Women in the Land of “Melting Pot”: A Comparative Study between Bharati Mukherjee’s Jasmine and Sandra Cisneros’ Esperanza

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Abstract—Women writers have made remarkable strides in the arena of literature and generously put across their aggressions, struggles, afflictions, and also their successful experiences in their writings. Of these, the immigrant women have reshaped and redefined the literature in a significant way because they suffered from the ‘twin burden’ of being immigrant and female. Among the immigrant writers Bharati Mukherjee an Indian born American and Sandra Cisneros a Mexican-American have achieved a high water mark in the literary canvass. They tell the tales of those immigrants whose stories go untold. Mukhejee’s Jasmine and Cisneros’ The House on Mango Street picture the struggle of women in an alien land, relate the cost they pay to create a perceptible existence in a strange land. The protagonists of these two novels, Jasmine and Esperanza constantly reinvents themselves, modifying their identities as their American experience goes on and as they acquire consciousness of what it means to start a new life in a new country. These two characters make me feel the strength of women, open a new horizon for me, which is why I have decided to work on this title. In my paper I am going to explore the idea of “melting pot”, identity crisis, sense of belonging, sexual abuse, Jasmine and Esperanza’s immigrant experience, their attitude towards their own community, and their determination to create a new identity and new sense of belonging to the “land of opportunity”.

Keywords—melting pot, sense of belonging, immigrant crisis.

Immigrant experience serves as a fertile literary ground for the writers. They grip the reader’s psyche with heartrending accounts of the aspiring outsiders. Over the course of her thirty-year creative and critical career, Bharati Mukherjee has energetically been engaged in redefining American national identity from the perspective of immigration. To discover, create, and retrieve America’s multicultural myths and histories, Mukherjee rejects the expatriate’s nostalgia. She represents immigration through the logic of transformation. Jasmine in Bharati Mukherjee’s Jasmine, for instance, begins her journey travelling through the underbelly of the immigrant trade route on forged papers, through the tiered bunks on the trawlers out of Europe, and ends up metamorphosing into a creature who is infatuated by the promise of America.

Throughout Cisneros’ life, her Mexican-American mother, her Mexican father, her six brothers, and she would move between Mexico City and Chicago, never allowing her much time to get settled in any one place. Cisneros’ writing has been shaped by her experiences. A sense of shifting she has experienced in the earlier stage of her life and which is also reflected in her matchless character Esperanza. Cisneros by herself felt the life of an immigrant and voices her suppressed and agonized experience through the character Esperanza Cordero. She writes in her introduction to The House on Mango Street: “Because I was unsure of my own adult voice and often censored myself, I made up another voice, Esperanza’s…” (Cisneros xxiv). The House on Mango Street was awarded the Before Columbus American Book Award in 1985. Like Jasmine, Esperanza cherishes the wish to construct a meaningful identity in America through assimilation.

According to Sonya Dutta Choudhury: “Immigrant literature may seem to occupy a curious midway world, weaving a tapestry that is at once familiar and far away. Yet, it is a validation of the American way of life, with assimilation being seen as coming of age”. Phillip Lopate in his article “Immigrant Fiction: Exploring an American Identity” says, “in these novels, the immigrant experience often begins in a spirit of wild, open-ended adventure, as their protagonists fling themselves halfway around the world, breaking dramatically with past lives to settle in a big country full of promise, though soon enough the sphere contracts to an urban ghetto or small town, where they are thrown into an introverted,
culture jasmine incorporates some eastern habits among her western neighborhoods: “people are getting used to some of my concoctions, even if they make a show of fanning their mouths. They get disappointed if there is not something Indian on the table” (Mukherjee 9).

Jasmine and The house on Mango Street relate the tale of two immigrants from different continents. Jasmine from India and Esperanza a Mexican, their diverse origins play no role in their world of longing. Both of them repudiate the imposed norms, roles; yearn to locate a place of their own in an alien land. Their much desired metamorphosis was not rosy. To realize their dream they face many hurdles, for being women and immigrant.

Esperanza and Jasmine sound similar in their audacity, in craving a new world with buoyancy.

Esperanza Cordero lives in an impoverished Chicano ghetto, defies living a life of isolation and confinement. She fights against the socialization process imposed on Chicanas, rejects the model presented to her—“but I have decided not to grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on threshold waiting for the ball and chain” (Cisneros88). She in a self-affirming way declares herself as a rebel—“I have begun my own quiet war” (Cisneros 89).

Again, in Jasmine we see the same dissenter spirit—“my grandmother may have named me Joyoti, Light, but in surviving I was already Jane, a fighter and adapter” (Mukherjee 40).

Esperanza and Jasmine shuttle between identities. Esperanza’s name, in "My Name" represents her most basic struggle with her Spanish-American identity. Esperanza states, “In English my name means hope, in Spanish it means too many letters” (Cisneros 10). She also reveals that she is named after her grandmother, who like Esperanza was born in the "Chinese year of the horse which is supposed to be bad luck if you're born female because Chinese like Mexicans don't like their women strong” (Cisneros 10). After this realization, Esperanza longs for a new name and identity. She states, "I would like to baptize myself under a new name more like the real me” (Cisneros 11). This preference ultimately forces Esperanza to leave Mango Street, in search of a more promising future. Esperanza also struggles to find her identity by overcoming the stereotypes which other women in the community exemplify. Sally, an older girl on Mango Street, introduces Esperanza to sexuality and the supposed glamorous myth associated with femininity. However, after her own rape, Esperanza sees Sally, who falls into the same trap as most of the other women on Mango Street, as someone who "got married too young and not ready, but married just the same” (Cisneros 101). Esperanza does not want to become trapped in the same situation in which Sally finds herself and uses Sally’s situation as a learning experience and a negative model of
Jasmine sets off an uncertain journey to a new world of fulfillment. Jasmine embarks on a perilous journey to a new world of fulfill her husband’s dream. With a forged passport she sets off the journey, she sleeps in tiered bunks, under the tarp, faces the death itself. She states the sufferings of illegal immigrant—“we are the outcasts and deportees, strange pilgrim visiting the outlandish shrines, landing at the end of tarmacs, ferried in old army trucks where we are roughly handled and taken to roped-off corners of waiting rooms where surly, barely wakened custom guards await their tribute” (Mukherjee 103). Esperanza reveals the feeling of the native people towards the immigrant—“those who don’t know any better came into our neighborhood scared. They think we’re dangerous. They think we will attack them with shiny knives” (Cisneros 28).

Women are always victim of male oppression. In men defined world there is no sanctuary for women. We find Esperanza who is determined not to live the lives of other ghetto women, who does not cross the street like other girls, straight ahead, straight eyes, she also faces the sexual abuse—“the one who grabbed me by the arm, he wouldn’t me let me go…only his dirty fingers nail against my skin…” (Cisneros 100). Jasmine sets off an uncertain journey to accomplish her husband dream. At the very outset her dream gets demolished by the monstrous Half-face. While Jasmine and Esperanza try to explore a new horizon, their feminine identities impede them to bloom.

“The land of opportunity” fascinates people with its charming American dream life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Jasmine and Esperanza both nourish and aspire to grasp this dream. Esperanza never feels at home within her barrio. For her it was confinement, a source of anguish, alienation. The “sad red house” on Mango Street makes her feel like nothing. The house on Mango Street is a heavy burden that Esperanza must carry. She is ashamed of it “no, this isn’t my house and shake my head as if shaking could undo the year I’ve lived here. I don’t belong. I don’t ever want to come from here” (Cisneros 28).

She does not like Mango Street, a great big yard and grass, who does not cross the street like other girls, straight ahead, straight eyes, she also faces the sexual abuse—“the one who grabbed me by the arm, he wouldn’t me let me go…only his dirty fingers nail against my skin…” (Cisneros 100). Jasmine sets off an uncertain journey to accomplish her husband dream. At the very outset her dream gets demolished by the monstrous Half-face. While Jasmine and Esperanza try to explore a new horizon, their feminine identities impede them to bloom.

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Both Jasmine and Esperanza foster the dream of assimilation but with a different attitude towards their origin. Jasmine wishes to cut off her Indian self. She wants to forget her Indian past. Her genuine foreignness frightens Bud. She wants to distance herself from Indian people, attitudes. She is different from her adopted son Du who has kept in contact with his community of origin, “My transformation has been genetic: Du was hyphenated” (Mukherjee222). On the contrary, Esperanza desires to be assimilated to serve her community, “They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind” (Cisneros 110).

The House on Mango Street and Jasmine relate the histories of economic and physical violences that fuel immigration and those immigrants face upon reaching the New World. Protagonists of these novels illuminate the making of American mind. Overlooking their vulnerable feminine identity Jasmine and Esperanza carve out their way to their dreamland. They listen to the voice of their heart and tread the untrodden path. They make us feel the vigour of women and encourage us to touch our long cherished dream.

REFERENCES