

Cross-Cultural Conflicts and Pursuit of Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

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ABSTRACT

Multiculturalism is an offshoot of developing global culture emanating from incessant flow of people between nations and intercultural interactions. Crossing the borders results in psychological metamorphosis of the immigrants as their ethnic identity shaped by social, religious, historical and political forces over decades is in continual flux. Though different kinds of responses to the situation of cultural multiplicity may be diagnosed, the fact remains that there are no simplistic ways of dealing with or responding to multiculturalism. The immigrants face cultural clash and find difficulties in acculturating. When the immigrants come to ensconce in another country, they are accosted with a new culture, a new statute and a reticent group of people who do not mix so very easily. Everyone does not have the capacity to adjust their feelings and mind. They form a community of diaspora who are always reminded of their roots in an alien land. The impact of diasporic experiences on immigrants' psyche depends on their level of belonging in an alien land. Bharti Mukherjee's odyssey from India to Canada to United States gives her a cutting edge over her contemporaries to be established as most revered author of Indian Diaspora abroad. Mukherjee, molded and transformed by the cultures of her countries of origin, movement and settlement, has been earnestly engaged in re-conceptualizing the idea of diaspora as a profitable affair as opposed to the popular belief that render immigration and displacement as a condition of loss. Her novels are bulging with women protagonists of staunch spirit and calibrating credence who win the tussle with cultural conflict and in the process evolve and emerge as winners. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how Mukherjee's heroine "Jasmine" in her novel of the same name evolves with cultural changes, endeavors for self-realization and finally takes control of her destiny.

Keywords: Immigrants, identity, flux, roots, tussle, winners

INTRODUCTION

The literary oeuvre of Bharati Mukherjee is engrossed with Cross-Cultural Conflicts and Pursuit of Identity. The most renowned novelist of Indian diaspora in America, she was born on July 27, 1940, as the second of three daughters of Sudhir Lal, a chemist, and Bina Mukherjee to an upper-middle class Hindu Brahmin family in patriarchal society in Calcutta, India. She had the opportunity to receive excellent education in India and United States. She impulsively married a Canadian writer Clark Blaise while at Iowa University, immigrated to Canada with him and finally fed up with Canada, after spending the hardest 14 years of her life due to racial discrimination, moved to the United States with her family in 1980, where she was sworn in as a permanent U.S. resident. Her novels open up a space for a consideration of the notions of rupture of identity and its amelioration. As Paul Gilroy echoes in *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* the distinction between "merely formal citizenship of the national community provided by its laws and the more substantive membership which derives from the historic ties of language, custom and race" (46).

“In this age of diasporas,” Mukherjee argues in *American Dreamer* “One’s biological identity may not be one’s only identity. Erosions and accretions come with the act of emigration” (4).

In the essay *Imagining Homelands* by Bharati Mukherjee, the author suggests that “the reality of transplantation and psychological metamorphosis” (70) is pivotal to her fiction. Her characters from disparate ethnic backgrounds and national origins cross borders in hope of attractive and more fitting life. On their arrival in an alien land they undergo cultural shock and have to devise ways and means of belonging and “becoming” in America.

Mukherjee in an interview with Hancock elucidates the identity reformation by diaspora as “Unhousement is the breaking away from the culture into which one was born, and in which one’s place in society was assured. Rehousement is the re-rooting of oneself in a new culture. This requires transformations of the self.” (39)

Bharti Mukherjee’s third novel “Jasmine” belongs to her third immigrant phase of writing in which Mukherjee is described as having accepted being “an immigrant, living in a continent of immigrants” (M. qtd in Alam 9). In this, Mukherjee has rejoiced the idea of assimilation. John K. Hoppe on studying her immigrant characters has remarked

“She is plainly disinterested in the preservation of cultures, the hallowing of tradition, obligations to the past; at least, she is not interested in the nostalgic aspects of such preservation. Rather, her current work forwards a distinction between “pioneers” and pitiable others for whom attachments to personal and cultural pasts foreclose possibilities” (137).

It is a saga of Jasmine, the protagonist of the novel of the same name who uproots herself from her life in India breaking all the social taboos and re-roots herself in search of a new life and the identity in America. Though she defies the system of patriarchy, she is able to strike a fine balance between tradition and modernity. She tells her story as a twenty four year old Indian widow pregnant with and living with her crippled American lover, Bud Ripplemayer in Iowa. Jasmine relates the past events that span the distance between her birth in Punjab and her adult life in America and inform the action set in Iowa. Throughout the novel, the character’s identity along with her name changes from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jazzy to Jane. The narrative shuffles between her past life in India and her present life in America.

In a small rural village of Hasanpur in Punjab, Jasmine was born with a “ruby-red choker of bruise” around her throat and “sapphire fingerprints” on her collarbone (40). Being the fifth daughter and the seventh of nine children, she was completely unwanted. To save her from the problems of marriage in a society where brides are burnt for dowry she was almost strangled to death at birth. She sees it as an expression of her mother’s strong love for her and says “she tried to kill me, or she would have killed herself...” (52). But, she survived that attack. From that incident, it could be seen that Jasmine had the capacity to grapple, outlive and establish her true identity.

“I survived the sniping. My grandmother may have named me Jyoti, light but in surviving I was already Jane, a fighter and adapter” (40).

Male tyranny is rampant in Indian culture which leads to maltreatment of Jasmine at her father’s and brother’s hands. But, Jasmine displays strong will and gets educated against the will of her father. Unlike her sisters and other girls, Jyoti excels in school and continues her education until the 8th grade despite her father’s disapproval. Education represents a way for Jasmine to distinguish her from many girls of her age including her sisters and to shape her identity. In other words, this allows her to break from the antiquated rural society in which she lives.

From the beginning, Jyoti rebels against her cultural inscriptions. In Indian culture, the lives of the people dance to the tunes of astrologers who mint money from them due to their naivety. When Jasmine is seven, an astrologer prophesies widowhood and exile for her. She slips and falls on hearing the astrologer's prophecy and emerges with a permanent star-shaped wound engraved on her forehead "It's not a scar," she tells her sisters, "it's my third eye." She compares it to the third eye of Lord Shiva and says that through this third eye she will have a wider and true perspective of life. She repels credulousness and myths and argues against the fate as:

"Fate is Fate. When Behula's bridegroom was fated to die of snakebite on their wedding night, did building a steel fortress prevent his death? A magic snake will penetrate solid walls when necessary". (2)

Then, swimming in the river, she comes across a dog's old, waterlogged carcass and decides "what I don't want to become," (3). This image of stasis, passivity, and rot is definitely something she determines not to even near. Even though she is never sure of what future will bring Jyoti always prefers future over the past. This is evident as she despises her father's obsession with the faded past in which he was a wealthy farmer before partition riots and remarks "He'll never see Lahore again and I never have. Only a fool would let it rule his life" (37). Often she describes her past identities as ghosts and to herself as astronaut shuffling between worlds never solidly attached to any. "For me, experience must be forgotten, or else it will kill."(29)

She doesn't believe her *janampatri*, her life as mapped out for her but says, "I'm going to reposition the stars." She repudiates the centuries old practice of marriage by horoscope matching and marries in court Prakash Vihj, an engineering Christian student who renames and reshapes her as Jasmine. He encourages her and lifts up her spirits. She confesses:

"Pygmalion wasn't a play I'd seen or read then, but realizes now how much of Professor Higgins there was in my husband. He wanted to break down the Jyoti I'd been in Hasanpur and made me a new kind of city woman". (77)

He wishes to immigrate to United States and Jasmine seems happy sharing the dream of her husband to go to America, the land of opportunities. But, she is awe struck when on the eve of their departure her husband falls prey to a Sikh terrorist bomb. Her grandmother rebukes her for her neoteric stance and says:

"If you had married a widower in Ludhiana that was all arranged. If you had checked the boy's horoscope and married like a Christian in some government office...if you had waited for a man I picked none of this would have happened...God was displeased. God send that Sardarji boy to do that terrible act". (98)

Jasmine reacts strongly and proclaims "Dida, I said, if God send Sukhi to kill my husband and then I renounce God, I spit on him". (89) So, instead of crawling back to a life of gloom and despair she sets out for The United States, on forged papers and documents, to realize her husband's immigration dream and also to commit 'sati' by cremating his suit (in lieu of his mangled corpse) in the campus of the same engineering college where her husband was admitted for study. Here, the anguish of a woman becomes clear who is ready to face any challenge in order to fulfill her husband's last wish. It shows how the traditional Indian values are penetrated in her heart though she is rebellious by nature.

On her treacherous journey to America, she is savagely raped by Half-face, the captain of the ship. Enraged at this she first decides to kill herself but then changes her mind thinking that she cannot let this insolence disrupt her mission.

“I didn’t feel the passionate embrace of Lord Yama that could turn a kerosene flame into a lover’s caress. I could not let my personal dishonor disrupt my mission. There would be plenty of time to die... I extended my tongue and sliced it” (117-118).

Here she can be compared to Kali, the deity of avenging fury. And she is reborn by killing not herself but Half-Face. Thus she transforms by disintegration and regeneration and her quest for new identity begins.

Samir Dayal, a critic on Indian Writing writes that “In killing half-faced she experiences an epistemic violence that is also a life time transformation” (71).

She is helped by a kind woman Lilian Gordan who enters her life as hope. She illegally aids refugees and renames her Jazzy, another reincarnation. Mrs. Gordan educates her, makes her free from her past memories and strengthens her will to survive. She advises Jasmine “Let the past make you wary, by all means. But do not let it deform you”. (Dayal 131). Her advice helps Jasmine physically and mentally. Within a week Jasmine gives up her shy side of personality and dresses up on a jazzy T-shirt, tight cords and running shoes. With the change in clothes and culture comes the change in personality so much so that the intrinsic qualities of her personality start fading away. With this change she moves from being a “visible minority” to being “just another immigrant.”(4)

With Mrs. Gordan’s help, she goes to meet Professor Vadhera who helped Prakash in securing admission in an engineering course. In the beginning, she stays at Professor Vadhera’s house. But Jasmine is disappointed when she learns that Mr. Vadhera traded in human hair. She also feels uncomfortable in Mr. Vadhera’s house which they have converted into a Punjabi ghetto. Jasmine soon finds herself stifled by the inertia of this home for it was completely isolated from everything American. Considering it to be a stasis in her progression towards a new life, she tries to separate herself from all that is Indian and forget her past completely. So, she decides to run away from another claustrophobic atmosphere to join the lonely and empty people of American consumerist society and culture. This move indicates that self-actualization was developing in her life and it might be due to the acculturation to the American way of thinking and dressing. She endures massive wrecking and reconstruction at personal and cultural fronts. Gurleen Grewal observes that Jasmine has travelled a long way both on physical and psychological plane, from India, “locked into the inertia of stasis, the land of Yama/Death” to America, “equated with freedom from fate, poverty, and a repressive gender identity” (186).

Jasmine moves to Manhattan, New York to join a glamorous and emancipated couple, Taylor and Wylie Hayes and their adopted daughter Duff as a Caregiver. Jasmine is renamed as Jase by Taylor and starts her transformations into a sophisticated American woman.

Jasmine transforms but this time the change is not from a reaction, but rather from her very own yearning for personal change. In becoming Jase, Jasmine gets increasingly comfortable with her sexuality which she always tried to repress earlier, more so, after her traumatic experience. Here Jasmine boldly asserts,

“I changed because I wanted to. To bunker oneself inside nostalgia, to sheathe the heart in a bulletproof vest, was to be a coward. On Claremont Avenue, in the Hayeses’ big, clean, brightly lit apartment, I bloomed from a diffident alien with forged documents into adventurous Jase” (185-186).

Taylor becomes Jase’s American instructor; he teaches her about all the advantages of democracy. Taylor feels desolate when Wylie moves out of the family to move in with the wealthy Stuart Eschelman. She is outwitted at Wylie’s decision of leaving Taylor for another

man in search of real happiness. Here the woman of Jasmine is unable to have an empathy with the woman of Wylie. In fact, here Bharati Mukherjee reflects on the uncertainties in America, where everything is ephemeral, even a human relationship. She says:

“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 for me 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).

Mukherjee critiques the American society in the perplexed voice of Jasmine, an uprooted being trying to belong in a place where relationships are plastic rather than lasting.

Taylor gets romantically involved with Jasmine. After long, Jasmine feels that she has landed and is rooted. But her fate intervenes and terrorized she runs to Iowa abruptly ending the romantic life between Taylor and herself on recognizing a neighborhood hot-dog vendor as her husband’s murderer.

Jasmine enters a personal continuum of time where events swing backwards and forwards from place to place and from childhood to adult, from despair to hope, compassion and love. The inescapability of memory, and the boundless nature of time is stressed here and Jasmine finds her life distorted by the different consciousness through which now she experiences the world. She loses even her sense of self-expression. Unable to live with this plethora of conflicting identities she flees to Baden County, Iowa to give her life a new beginning.

In Baden she meets Bud Wipplemeyer, a tall, handsome, fifty years old American banker, a husband, and father of two children who instantly falls in love with her. Bud renames Jasmine ‘Jane’ yet another sign of her evolution. After his divorce, Bud encourages Jasmine to freely change roles from caregiver to temptress whenever she feels the desire to and views her sexuality through the lenses of his own oriental fantasy. This instead of denigrating Jasmine serves to imbue her with a sexual confidence and she thrives on it. Her racial identity also morphs in Baden, for here her difference is recognized but not comprehended or openly acknowledged. The community attempts to see her as familiar instead of alien. This new perception of her race is an essential portion of her identity as Jane because now she feels assimilated and in fact becomes the typical American she always wanted to be. After some time, Bud is confined to wheelchair on being shot at the back by a distressed farmer facing foreclosure and Jane becomes pregnant while making him feel comfortable. Here we see a remarkable change in Jasmine’s attitude. The girl, who murdered Half-Face for violating her chastity, now willingly chooses not only to live with an American as a wife without being married to him but carries his child in her womb also. She has fully assimilated herself to the American family life with adopted children and pregnancy, but is waiting for her love which she finds when Taylor comes to her. From her duties towards others, she now thinks of her duty to herself.

The end of the novel finds Jasmine moving to California with Taylor, uncertain of what the future will bring but nevertheless confident in her decision to leave. “Greedy with wants and reckless from hope” (Dayal 240).

C.L.R. James in *Beyond a Boundary* quotes “it’s not quality of goods and utility that matter, but movement, not where you are or what you have but where you come from, where you are going, and the rate at which you are getting there”.

This sense of movement further reinforces the notion that her identity is forever evolving, she cannot remain in a stable life because disruption and change are the means of her survival. The surrounding environments influence her formation of her identities and she navigates

between temporal and spatial locations, her perception of herself changes, thereby resulting in a multiplicity of consciousness. These create a tension within her and she feels the need to reconcile these conflicting perceptions so that they do not wage a psychological war inside her. Thereby we see her reinvent her identity completely. From a passive, traditional object of fate Jyoti transforms into an active, modern, cross-cultural shaper of her future. Her arduous odyssey from the rural conservative patriarchal society of Hasanpur to advanced society of U.S.A. leads to many transformations of mind, body and soul and making of a strong identity that always emerges as a winner and has an incessant desire to always move forward. From the beginning, Jyoti rebels against her cultural inscriptions.

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