

REVIEW ON CLASHES OF CULTURE IN THE NOVEL OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE

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Abstract

Within the postmodern world, where individual are both decreased and increased ironically, ideas such as the positive effect and multiculturalism have surfaced to determine the new planet order. As the world is actually shrinking right into a global town where variations melt in to similarities, civilizations and organizations outside the dominating ideology discover ways to submit their variety. On the other hand, a lot confusion within the topic provides identity economic crisis forth which may be summarized like a difficulty of actually finding a fixed location for yourself. The Indian native author Bharati Mukherjee's book Jasmine may be the story of the young Native indian woman who else experiences identification crisis as well as cultural discord both in and also out of her very own culture. This particular paper will certainly shed light on the actual identity problems and social conflict from the East and ladies in opposition to the particular dominant strength of the To the west and males with recommendations to Mukherjee's Jasmine inside the framework associated with multicultural along with feminist viewpoints.

Keywords: Bharati Mukherjee, CULTURE, Short Stories, English

Introduction

In the postmodern world, the idea of identity is within an ironical condition because identities tend to be multiplied within a richness of numerous combinations inside multicultural communities while they may be reduced to some single dimensions in the fingers of the positive effect. According to Bob Barker, "identity is a fact that can be signified through indications of taste, values, attitudes as well as lifestyles" (2003: 220). Identification has individual and interpersonal dimension both these styles which has the opportunity of becoming more and more complicated and rich thanks to the actual interactive human relationships of our postmodern world. However, the trend associated with globalization, which is shaped through the dominant forces, creates a regular identity within just which non-e of the variations are pleasant.

As a natural outcome of this clash between the opposing powers of multiculturalism and globalization, postmodern self is decentred and fragmented and that is why "persons are composed not of one but of several, sometimes contradictory, identities" (Barker, 2003: 224). The tension between the mentioned opposite powers bring identity crisis forth for many individuals and groups, which can be summarized as a difficulty of finding a fixed place for oneself and of creating any sense of life and meaning.

The Indian author Bharati Mukherjee's 1989 novel Jasmine is the story of a young woman from Punjab, India who experiences identity crisis and cultural conflict both in and out of her own culture. In other words, the story narrates

Jasmine's search for her true and unfragmented identity and the transformations she experiences in a positive and optimistic way. Thus, it becomes a tale of moral courage seeking for self-awareness. The novel is more than a classical bildungsroman since it only focuses on a short but very intense life span of the protagonist and it involves her struggle against not only the ordinary difficulties of the normal process which is experienced by every young person but also challenges related with her sexual, racial, national and cultural identity. Jasmine's life in India, her migration to United States and her struggle to define herself portray the similar stories of many others both as easterners and women. That is why this paper will discuss cultural conflict and identity crisis by focusing on the East and women in opposition to the dominant power of the West and men.

The metaphorical quest of Jasmine's protagonist starts as Jyoti in India where she stands against the role that was prepared for her by the patriarchal system of her homeland. Like most of the Indian women, she is born as the disappointing baby girl of her family and her whole life is under the control of her father and brothers. According to Indian tradition, a girl should be married at an early age with a dowry which is a burden for the families. Additionally, girls are seen as belongings of their future husbands. That is why families are reluctant about educating them or giving them extra facilities. In short, they are named as curses directed towards women "who needed to be punished for sins committed in other incarnations" (Mukherjee, 1991: 34) according to their religious belief.

Jyoti stands as a rebellious character in the patriarchal society that dominates India. She does not want to obey her society's predetermined gender roles which are summarized by Chris Barker as "the cultural assumptions and practices that govern the social constructions of men, women and their social relations" (2003: 240). Having interests and demands more than the usual girls, she wants to continue her education to finally become a doctor and to have her own choices in life unlike the village girls who are "like cattle" that follows "whichever way you lead them" (Mukherjee, 1991: 39). Instead, Jyoti likes "hearing the men talk" (Mukherjee, 1991: 56) since they usually talk about a world to which she is a stranger. Thus, the first conflict Jyoti experiences is the one between the dominant patriarchal system and the modern life that she desires. She loses her sense of belonging to the life and traditions of rural India and dreams a life which is impossible even to dream for many Indian girls.

Prakash, her Indian husband, is the man who gives her what she looks for. Prakash is a radical man with extreme ideas even for Jyoti. He believes that "there's no room in modern India for feudalism" (Mukherjee, 1991: 69), rejects the traditional large family life and forces his wife to call him by his first name in contrast to Indian traditions. However, his biggest impact on Jyoti is his Professor Higgins-like role in her life: like the professor aiming to create a lady out of the flower girl, Prakash intends to turn Jyoti into the 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; 'You are small and sweet and heady, my Jasmine. You'll quicken the whole world with your perfume.'

Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttled between identities." (Mukherjee, 1991: 70)

Although Jyoti wants to become Jasmine, still she is split into two just as her life is parted in two halves by her marriage with Prakash. Despite her eagerness for a more modern life, even she hesitates to go beyond patriarchal rules at first:

“In contrast to the other men of the traditional culture, Prakash does not see marriage as the cultural sanctioning of patriarchal control and enforced obedience. He renames Jyoti as Jasmine, a symbolic break with her feudal past. Yet this break causes Jyoti/Jasmine deep conflict. As a traditional woman she wants to get pregnant immediately to prove her worth and to validate her identity. Indeed, in this society, pregnancy is the only available identity.” (Ruppel, 1995: 184)

Instead of the expectations of the traditional Indian society, Prakash wants to see Jasmine as an individual interested in educating herself for the better. Unfortunately, Jasmine is left alone with his sudden and unexpected death after which she has to make a serious decision of either turning back to her old life or taking risks for a new one. Finally, she completes her rebellion against Indian patriarchy with her decision to go and live in America as Prakash always wanted. At that point, she clearly indicates that she is “a widow in the war of feudalisms” (Mukherjee, 1991: 88).

Mukherjee draws a line between Jyoti and Jasmine in India and other identities employed by her protagonist in America. Thus, the book becomes the combination of two stories that take place in two different countries and cultures. Following such a scheme, it is possible to say that the India part of the book is about Jyoti’s survival under the hegemony of traditional patriarchy and her rebirth with the help of Prakash who gives her both a new name and a new life despite the fact that Jyoti’s rebirth as Jasmine is possible only with the help of a man.

The second part of the book, which is the story of Jasmine in America, implies more problems for her to face with. She starts to feel her identity crisis more powerfully and in different ways in the United States. Chris Barker describes identity as “an essence that can be signified through signs of taste, beliefs, attitudes and lifestyles” (2003: 220). Leaving all the vital elements of her identity back at home, Jasmine is a complete stranger in this country since identities are “wholly social constructions” which “cannot ‘exist’ outside of cultural representations” (Barker, 2003: 220).

To start with, Jasmine’s setting off for America is the start of her symbolic quest which is full of transformations and displacement far away from her homeland. Although she is willing for her migration, she is not welcomed in America since her journey which she calls her “odyssey” (Mukherjee, 1991: 91) is an illegal one and she is able to enter the dreamland she desires so much only from the back door:

“The first thing I saw were the two cones of a nuclear plant, and smoke spreading from them in complicated but seemingly purposeful patterns, edges lit by the rising sun, like a gray, intricate map of an unexplored island continent, against the pale unscratched blue of the sky. I waded through Eden’s waste: plastic bottles, floating oranges, boards, sodden boxes, white and green plastic sacks tied shut but picked open by birds and pulled apart by crabs.” (Mukherjee, 1991: 95)

Jasmine’s American Dream collapses at this very first sight, but the worst is yet to come at the motel where she has to stop for her first night on this alien land. She is not only raped by the man called Half Face but also humiliated by him:

“He looked at me, and at the suitcase...He hefted the bag onto the bed and unsnapped the catches. Out came my sandalwood Gampati. He propped it up against a picture on the dresser. He noticed my photo album and picked it up. Pictures of Prakash and of Pitaji, wrapped in an old sari...At the bottom, the blue suit.

“Who’s this for?” he demanded. “A kid?”

“It is my husband’s,” I said.

“Kind of a scrary little bastard, ain’t he?” He laughed and dropped the jacket back in the suitcase.” (Mukherjee, 1991: 101)

Jasmine is so much irritated by his abasement that she kills Half Face to take revenge for the rape and humiliation she went through. She feels everything that is dear to her is invaded by the dirty hands of Half Face. Therefore, she burns them all in a metal trash bin imitating a sati ritual before leaving the motel.

Jasmine’s first night in America is significant in many ways for she experiences another death and rebirth circle on this night. After being raped, she feels as if she is dead until she decides to take a quick revenge from the man who disrespects her in all possible ways. As Ruppel states “instead of killing herself and passively conforming to an identity politics that would define her solely as a victim, she decides instead to kill her attacker” (1995: 186) which means reclaiming her body. Slicing her own tongue first, she slaughters the man. This bloody ritual is followed by a purification ceremony of her body in the first American shower Jasmine sees in her life and Jasmine leaves the place after her funeral fire in full American clothes:

“I took out a blue-jean jacket bought for me in Delhi by my brothers...I buttoned up the jacket and sat by the fire. With the first streaks of dawn, my first full American day, I walked out the front drive of the motel to the highway and began my journey, travelling light.” (Mukherjee, 1991: 107-108)

Instead of suicide, Jasmine decides to finish her mission which is to visit the campus and sit under that particular tree for Prakash. With the help of the symbolical steps she followed after the murder, she metaphorically kills her Indian identity and her past to find a new identity and a future in America which is why she defines herself as “walking death. Death incarnate” (Mukherjee, 1991: 106).

Living for today becomes Jasmine’s motto in America where nothing lasts forever, but learning how to live for herself and today and bringing her fragmented self together is her challenge that is clear in her words:

“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 inboats and cars and motel rooms?” (Mukherjee, 1991: 114).

Although she creates a new identity for herself not because Taylor wants this time but because she wants it herself, her choice of leaving the father of her unborn child is far from her devoted love once for Prakash which proves her liberated,

American identity. In contrast to her innocence with Prakash, she finally has self-awareness through her experiences with men in America. She discovers her various identities by saying: "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." (Mukherjee, 1991: 175). As Hoppe suggests "Jasmine's postcolonial, ethnic characters are ...carving out new spaces for themselves from among a constellation of available cultural narratives, never remaining bound by any one, and always fluidly negotiating the boundaries of their past, present, and futures" (1999: 154) to finally reach the unity under the head title of being American which brings her conformity.

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