

CULTURAL CONFLICT AND IDENTITY CRISIS IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S JASMINE

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ABSTRACT

In the post-colonial global interface, where identities and cultures are constantly defined, explored as well as appreciated for connecting at a macro-level, processes such as globalisation and cultural assimilations have emerged to occupy the centre stage and shape the new world narrative. At the same time, varied level of confusion and noise across conflicting cultures brings identity crisis forward that leads to the construction of a homogenous identity. It is in the light of this gradual culture-shift, where cross cultural assimilation and immigrant literature, in recent times, has increasingly unravelled the emerging identity conflicts by way of a protagonist.

KEYWORDS: Identity Crisis, Cultural Conflict, Cultural Assimilation, Bharati Mukherjee, Jasmine, Immigration, Globalization

INTRODUCTION

Against the above backdrop, the paper particularly focuses on the study of cross-cultural conflict and the final search of identity of the Indian immigrant women Jasmine, who tries to tackle the problem of loss of culture and endeavour to assume a new identity in America. The paper underscores how creative imagination of an individual is repeatedly influenced and inspired by cultural conflict, despite her faith and pride in the Indian society and civilisation. The study of the literature of diaspora calls for a need to analyse how the geographical boundaries including an old country, land or nation still would have some claim or hold left on those who have migrated to another place and this may also include communities who were enslaved, those who chose to immigrate for reasons related to labour or trade, those who were dispersed for political or imperial reasons as well as those who are in cultural exile – a more loose term to describe individuals or communities who are in some sense considered to be “transnational” – living between, alongside or in several communities.

The Post-Colonial Diaspora

Indian born writers like Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Salman Rushdie and VS Naipul and many others have focused on the world of immigration in the post-colonial era, which deals with issues and discussions, related to diaspora, which happened after the Indian independence in 1947. More specifically, taking diasporic approach to what is often called ethnic literature calls for the language and theory of post-colonialism to be applied to the immigrant experience. Post colonialism in literature includes the study of theory and literature related to the coloniser – colonised experience. Edward Said's book *Orientalism* (1978) is considered to be the foundational work on which post-colonial theory later developed. Said's book *Orientalism* covers historical evidences and arguments latest to the time of writing. *Orientalism* exposed the discourse which was being constructed by the west to overshadow the east. *Orientalism*, which was supposed to be an authoritative body of knowledge about Orientals – Asia and parts of Africa, according to Said was a supreme example of the “construction of others” with the help of which the west not only ontologically and epistemologically created knowledge

about East but also used such a biased knowledge to rule over the East. Edward also suggests that all cultures have a view about other nations or cultures that might be interesting and harmless. *Orientalism* discourse was then transferred from country to country and from political leader to author. Said later developed and modified his ideas in his book *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). The post-colonial diaspora of the mid to the late twentieth century forms an important dimension of the post-colonial engagement with the globalisation of cultures.

With regard to an individual's "identity", it has a personal as well as social aspects attached to it; both of which have the potential of becoming more and more complex courtesy the interactive relationships between various cultures of our post-colonial and modern world. Shaped by the dominant powers across both economic and cultural spectrums, globalisation tends to create a standard identity discouraging the differences. As an upshot of the on-going clash between conflicting cultures or opposing powers and interests, postcolonial or globalised values are likely to be decentered as well as fragmented and, consequently, individuals that we come across are composed of not one but of several, at times contradictory, identities.

Bharati Mukherjee

Bharati Mukherjee is a diasporic fiction writer who holds the migratory experience and has enriched expatriate literary writings. In fact, her experience as an expatriate forms the main source of her writings. Her novels also deal with the issue of identity, the notion of belonging, the feeling of alienation and rootlessness, migrations, dislocations and relocations. Her novels are chiselled by her diasporic identity, immigrant experiences as well as her personal experience of being a woman. In her novels, Mukherjee represents India as a postcolonial writer who affiliates with the West and today she is one of the most acclaimed authors of the postcolonial immigrant experience in America.

A familiar voice in the Indian diaspora, Bharati Mukherjee depicts the cross-cultural conflicts faced by her through the woman characters in her novels. She herself found it difficult to adopt the culture, custom and traditions of foreign nations, which she depicts through her female protagonist's cultural crisis. The conflict between western and eastern cultures including the related ideologies and its impact in the life of the protagonist is strikingly expressed in her novel *Jasmine* (1989). After her immigration in the US, the protagonist confronts a multicultural society that ultimately leads to her evolution and transformation into a new identity. *Jasmine* is one of the most popular works of Bharati Mukherjee. The novel is plotted in the contemporaneous scenario and revolves around a young Indian woman, Jasmine who emigrated to the United States and is trying to adapt to the American culture and changes identities several times in order to be able to survive. The novel was first published in 1989 and depicts Mukherjee's exultant manner of violent adaptation of identities by way of sweeping confrontations in the dominant culture.

Jasmine

In short, *Jasmine* is the story of a Punjabi teenaged girl named Jyoti, born in a small extremism-infested village of Punjab and gets transformed into identities of Jasmine, Jazzy, Jase and Jane through her journey from a village in India to the metropolitans of the US. Her transformational traverse is marked by widowhood, illicit documents, murder, rape and a determined zeal to endure everything circumstances threw at her. In other words, the novel narrates the search of a woman for her true and un-fragmented identity and includes the transformations she experiences optimistically enveloped by the positivity.

As the protagonist, Jasmine leaves her country for the US to fulfil her desires and realise the dream of her husband

and in search for her self-independence and truer identity in the US, she struggles hard to achieve it and ultimately realises that self-independence has got little to do with being an Indian or an American but to be at peace with oneself. It is against the above backdrop the unanimity between the First and Third World is portrayed in the treatment of women as subordinate to men in both the countries. The plot moves as a story of a mid-teenaged girl suddenly widowed at the age of seventeen. She shifts her immediate world from India to America in search of a new life and hope. It is a tale of dislocation and relocation as the protagonist continually sheds lives to move into newer roles and responsibilities. The metaphorical quest of the woman protagonist starts with Jyoti of India where she fights against the role that was prepared for her by the traditional customs and patriarchal system of her homeland.

In this novel, the author has dramatized the mechanism and evolution of westernisation, Americanisation in particular, by underscoring young Indian girl's experiences of suffering and accomplishments in her attempt to forge a new identity for herself. The story is recounted from a first-person's standpoint by the female protagonist, who has to undergo multiple identity transformations in her quest for self-empowerment and contentment. Steeped in violence, Mukherjee uses the movielike practices of flashback and cross-cutting to fuse Jasmine's past and present. The author has created an exotic and unexpected heroine out of Jasmine; true to the many worlds she lives in.

Still a teenager, when Jasmine gets unexpectedly widowed, she seems destined to a life of trauma and distress living in a quiet isolation of a small Indian village where she was born. But her desires and determination propels her into a larger and more dangerous but possibly a more evolved and better world. The novel advances with the twenty-four-year-old narrator, Jane, living as the live-in partner of Bud Ripplemeyer, aged fifty four years, a banker based at Iowa in the US, who with the help of flashback, retraces her story to her childhood in Hasanpur, a village in the state of Punjab in India where she was born as Jyoti, the unwanted fifth child in a poor Hindu family.

The story opens with an astrologer's prediction about Jyoti's lifetime widowhood when she was just seven years of age. Jyoti is portrayed to be an ambitious character with fighting spirit in a patriarchal society that is part of the Indian culture. She is portrayed as a determined girl. "She was then only seven and shouted, no! You are a crazy old man. You don't know what my future holds!" (3). Determined to fight her destiny, Jyoti begins to empower herself through learning English, for "to want English was to want more than you had been given at birth, it was to want the world." With interests and ambitions more than that of an average girl, she intends to continue her education aiming to become a doctor and make her own decisions in life ahead unlike the village girls who are "like cattle" and follow "whichever way you lead them" (39). The initial conflict Jyoti faces is the one between the dominant patriarchal society and the modern city life she aims for.

Jasmine's another noteworthy transformation commences at fourteen years of young age when she marries Prakash Vihh, an engineering student as well as an urban man who believes in equality of both sexes and didn't foresee a submissive role of an Indian wife. "To break off the past," Prakash rechristens her to Jasmine and gradually shapes her to occupy a new role for herself and become an urban woman. He then embeds the American dream in her mind and soon both start planning to leave for America and live a new life. In a way Prakash gave her what she looked for. He firmly held the belief that "there's no room in modern India for feudalism" (69) and rejected the traditional concept of living in a large family life and asked his wife to call him by his first name in striking contrast to Indian belief. He wanted to do a Professor Higgins on Jyoti, to create a lady out of a flower girl, intended to transform Jyoti into an ideal, modern woman of India: "Pygmalion wasn't a play I'd seen or read then, but I realize now how much of Professor Higgins there was in my

husband. He wanted to break down the Jyoti I'd been in Hasnapur and make me a new kind of city woman. To break off the past, he gave me a new name: Jasmine. He said that you are small and sweet and heady, my Jasmine. You'll quicken the whole world with your perfume.' Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttled between identities'' (70). Then the first major tragedy of her life strikes when Prakash gets assassinated and becomes a victim to the Sikh extremists' movement.

Determined Jasmine now decides to go alone to the US to realise her dream. She thought that since Prakash had created Jasmine out of a Jyoti, so Jasmine should achieve ambitions of Prakash. Here we get to see her strength and an extraordinary determination of Jasmine, who decides to move on an unpredicted journey to a new world. She seeks help of her brothers in order to prepare an illegal document to enter the US. Yet another tragedy besets when she gets raped by the captain of the ship on her very first day in the US. As a woman of India origin, the protagonist considers it be a gross damage to herself as according to ethnic culture chastity is often considered to be the most precious among all the wealth harboured by a woman. Being robbed of her chastity, she tries to kill herself. Jasmine falls back on her native culture and pray to the figure of Ganpati to give her "the strength to survive, long enough to kill myself"(116).

Seeking to revenge and punish the half-faced man for making a Hindu widow impious, she adorns the Goddess Kali and kills her rapist with her destructive energies. As she murders the horrific half-faced man, Jasmine vacates the motel after which she luckily meets Lillian Gordon, a sort of supporter of unlawful immigrants who later organises her meeting with Professor Vadhera who had also played a key role in her husband's admission to the US. At Florida, her saviour Gordon complains to her that the shoes she is wearing reveal her culture, "Undocumented aliens wear boxy shoes with ambitious heels,"(132). Lillian helps Jasmine adorn a new identity calls her Jazzy before sending a word of introduction to the Vadheras.

Now putting up in Florida along with the Vadheras, Jasmine faces amazement upon finding the Vadhera family's everyday struggle against the western culture in maintenance of their identity as an Indian family. It becomes hard for her to decipher as to why the family is trying so hard in maintaining their Indian cultural-identity in a country which is alien to them. Although, the Vadheras sympathetically give her space inside their family but she gets the treatment of a typical helpless widow who is not entitled to live her life the way she wants to. Often she found herself being forced to wear saris just as the widows are expected to in India. Her latest identity as a typical widow irritates her no end as she mulls to part with this lifestyle and affirms, "I wanted to distance myself from everything Indian, everything Jyoti-life". When the going gets tough, Jasmine decides to walk away from the conservative Vadheras. She then relocates herself to Manhattan in the hope of getting liberated from the Indian culture and customs that had imprisoned and enveloped her even in a new country.

At Manhattan, she found herself at peace with an American family, comprising Taylor, his wife Wylie and their adopted daughter Duff, who keeps her as a caretaker with them. Here she begins to blend herself with the western consumerist society and culture by adopting the dress-up and outlook of a young American woman. Even though, Jasmine tries to assimilate herself in the western culture, she continues to possess a soft corner for Indian customs and values in her mind. Such occurrences with respect to the Indian culture and traditional customs are noted to be spontaneous as well as frequent. Such an assumption comes to the fore when she discovers that Duff is their unnatural and an adopted child.

Later as Wylie decides to leave Taylor for her new found love – Stuart and seeks real happiness, Jasmine is in for yet another culture shock. She then recognises that in American consumerist society and culture nothing is permanent, not even the human relationship. As expected by now, Jasmine's contentment at Manhattan is short-lived. Even though, she is

happy with her life babysitting Duff but then her past flashbacks to the deeds of Sukhi, her husband's murderer. The very thought of Sukhwinder, the "Khalsa Lion" and the killer of Prakash, makes her feel restless. On the pretext of saving the duo from the religious extremists, she decides to shift to Iowa where another role awaits her. At Iowa, she made friends with Bud Ripplemayer, a banker who assigns her a newer life and gives her a new name and identity as his Jane.

Jane now enters into a live-in relationship, considered to be against the society in India, with her newfound love in the banker. As the couple begins to live together, Jane's acceptance of western culture and her willing assimilation into it becomes apparent. Subsequently, as Jane gets impregnated against her wish, she begins to get a guilty feeling against the pretext of her inherited cultural values. The enraging conflict between Indian cultural values and American customs occupies a centre stage by now in the flow of the story. We observe two different facets of a girl who had earlier committed a murder of a man who had violated her chastity and now willingly chooses to enter into a live-in relationship and even carries his child in her womb.

Still going strong in her relationship with Bud, Jane keeps her communication with Taylor open. Later on, when Taylor pleases her over to come with him and get settled at California, she found herself to be a puzzled lady and is not able to decide on her options. In a quagmire, she is now caught between the old-fashioned dutifulness towards the helpless Bud and her residual affection towards Taylor and Duff that splits her into two equally important choices of life according to her innate and native cultural values. Following her inner voice, finally she decides to leave Bud for Taylor. Having shed the garment of her past life, she is now free to live and make her own decisions. "I am not choosing between men, I am caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness. A caregiver's life is a good life, a worthy life. What am I to do?" (240). Her ultimate decision reflects on the assimilated aspects of both cultures when she determines to give more importance to herself than anyone else.

DISCUSSIONS

The story relates the journey as well as the metamorphosis of a young immigrant from rural India. In just a few years of time, Jyoti transforms herself to Jasmine, Jase and to Jane; merrily impregnated by a middle-aged Iowa banker and becomes an adoptive mother of a Vietnamese refugee too. Jasmine's metamorphosis with its abrupt upheavals but slow evolutionary paces illustrates the making of an American living being. The shift in her identity from being Jyoti to Jasmine to Jane to Jase is symptomatic of the death of one personality and an emergence of a new one without any perceived negative implications. The protagonist does not see her "Indian-ness as a fragile identity to be preserved against obliteration, now it is seen as a set of fluid identities to be celebrated" (5).

Throughout the story in the Americas, Jasmine is unremittingly striving to create a truer identity for herself in order to be absorbed by the American culture. This is viewed as a struggle for her as she often reflects of being torn between her old culture and latest one. Quite a lot of her old accustomed ideas and habits remain with her as she tries to adapt to the newer and foreign ones. Although Jasmine feels lost at times, she is portrayed as a strong as well as a determined mind. She is never shown to be giving up in fight for her true independence and identity.

At the point of intersection between her native land and a foreign country that seem to have overran the sheltered zone comprising her feelings and affection, the portrait of Mukherjee's protagonist becomes particularly interesting. As the author admits in an interview with VrindaNabar published in the July 09, 1989 edition of the Times of India, "I am in fact writing about America more than about dark-complexioned immigrants. My focus is on the country how it is changing

minute by minute. My story explores the encounter between the mainstream American culture and the new one formed by the migrant stream. I am really writing about the joining of two cultures. Many expatriate writers are destroyed by their duality, I personally feel nourished by it' (17).

In her novel *Jasmine* by Bharati Mukherjee, the protagonist is portrayed to be embodying the realistic shape of human spirit who has attained empowerment as well. Not only she but her actions and reactions equally affected the Americans whom she interfaced or came into contact with. By way of her writings, Mukherjee is able to take on a positive viewpoint on the idea of transition from one set of surroundings or cultures to another. At the same time, this perspective allows immigrant readers to remain hopeful about their involvements and ambitions. Deepika Bahri in her essay "Always Becoming: Narratives of Nation and Self in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*" captures the interrelationship of women, America and movement by applying the narrative of dislocation and cultural hybridity, but she also does not take in to account the major role played by cultural factors and forces in determining the course and career of these women protagonists.

The author has created a fine line between the characters of Jyoti and Jasmine in India and other identities enveloping her protagonist based in America. The book becomes an amalgamation of two sub-stories or cultures from two different worlds. Taking the discussion forward, it would be acceptable to argue that the India part of the novel is about Jyoti's survival under the scrutiny of old-fashioned patriarchy and associated customs or values ranging from tradition to modern, whereas, the America part of the book talks about the cultural dilemmas she faced in an alien western country. She rebels against the blind beliefs and superstitions prevailing in her small village and argues against the fate which is adumbrated by the astrologer. It was in the US where she felt at loss with her identity more powerfully than anywhere else.

During the flow of the story as reflected in the novel, Jyoti acquires many new names and identities, each requiring a newer role and expectations that highlighted the various phases in her transformation towards "Americanisation" or, more particularly, cultural assimilation in her case. Notwithstanding the trauma and aftereffect of rape on her very first day in the white environs of the US, with the affectionate moral aid of certain well-intentioned people in America, she completely transforms herself from an ignorant, vulnerable migrant to a self-assured confident working woman. She confirms her various identities by observing, "I have had a husband for each of the women I have been. Prakash for Jasmine, Taylor for Jase, Bud for Jane. Half-Face for Kali" (175). At each phase of her transformation from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jase and from Jase to Jane, one comes across a different woman in her, more adapted to the western world. She is reflected to be a born fighter. The shift in her identities is suggestive of the death of one personality and an emergence of a new and she notes, "Indianness as a fragile identity to be preserved against obliteration, now it is seen as a set of fluid identities to be celebrated" (3).

Through the novel, the author also brings out her anguish against the third world when she highlights that Jasmine needed to shift to America to achieve something significant in her life. According to her, she faced only despair and loss in the third world. Jasmine has emerged to be a novel of emigration and assimilation on physical as well as psychological aspects. Having gradually assimilated both the cultures in herself, she even allows herself to become an unwed mother and a hasty lover of sorts, an otherwise unsociable norm in the Indian society back at her village. Jasmine's subsequent days in America transports her to a new lifestyle notwithstanding the problems created by a new culture she was now part of. The initial impression she left on the natives was that of a certain someone, coming from somewhere in the eastern part of the world, with blackish skin, speaking a native language. In her initial attempts, she found it difficult for herself to share

with strangers the finer details about her life and identity which she left back in India.

The existent assimilation for Jasmine begins when she meets Lillian Gordon who teaches him the shorter ways and means of how to become an American. Lillian starts calling her by "Jazzy", a symptomatic gesture of her entrance into and acceptance of American culture which she gladly inherits. Once the ice gets broken, people from the university now wanted her to help them on their studies about subjects related to India including the traditional food and diet which they found to be so interesting that "they get disappointed if there's not something Indian on the table" (7). At the same time, she felt herself to be marginalised when an officer on TV describes the illegal refugees, "The border's like Swiss cheese and all the mice are squirming through the holes" (23). In response to everything, she now decides to get Americanised in her outlook at the earliest. She is described by Aneja in her book *Jasmine, the Sweet Scent of Exileas* follows: "Escaping an oppressive environment in rural India, the immigrant arrives in the land of opportunity, hoping to make a better life. Finding herself at the margins of American society, due to her immigrant status, Mukherjee's Jasmine does her best to insert herself into the flesh and blood of America, to the point where her body is literally impregnated by that of the white man." (73). The desire and necessity of becoming an American is now so deeply occupied in her that she believes she has to murder herself first in order to "rebirth [herself] in the images of dreams" (25). She follows the life of Professor Ji and has the following lines to conclude, "I got the point. He needed to work here, but he didn't have to like it. He had sealed his heart when he'd left home. His real life was in an unliveable land across oceans. He was a ghost, hanging on" (136).

As reflected from the events of the novel, even though she is shown to have accepted the values and customs of the host culture (western), she upholds certain fundamental traits of Indian culture as well. In each of her identities despite transformations, Jasmine remained to be an Indian woman at heart. Not only her roles, her stories shared with Duff or timely commentaries on events stand a confirmation to the assumption. Typically like an Indian village woman she observes after Wylie had walked out of Taylor's life, "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 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" (181).

CONCLUSIONS

The woman protagonist in the novel *Jasmine* begins her transformational journey as an Indian girl, backed up by tradition and customs, who experiences happiness as well as sorrow in each of the phase she plunges into moving towards the final predicament. She is depicted to have fought against not only the male supremacy but the hostility of cultures of both Eastern and Western worlds in her quest towards absolute freedom. Although she is portrayed to have possessed a complete control over herself and her decisions, the deviation, in her quest to be successful, from her original intention is very much decipherable. The novel proclaims the process and need to unite globally and think trans-culturally to become a global citizen by building bridges across conflicted cultures. She admits to that she changed herself because she wanted to and feels that it would have been cowardice otherwise, "Jyoti was now a sati-goddess; she had burned herself in a trash-can-funeral pyre behind a boarded-up motel in Florida. Jasmine lived for the future, for Viji & Wife. Jase went to movies and lived for today" (156). She decides to live for the day after she observed that nothing lasts forever and only change is permanent, "Jyoti of Hasnapur was not Jasmine, Duff's day mummy and Taylor and Wylie's au pair in Manhattan; that Jasmine isn't this Jane Ripplemeyer having lunch with Mary Webb at the University Club today. And which of us is the undetected murderer of a half-faced monster, which of us has held a dying husband, which of us was

raped and raped and raped in boats and cars and motel rooms?" (114).

It can be concluded that in Bharati Mukherjee's culturally collisional discourse, as articulated in her writings, the post-colonial diaspora aspires to be cosmopolitan and to be a citizen of the newer and culturally assimilated world. As admitted by her in an interview in the US, the plot of the novel *Jasmine* is an outcome of an earlier short story written by Bharati Mukherjee *The Middleman and Other Stories*, an intermingling of the East and West through the expression of a seventeen-year-old Hindu girl who emigrates to the US after her husband's assassination in a religious attack in India. Through her expression, the immigrant underclass, illustrated by characters like Jasmine, enters such a newer world and culture without the privileges enjoyed by the cosmopolitan elite class but through the trajectory of everyday life including its ups and downs, suffering, distress and violence, etc. As reflected, the world is gradually transforming itself into a global village, a melting pot of differences, identities and cultures.

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