
Cross Culturalism in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

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Abstract

Multiculturalism is a burning issue today and the critical analysis of Bharati Mukherjee's selected novel *Jasmine* brings into focus the immigrant experience of the female's self of being a woman and being an immigrant woman. It also covers cross-cultural experiences such as the rootlessness, the identity issues and the assimilation of the protagonists in her novels. The present research paper analyses Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* from a cross-cultural perspective. She is one of the renowned and established female writers of Indian diaspora in the United States. Her key objective is to explore and examine an impenetrable cross cultural awareness of those who connect with more than one culture. Her keen interest is to explore the plights and pains of South Asian immigrants in America and Canada and to bring about how immigrants face the problem of acculturation and cultural conflicts in adapted lands. Cultural alienation, displacement, survival and adjustment are the most frequent themes in her novels. Her own journey of life stretches across India, Canada and the United States. Almost her all novels reflect the themes of migration, exile, cultural alienation, assimilation and identity issues.

Keywords -Acculturation, Immigrants, Assimilation, Cultural Alienation, Migration, Metamorphosis

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Introduction

Jasmine, Mukherjee's third novel unties the intricate layers of cross-cultural reality through a sequence of journeys of female immigrants from one place to another. The heroine of the novel starts her journey from Punjab to California via Florida, New-York and Iowa. Her struggle presents restless quest of a rootless person who is surrounded by a depressing sense. Her journey leads Jasmine to many transformations as Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase and Jane as she encounters different geographical locations like Punjab, Florida, New York, Iowa and at last California. *Jasmine* is a representation of encounter of two cultures: Indian culture and foreign culture. Jasmine interacts freely with American culture. During cultural exchange process she acquires a new outlook towards the host land where she resides. She as an Indian immigrant interacts with the new world and proceeds towards the process of transformation and absorbs new culture.

Jyoti's childhood spends in a small village of Punjab, Hasnapur there she marries to Prakash Vijh who is a young laborious city man. In Iowa she is identified as Jane and she has a live-in relationship with Bud Ripple Meyer, a small town banker. Her American experience upsets her many times and she feels depressed and thinks, "This country has so many ways of humiliating, of disappointing There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake one self. We murder who were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams."¹ (29)

She experiences many transformations physical as well as mental. During her stay in Manhattan for two years she acquires knowledge of American life style as women doing outside work and remain out for longer hours and men do household work and stay at home. She finds out that American young couples easily adopt a child and do not wait for their own child. She praises and likes American life styles. She gains an understanding that sticking tightly to native culture while living in hostland is not a wise decision and it does not help to immigrants in any way. Therefore, she goes through the process of acculturation and grasps American cultural values and customs. Through this process, she becomes Americanized by having good hold over English language. But sometimes her innate Indian values become apparent. This happens when she gets information that Duff is an adopted child, but not biological child of his parents, her reactions speak about her Indian values, "I could not imagine a non-genetic child Adoption was foreign to me as the idea of widow remarriage."² (170)

Jasmine describes positive traits of American culture. She admires the Americans for their liberal thoughts and for having high regard for people doing inferior jobs. American work culture is entirely different and here everybody is given his/her expected due. Everybody performs his/her duties without any complex. Jasmine experiences extremely good time with Taylor and Duff in

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America. She feels like a family with them and thinks that now she has her own home and now the thought of homelessness will not frighten him. Her stay with Taylor for two years has been the most relaxing and comfortable period for Jasmine in America, “This period in Jasmine’s life is the most restful and comforting, emotionally and psychologically, intellectually, however, it is a phase of minute observations of complex inner deliberations on, and keen involvement in her new environment.”³ (113)

In Iowa, her personality changes from Jasmine to Jane. She likes Iowa very much because it reminds her village Hasnapur. The peasants of Iowa are like peasants of Hasnapur. She describes her father’s mission to Taylor concerning Hindu philosophy but Taylor reaction towards her is unemotional and rational. From this discussion the interaction of two different cultures is shown. This interaction brings about a gradual change in the personality of Jasmine. She behaves in American manner; she talks and walks like Americans. She declares that “in this apartment of artificially maintained Indianness, I wanted to distance myself from everything Indian, everything Jyoti – like⁴ (145).

Jasmine’s every shift is pre-planned towards the process of Americanization. At every step with every move a significant change is seen in her personality. Jasmine flees to Iowa and renames her as Jane. Her move towards Iowa indicates a slow but safe and balanced assimilation into the American culture. Her assimilation is not an easy process as it appears but for getting herself assimilated into a new culture she sacrifices many things. At last she has turned into a new pot which is almost American. Jasmine has discovered herself and chosen a new identity in the new location. Her readiness to accept fully the new American culture is a sign of contribution towards the positive restart of life. Immigrants are the persons who are reborn in the host lands.

For assimilation Jasmine says, “Let go just one thing not wearing our normal clothes, or a turban or not wearing the tikka on the forehead – the rest goes on its own down a sinkhole.”⁵ (29). Her willingness makes the process of acculturation easy. She manifests flexibility that strengthens the subjects for adaptation according to every situation.

At last, Jasmine has selected the option of acculturation and assimilation into American culture. This is the best way then feeling isolated and nostalgic by dividing between two selves. Immigrants experience divided selves, they are torn between two cultures, two places, two life styles and two aspirations connected with homeland and hostland.

The novel *Jasmine* reflects a positive spirit towards cross-cultural issues. Jasmine easily pulls up herself from her native culture and adapts a new culture. She is full of hopes and possibilities. She is different from Tara Banerjee because she all alone flees to new lands. While Tara moves with her

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husband. Jamine undergoes various transformations and take up different identities in order to survive in different situations. She celebrates the spirit of complete assimilation. She starts her journey as a migrant from Jyoti, village girl of Hasnapur of Punjab, to Jasmine as an urban woman, to Jazz as an illegal immigrant, to Jase as a Manhattan nanny, to Jane the Iowa woman. She is an epitome of the strength and skill of a person to change in order to adapt to a new culture. Jamine's self is a significant factor for her liberation. She is one of the powerful women characters of Bharati Mukherjee. She does not only try to adjust herself in a male dominated society but finally she comes out as a survivor. Bharati, in the form of Jasmine, portrays an independent, skillful and postmodern woman who tries hard to solve her problems at her own by using her personal strengths.

Mukherjee permits her Indian female protagonist Jasmine to interact openly with American culture for developing a new perspective towards American life. Being an immigrant she not only gives but also takes. She flees from India, considered a dilapidated and poverty-stricken country from Prof. Vadhera's household. She adapts herself to the new surroundings but she does not abandon her race, religion, Indian beliefs and life style. A perfect instance of Indian womanhood is exhibited vividly in the utterance of Jasmine, "I'll wait supper for you. Indian wives never eat before their husbands."⁶ (213)

In the beginning of the novel Bharati Mukherjee asserts the beliefs, habits, mentalities, rituals, customs and ideologies which are implanted in the Indian philosophy. Jasmine early in the novel strives to raise herself above from such dark beliefs. While collecting firewood Jyoti gets a star shaped scar on her forehead which turns into her third eye. Here Bharati uses quintessential example of Shiva's Third Eye. Through this eye Shiva looks into inconspicuous worlds.

Bharati wisely combines two exemplary figures of Kali and the broken pitcher in the novel. After she has been raped she wants to kill herself. But she incarnates the goddess Kali to take revenge of rape from Half-Face. She makes herself aware about her mission which is yet not accomplished, "I didn't feel the passionate embrace of lord yama... I extended my tongue avenging fury - "Death incarnate"⁷ (119). By doing this killing becomes very easy and now she executes an end for herself in the form of death of her old self and simultaneously birth of a new self. Another image of pitcher has used in the novel when Jasmine states, "I said my prayers for dead, clutching my Ganpati. I thought pitcher is broken. . . . My body was merely the shell, soon to be discarded. Then I could be reborn, debts and sins all paid for."⁸ (120-121) Jasmine takes a new birth after killing her rapist, Half-Face and starts her odyssey in America. She accepts herself as a sacred image of goddess sati. Indians have faith in metempsychosis, means reincarnation but for Americans this idea of rebirth is a merely a suspicion. Being an Indian, Jasmine expresses her belief, "Theoretically, I believe in reincarnation, I

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say. I am astounded by all this, the Americans need to make intuition so tangible, to possess a vision so privately.”⁹ (125)

C. L. Chua mentions, “Survival and reincarnation are indeed integral elements of this novel, for the protagonist is known by different names at different stages of the narrative, signifying her acquisition of different identities, different lives... it is also the account of an immigrant South Asian woman's metamorphosis, self-invention, and self-empowerment”¹⁰ (57)

The Indian experience of Mukherjee is a blend of two cultures and this fact finds space in the statement of Balachandra Rajan when he specifies, “. . . the presence of two cultures in one's mind . . . forms a wider and therefore a saner basis on which to originate the quest for identity and the discordance between these cultures can be creative . . . the question to be answered is whether the Indian tradition with its capacity for assimilation and its unique power of synthesis can come to terms with the new.”¹¹ (106)

Jasmine is a manifestation of confrontation of two cultures – ancient and modern and Eastern and western. Jasmine's Indian sensibility does not face any difficulty in accepting the difference between two cultures. Here an instance brings into focus the deep troubles and distresses faced by an Indian widow and an American widow, “Vimla (the Indian widow) sets herself on fire because she had broken her pitcher, she saw there were no insides and outsides. We are just shells of the same Absolute. In Hasnapur Vimla's isn't a sad story. The sad story would be a woman Mother Ripplemeyers age still working on her shell, bothering to get her hair done at Madame Cleo's”¹² (15).

Jasmine experiences extremely hopeless situation when she faces the reaction of Taylor which crops up from western philosophy. She tells him about the death of her father and her expression is implanted in Indian ethos. She expects the response of her news in Indian ethos but Taylor's response comes out in totally opposite manner which proves a complete surprise for Jasmine, “We have no husbands, no wives, no fathers, no sons. Family life and family emotions are all illusions. . . . I know that sounds soft. Very, very, very Indian, Jassy', that's what Taylor used to say, back in Manhattan. 'You don't believe that, do you? You can't, you're more modern than that’.”¹³ (59)

The interconnection and interaction between Eastern and western cultures bring about a metamorphosis in the personality of Jasmine at slow pace. In this phase of transfiguration she does not abandon her deep-rooted Indianness comprises of Indian values and traditions and she goes through endless predicaments during her transformation. She does not feel at comfort even in the house of Professor Ji which was turned into a typical a Punjabi place. She does not like this overly confined Indianness which has been maintained artificially and feels, “In this apartment of artificially maintained Indianness, I wanted to distance myself from everything Indian, everything Jyoti –

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like”¹⁴(145) Then Jasmine tries to locate differences between Professorji's family and herself and recognizes that Professorji's family does not contribute for American culture. It seems that Jasmine strives to maintain a give and take relationship with America. And this is what Mukherjee says Indian consciousness - the combination of two cultures.

Jasmine rediscovers herself when in Kate's apartment, she holds a big lizard with his own hands and states, “Truly I had been reborn. Indian village girls do not hold large reptile on their laps.... The relationship of an Indian, any Indian to a reptile, is that of a fisherman to a fish.”¹⁵(163) In fact, Jasmine enjoys this fusion of two cultures and takes delight in her journey to America and this journey has developed her asserting self. Jasmine has succeeded in retaining a balance between her Indianness and new American experience.

Migrants undergo external exile which is very painful situation. All migrants aspire to assimilate into the new place but they are segregated from the life of new place while living into the new place, this is called external exile. Many migrants experience permanent migrancy which come out as vigour and zest which lessens the pain of multiple displacements and transforms migrancy into a productive and innovative experience.

Jasmine imbibes American culture but above all gives importance to the basic Indian cultural characteristics for proper synthesis of Indian and American cultures. She is appointed as a caregiver to Duff, in Taylor's family. Jasmine's indianness can be explored when she tells stories to Duff about gods, demons and mortals. She tells Duff a story of Nachiketa and Yama. She finds her identity and roots in America.

She compares the behaviour of Taylor with that of an Indian husband when her wife, Wylie makes up her mind to leave him for Stuart Eschelman: “Taylor acted forbearing even when aggrieved. Prakash would have slugged and raved. Prakash would have been impossibly possessive. He would have put in new locks and bars on the outside of the front door to the apartment. The Claremont codes still bewildered me.”¹⁶(182-183)

Though Jasmine refuses to obey American codes but becomes eager to form her self-supporting family with Duff and Taylor. Jasmine's deep-rooted Indianness is a significant part of her personality and behaviour and this intrinsic quality remains in her forever. But Taylor wants to retain that foreignness which Jasmine has accepted. Bud Ripplemeyer gets attracted by Jasmine's partial Indianness, “Bud courts me because I am alien. I am darkness, mystery inscrutability. The East plugs me into instant vitality and wisdom. I rejuvenate him simply by being who I am.”¹⁷(200) Jasmine is not aware of the shortcomings of American culture such as breaking down of family culture. She adopts a Vietnamese-American boy and when he leaves her she feels intense pain, “the prospect of

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losing him is like a miscarriage.”¹⁸ (221) But she wants to drives all Indian empathy out of her mind. This combination of traditional conventions and modernity has endowed her with a new perspective which helps her to see traditional Indian life and American life without blinkered ideologies.

To conclude, Jyoti passes through a series of transformations after migrating to America, from Jyoti to Jasmine, and from Jase to Jane. These transformations indicate Bharati Mukherjee's journey from the perception of an expatriate to the perception of an immigrant. Her journey is the actual experience of an expatriate who undergoes a gradual process of assimilation into the American culture. Bharati depicts Jasmine as a symbol of progress and Americanization who adopts a changed outlook of her female character from a simple, rural, unassertive and docile Indian woman to a more advanced, dynamic and hostile Americanized woman.

End Notes

1. Mukherjee, Bharti. *Jasmine*. New York: Grove Press. 1989. 29
2. Ibid.,170.
3. Ibid.,113.
4. Ibid., 145.
5. Ibid.,29.
6. Ibid., 213.
7. Ibid., 119.
8. Ibid., 120-121.
9. Ibid., 125.
10. Chin-Chuan Lee (1979) *Media Imperialism Reconsidered: The Homogenizing of Television Culture*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1980. p.57
11. Rajan, Balachandra. “Identity and Nationality”, *Commonwealth Literature: Unity and Diversity in a Common Culture*. Ed. John Press, London: Heinemann Educational Book, 1965. p.106.
12. Jasmine, 15.
13. Ibid., 59.
14. Ibid., 145.
15. Ibid., 163.
16. Ibid., 182-183.
17. Ibid., 200.
18. Ibid., 221.

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