



Cross Cultural acculturation and assimilation in Bharati Mukherjee's Jasmine

Shailendra Rajput

Research Scholar

Department of English Literature
IES University, Bhopal (M.P.)

Under Supervision of

Dr. Renu Srivastava

Department of English Literature
IES University, Bhopal (M.P.)

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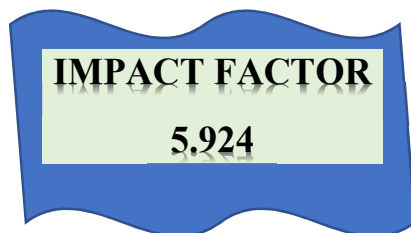
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Abstract

Mukherjee's first two novels *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Wife* bring out the cross cultural journeys of the protagonists and their quest for identity.

Bharati Mukherjee has been described as "the foremost chronicler of the multicultural New America" (Nicholson, 1990). Cross cultural confrontations constitute the core theme of her works. As a fiction writer her continuing concern has been to deal with the life of South Asian expatriates/immigrants in USA and Canada and her writings reflect the process of acculturation and assimilation in the journey from expatriation and immigration.

Her narratives address issues of identity as they intersect with culture, gender and race. The present paper focuses exclusively on her third novel *Jasmine*, which chronicles the movement of an Indian woman from India to the United States and what strategies of survival she adopts as she relocates herself in a new and alien world.

Keywords: Diaspora, assimilation, identity crisis, expatriate.

Mukherjee has changed citizenships and lived in various cultural milieus and consequently it can be said that she has passed through several different phases as a writer. Firstly, she lived as a colonial, then a National subject in India and then she led a life of exile as a post-colonial Indian in Canada. Finally she converted herself into a celebrity immigrant and moved to the United States.

The blending of these various lives and experiences is manifested in her work and constitutes an important part of contemporary immigrant literature. As a fiction writer, her continuing concern has been to deal with the life of South Asian expatriates/immigrants in USA and Canada and her writings reflect the process of acculturation and assimilation in the journey from expatriation to immigration.



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Books, internet, sources from reference books, research articles from journals, dissertation and interviews have been used for the research. Qualitative research methodology is applied to the research. It aims at gathering an in depth understanding of human behaviour and the reasons that govern that behaviour.

All diasporic deliberations come to be shaded by the ideology of post colonialism. Diasporic literature is replete with issues related to locations, movements, crossing borders, identities, original home and adopted home etc. Both Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak emphasize culture and imperialism as the distinguished factors that influence post-colonial literature. Edward Said defined Orientalism as “a western style for dominating, restructuring, heaving authority over the orient”. Gayatri Spivak expressed her views about subaltern. ‘subaltern’ means the colonized/oppressed subject whose voice has been silenced. Both colonialism and patriarchy resulted in the oppression of women and it is really difficult for the subaltern to articulate her point of view and “there is no space from where the subaltern subject can speak.”

The present paper focuses exclusively on her third novel Jasmine which was published in 1989. This novel was written in the third phase of Mukherjee’s life when she overcame the nostalgia for the land of her birth and appreciated the new opportunities in the host country. This novel was selected for two reasons. First, the protagonist of this novel is a first generation immigrant. This novel is the story of a young Indian woman who experiences cultural conflict both in and out of her own culture. The agony of the immigrants in the host country is a major theme of this novel. Secondly, this novel was written at a stage of her life when Mukherjee had succeeded in defining her own identity as an immigrant and an American. Jasmine contains the well-developed views of Mukherjee on South Asian diaspora.

Bharati Mukherjee’s novel Jasmine traces the story of the eponymous heroine in her American odyssey. The conflict between “Occidental” and “Oriental” cultures and its impact in the life of the protagonist is expressed beautifully in this novel. Jasmine, the Hindu widow, who leaves India for the USA after her husband’s death in a terrorist attack, is found to undergo a cross-cultural metamorphosis in her fractured life as an immigrant. From the beginning of the novel the novelist gives the readers a hint of Jasmine’s attempt to break out of the paradigms of traditional Indian culture. The opening chapter of the novel starts with the words:

Lifetimes ago, under a banyan tree in the village Hasnapur, an astrologer cupped his ears-his satellite dish to the stars and foretold my widowhood and exile. I was only seven then, fast and ventures on scabrous-armed from leaves and thorns, (Mukherjee, Jasmine 3)

The astrologer goes on to allude to the story of Behula from Hindu mythology. Here Bharati Mukherjee is not just exorcizing the content of the novel through these allusions. She is defining



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the mental space of her seven-year-old protagonist. Jasmine psyche is formed by the stories that her mother recited to her of “the holiest sages” the “third eye” they develop in the middle of their foreheads to peer “out into invisible world” (Mukherjee, Jasmine5), and their likes. No doubt Jasmine’s mind is spiritually inclined even though she challenges and revolts against customs and traditions. Her decision to fulfil her husband’s aspiration of going to America is guided by her spiritual beliefs as she acknowledges:

I had not given even a day’s survival in America a single thought. This was the place I had chosen to die, on the first day if possible. I would land, find Tampah, walking there if necessary, find the college grounds and check it against the brochure photo. Under the very tree where two Indian boys and two Chinese girls were pictured, smiling, I had dreamed of arranging the suit and twigs. The vision of lying serenely on a bed of fire under palm trees in my white sari had motivated all the weeks of sleepless half-starved.

The village girl from Hasnapur survives in America. She does not immolate herself because after landing on the Gulf Coast of Florida she is raped and in turn she murders her rapist. This defiles her mission and death is denied her: “Lord Yama, who had wanted me and whom I’d flirted with on the long trip over, had now deserted me” (Mukherjee, Jasmine 120). The transformation of Jasmine from the archetype of sati to that of Goddess Kali as she towers over the man, who violated her chastity, with blood oozing out from her sliced tongue, is a dramatic and violent imagery of self-assertion. The critic Nagendra Kumar notes that Jasmine’s “decision to kill herself first, is a decision of a woman who lives for her deceased husband but the woman who kills Half-Face is prompted by her will to live to continue her life” (Kumar 110). Jasmine’s journey from Punjab through Florida, New York and Iowa to California depicts the various stages of her exilic condition. But these exilic locations are also representation of the spiritual states of her mind. Jasmine assumes different mythological avatars in her various exilic states:

“I have been reborn several times” (Mukherjee, Jasmine 126). She shuttles between identities: “Jyoti [was] the Sati-Goddess, Jasmine lives for the future” (Mukherjee, Jasmine 176). She emancipates herself from being an illegal immigrant into a self-assured American woman but her spiritual call comes from India: “I am caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness” (Mukherjee, Jasmine 240).

Not only Jasmine even the other characters in Jasmine are all exiles, expatriates, wanderers and people on the move, casting off old lives easily as a snake sheds its skin. They are Third World refugees fleeing poverty and oppression, but they are also Americans moving from Coast to Coast, small towns to cities, exchanging one partner for another, in search of a dream that always seems to elude them. A feeling of dislocation, displacement and rootlessness is a heavy price they must



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pay for the infinite freedom and possibilities that America offers. Everyone in Jasmine appears to be reeling from the speed of changes overpowering them.

Mukherjee has explored her theme with its many nuances. The transformation of Jasmine from a semi-educated Punjabi rustic to an American is convincing. Perhaps Mukherjee's purpose of bringing to the contemporary American fiction, the reality of the experiences of the floating elements in American society, the immigrant who are trying to establish themselves is fulfilled.

It is not easy to overcome the "aloofness of expatriation" or disunite oneself from the roots and tradition of the culture that one comes from. Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase and Jane, who make a life time for every name, look like a possibility for every enthusiastic immigrant. Thus caught between the two cultures of the east and west, past and present, old and new, Jasmine constantly "shuttles" in search of a concrete identity.

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