From Gordon's house Jasmine moves to New York. After that she visits the house of Mr. Vadhera, the former teacher of her husband, in Flushing, Queens. Vadheras are conservative by nature and they are opposed to the traditions of their host country. They are also unwilling to accept Jasmine, the widow in the form of 'Jazzy' in an American outfit. A white sari is considered to be her proper dress. Jasmine says: "I could not admit that I had accustomed myself to American clothes. American clothes disguised my widow-hood"⁸. Vadheras' conservative outlook towards this Indian widow terrifies her. She states her experiences in Flushing thus "In Flushing I felt immured. An imaginary brick wall topped with barbed wire cut me off from the past and kept me from breaking in to the future. I was a prisoner doing unreal time"⁹. She also says, "Flushing, with all its immigrant services at hand, frightened me"¹⁰. In an alien land Jasmine does not want to live the life of an Indian widow that will prevent her from achieving her goal of Americanization. She says: "I wanted to distance myself from everything Indian, everything Jyoti-like"¹⁰.

Only after five months Jasmine deserts the Vadhera family and sets for her another nomadic journey for self- identity in the American society. Jasmine in the name of 'Jase' restarts her life as a day mummy of the adopted child of Taylor and Wylie in an apartment on Claremont Avenue, Manhattan. Here she gets much opportunity to mix herself into the crowd of her new land. She becomes more confident of her ability to communicate in English. Jase falls in love with Taylor. When Taylor's wife, Wylie departs him for another man, Jase becomes happy to think that now she can achieve her identity in the American society by marrying Taylor. She feels happy that her crisis for an identity in the mainstream of American society at last may come to an end and she is going to erase her identity as an Indian immigrant soon. She declares, "I had landed and was getting rooted"¹¹. Jasmine spends her best two years of her life with Taylor in Manhattan. According to Pushpa N. Parekh: "This period in Jasmine's life is the most restful and comforting, emotionally and psychologically..."¹². The sudden appearance of Sukhwinder, the killer of Jasmine's husband, frightens her that he may harm Taylor and his child. She moves to Iowa leaving behind her happy life with Taylor. It is Jasmine's fate that renders her a nomad. In Iowa she re-starts her life with a banker, Bud Ripplemayer, who gives her a name - Jane, and carries his child in her womb without marrying him. But when she gets a chance to re-unite with her former lover Taylor, she leaves Bud. Jasmine's escape from Taylor to Bud and her renaming from Jase to Jane suggests her slow but firm immersion into the mainstream American society and her final decision to go with Taylor shows her ultimate Americanization. Through the heroine's restless nomadic journeys to the different geographical locations like Punjab, Florida, New York, Iowa and finally California and her continuous process of changing her names like -Joyti, Jasmine, Jazzy, Jase, and Jane which suggests a continuous shift of her identity, the novelist gives emphasis on an immigrant woman's sense of acute rootlessness and her continuous struggle for a new identity as the member of her host country. As an immigrant she "struggles for adjustment and quest for new identity in an alien land"¹⁹. Jasmine very carefully determines her every step and uses every opportunity optimally to reach her goal and for this she has to break out of the shackles of caste, gender and family traditions. Her contact with Taylor and Bud affirms her position in the mainstream American society. Jasmine "assimilates with the culture of new land and comes out as a winner of life"¹⁹.

III. Nomadic instability and the basis and acuteness of identity crisis in Debby DiMartino's life

In *Leave It to Me*, Bharati Mukherjee tells the story of a twenty-three-year old young woman named Debby DiMartino, short name Debby, born in India and raised up as an adopted child by American parents. Mukherjee introduces her protagonist as: "a tall girl in a small school, a beautiful girl in a plain family, an

exotic girl in a very American town".¹³ Though she is very beautiful but her story is full of pangs and sufferings. Being an adopted child, she is always preoccupied with the feeling of rootlessness. The identity of a child is usually determined from the moment of birth. Communal identity is more important than individual identity. Debby in *Leave It to Me* realizes that her individual identity is incomplete without knowledge of the parental identity. As an orphan, Debby has no clear idea about which race she originally belongs to and she also cannot claim her nationality as an American, Pakistani, or a Vietnamese. So she wants to find out her biological parents as they can only affirm her social identity. She has a lot of bitterness towards her bio-parents: "lousy people who'd considered me lousier still and who'd left me to be sniffed at by wild dogs, like a carcass in the mangy shade".¹⁴

In the DiMartino family Debby gets shelter, love, affection and a social identity of an adopted child. But she thinks that her life is not stable there and feels herself as an outsider among the DiMartinos. She says: "You're just on loan to the DiMartinos Treat them nice, pay your rent but keep your bags packed"¹⁵. She always thinks herself as an unwanted child in this world. She says: "I was just a garbage sack thrown out on the hippie trail"¹⁶. The sufferings of the protagonist on account of her rootlessness become clear through the lines below: "Who but a foundling has the moral right to seize not just a city, but a neighborhood, and fashion a block or two of it into home? When you inherit nothing, you are entitled everything".¹⁷

In search of her bio-parents she becomes restless and travels from place to place and her repeated shifting may be compared with the nomadic journey. The feeling of an unwanted child in the world creates a big void in her mind about her real identity and she becomes very aggressive to find out her bio-parents at any cost. This acuteness of identity crisis and strong desire to know the parental identity are the basis and internal force of her nomadic journeys.

In search of her real identity, Debby desperately leaves her comfortable home and her loving Italian-American foster parents. *Debby* travels throughout America. In San Francisco, Debby envies the people who have their communal identity. There she comes in contact with a group of old ex-hippies and a mentally misbalanced Vietnam Veteran from whom she gets some information about her Hippie parents. From San Francisco she arrives at Laxmipur, Devigaon, India and the orphanage where she was raised by the Gray Sisters after being deserted by her real parents.

For investigation she hires Fred Pointer, a detective, who provides her the information that Jess Du Pree is to be her supposed bio-mom who is the Hippie follower of a sex-age guru, and her father Romeo Hawk Haque is a serial killer. The deserted child, Debby, of this Hippie couple is saved by the nuns and is adopted by Di-Martino family. After this revelation of the truth, she, instead of thinking any happy family re-union, wants to take revenge on her parents. She expresses her feelings about her real parents thus: "The man and woman who'd given me life were as strange to me as honeymooners from Mars"¹⁸.

To stay in contact and to understand Jess, she joins the office of Jess. But Jess Du Pree never confesses her relationship with Debby. Jess says "I've never been pregnant"¹⁸. But Romeo claims Debby as his daughter. She kills Stark Swann, Beth and Larry, the friends of her bio-mom, to take revenge on her and to get justice. The sudden arrival of Romeo Hawk in San Francisco arises more complications in Debby's life. Romeo wants to take revenge on Jess as he thinks that Jess is responsible for his imprisonment in India. Jess Du Pree is murdered in the hands of Romeo. To take revenge of the murder of her bio-mom, she murders Romeo Hawk and surrenders herself to the police. It is the tragedy of Debby's life that she found her bio-parents but she could never get accepted as a daughter. She consequently becomes the murderer of her father. At last, Debby realizes that violence cannot be the only way in the war of justice and through it one cannot gain anything.

IV. Comparative perspectives: Jasmine Vs Debby DiMartino

Jasmine, the strongest protagonist of Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* establishes herself as a new woman by gradual changing her personality and identity through her nomadic expeditions. Jasmine survives against ever changing situations in an alien land due to her strong mentality, adaptability and fervent will-power^{19,20,21}. Bharati Mukherjee has created her women characters as a contender for fulfilling identity and *Jasmine* validates the concept of a fluid identity linked to nomadic instability.

Debby was born to a hippie parents and was adopted in India at the age of two by an American family of Italian origin. As a foster child she always feels insecure and it haunts her like nightmare at every moment and she thinks of herself as an unwanted member in the DiMartino family. She wants to know her own biological origin. The novel shows the protagonist's predicament that has originated from her acute quest for true bio-parental identity and that leads her to nomadic journeys across countries.

From the above discussions we get a comparative perspective between Jasmine and Debby DiMartino. Both the protagonists, Jasmine and Debby, are neo-nomad and perform several shifts in their nomadic expeditions. But the nature of the shifts is different. Jasmine immigrates to America with forged documents to accomplish her husband's wishes and to perform *Sati* in America but Debby has to emigrate from India as an adopted child of DiMartino family. Jasmine's struggles and sufferings as immigrant starts right at the beginning of her expedition and in course of her daring journey she losses her chastity while Debby up to 23 years has adjusted herself in the society as an adopted child but the acute contemplation of lack of genetic identity makes her restless and she starts her nomadic journeys in search of her bio-parents leaving DiMartino family. Through nomadic journeys Jasmine achieves several intermediate temporary identities in new locations by changing name and one may accept it as immigration phases before final settlement with a new identity in host country. Jasmine has given more importance to her transformation towards Americanization by optimal utilization of available opportunities around and simultaneously by keeping distance from the old country and by rejecting the traditional values especially Indian widowhood. Debby has gained identity as an adopted child and culture of the host country from the beginning of her adoption and immigration but she felt insecure and her identity crisis compels her to leave happy DiMartino family. At the end of their nomadic journeys and transformations, Jasmine attains American identity, while Debby establishes her bio-parental identity but unfortunately, her mother does not want to accept her as a daughter though her father accepts her. Jasmine becomes the winner and is satisfied with her American identity, while Debby becomes unhappy even after exploring her genetic identity and turns herself as a destructive heroine by taking revenge on her mother's killer who happens to be her genetic father.

V. Conclusion

In conclusion it may be said that both Jasmine and Debby are neo-nomad and they have experienced nomadic instability and identity crisis in their diasporic lives though the nature and acuteness of identity crisis are different. Jasmine's every step was towards assimilation into mainstream American society and she became successful at the end of her journey whereas Debby travelled all along in search for her bio-parental identity and explored the ugliness of life.

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