



Cultural Complexities And Constant Conundrums Chronicled In Bharti Mukherjee's Protagonist In Jasmine (1989)

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Abstract: For the past decades, cross-cultural crisis remains as a predominant theme delineated in the writings of literature. This perspective of cultural crisis has been the focus in the writings of contemporary and modern authors. Multi culturalism arises when the individual becomes congenial with another culture rather than his born culture. The depiction of these synchrony of cultures is beautifully depicted by the Indian diaspora authors like Anita Desai, Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri and many others. At this cross-cultural juncture, immigrant writer like Bharati Mukherjee has come up with specific perspectives. Being an immigrant, she was caught between the conflicting cultures in her own attempt to explore an identity of her own, which is circumscribed in her novels. Migration, exile, displacement, identity, sense of belonging, isolation, and cross-cultural conflicts are some of the indispensable themes found in her writings. She accepts American culture comparing with Indian, as the laws and policies of her settlement has proven much favorable for her. In her works, the readers can find a beautiful blend and paradox of Indian and American culture. In this article, the element of cross cultural complexities is explored in her 1989 novel Jasmine. Bharati presents a beautiful epigraph in the beginning pages by James Gleick 'the new geometry mirrors a universe that is rough, not rounded, scabrous, not smooth. It is a geometry of the pitted, pocked and broken up, the twisted, tangled and intertwined.' (Jasmine) which embarks the journey of the protagonist, whose path is not smooth but rough encompassed with several impediments.

Key words : cross-culture, immigrant, identity, laws and policies, epigraph

Introduction:

Bharati Mukherjee's protagonists are considered as an inspiration for several immigrant women in India and America. The reason is their problems in consortium with the quest of transition from one place to another. Her characters are the recipients of dual civilization, who struggle in distant lands in search of fortune, some to fulfill their aims and aspirations, and others in their search for identity and settlement in life. For four decades Bharati had her nexus with India, and continues to write about Indian immigrants to the West quite sensibly, consciously and carefully. Most of her protagonists travels from their own cultural environment and settles in alien land. Katrak in his book *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature* opines Bharati Mukherjee as: 'the quintessential immigrant turned citizen who embraces being an American citizen with a troubling and insistent fierceness' (201).

Bharati's Literary Forte:

Bharati's literary niche can be clearly demarcated into three stages. According to Sarkar in the journal JETIR: The phase of Expatriation from 1972 to 1979, the phase of Transition 1980 to 1988, and the phase of Immigration from 1989 to 2011.

In the phase of Expatriation, she wrote two novels and a nonfiction - *The Tiger's Daughter* (1972), *Wife* (1975) and *Days and Nights in Calcutta* (1977). During the period of transition, she wrote short story collections and a non-fiction; *Darkness* (1985), *The Sorrow and the Terror: The Haunting Legacy of the Air India Tragedy* (1987) and *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988). In the phase of immigration, she wrote many novels of repute like, *Jasmine* (1989), *The Holder of the World* (1993), *Leave It to Me* (1997) and *Desirable Daughter* (2002) *The Tree Bride* (2004), *New Miss India*, (2011) (2).

Her former works portrays the aspect of colonialism, history, and culture crisis but in her later writings, a transition is noticed in her writing style towards her focus on more adventurous, more innovative and radical like her literary counterparts, Salman Rushdie, Upamanyu Chatterjee and Amitav Ghosh.

CruX of the Novel:

Bharati in *Jasmine* fictionalizes the process of Americanization by tracing a young Indian woman's experiences in the process of assimilation. The novel is characterized by the tendency in which the feeling of being displaced is overcome by a zeal to settle down and find a new home. Jasmine, the protagonist of the novel, reincarnates herself constantly, in connection with the places, she treads upon. She never feels frustrated by the cultural inconsistencies. She survives to make a new beginning in the host country, ignoring the impediments she faced in her native past. The backdrop of 'Jasmine' is based on the idea of the marriage of the East and the West, with a story that portrays a young Hindu Indian woman whose husband is murdered. Being widowed at the age of seventeen, Jasmine leaves India and sojourns to The United States to fulfill the wish of her husband, which is to pursue his studies abroad. She goes on a mission at least to burn his suits in the university, he craved to study. The whole village stood against her. "A village girl going alone to America without job, husband or papers? I must be mad! Certainly, I was. I told them I had sworn it before God. A matter of duty and honour. I dared not tell my mother." (97).

Cultural inhibitions

The novelist provides a subtle visual imagery of women in India when they lose their husband and the implications faced by widows in the Indian society. Both Jasmine and her mother loses their husbands. The former due to bomb attack and the latter due to goring by bull. 'My mother kept company only with other widows, bent old women of public humility and secret bitterness. I felt myself dead in their company, with my long hair and schoolgirl clothes. I wanted to scream, "Feudalism! I am a widow in the war of feudalisms' (97). The travelogue makes the novel. There are so many themes which can be researched reading this novel. Jasmine meets several obstacles during her journey including rape and molestation, marriage, love and adventure. She meets several characters who travels with and parts from her. The strand of immigration and multiculturalism in Bharati's *Jasmine* appears to be the core which picturizes this fiction. It is not that the migration of the protagonist from a village in Punjab to Florida in the United States naturally leads to the projection of multiculturalism. It is the line of events analyzed with an introspective and critical view, leads to the concept of multiculturalism and identity trauma visualized throughout the novel.

Male patriarchy

Jasmine, rather addressed as Jyoti, was born in Hasnapur in India, is the most beautiful and clever child in her family. The way she has been controlled dominated by the male members of her family, and the way it has been shown clearly reveals the male patriarchy existed and existing in India. Like most of the

Indian families, Jyoti's life is also controlled by her father and brothers. Rural landscape of India is vividly picturized by the writer. 'On the far side of the countryside, by the buffalo enclosure, the maidservants pretty little girl was scooping up fresh dung, kneading it thick with straw chips and patting them into cakes the size of her palms. She would slap the cakes down on the adobe walls of our kitchen enclosure and leave them to dry into fuel' (50).

Transition phase of the protagonist:

Marriage at an early age is still a part of culture in many parts of India. Yet, Jasmine has the mind to think in a different way as young generations in most cultures do. Though our protagonist does not deny marriage, yet she does have the desire to marry an educated man who does not believe in the dowry system. Thus she is married to Prakash, a man who craved to land abroad and with modernistic approach. It is after her marriage, transformation is noticed. Even in her name as Prakash calls her Jyoti meaning light. At the same time, Jyoti's shift from one culture to another is ignited by Prakash. He encourages her to study English as he had plans to settle abroad. This change of her name is much symbolic of the change of her identity as well as of her shift from the Eastern culture to the Western one. Beautiful comparisons prove the forte of the writer. 'Pygmalion was n'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 Jyothi, I'd been in Hasnapur and make me a new kind of city woman' (77). Jyoti was so happy in her marital life, but it is too short-lived as her husband is killed by terrorist groups.

After this phase, the novel presumes with Jasmine's life in the ferried land. The time that she spent with Prakash made her adapt to the Western culture shunning the Indian practices. According to her family tradition, she has to choose performing Sati a traditional practice of jumping into the pyre if the husband dies, but Jasmine decides to leave the country. She becomes an illegal immigrant to Florida. In the course of migration and shifts, the protagonist finds that America is really a land of opportunities. Jasmine leaves her oppressive family in India and chooses to live in America, even as an illegal immigrant. She did so for she had the hope that her search for a more fruitful life would be materialized in the United States.

Various phases of cultural transformations:

Jasmine's journey towards the Western culture transforms her in each and every place she treads. She meets people like Taylor and Bud. Her identity change as 'Jase' in Taylor's family and 'Jane' in Bud's family are not only the reflections of her name change but also her shedding of one culture and adapting the other. Taylor is the one who truly loves Jasmine but the readers can find the extremity of culture, when Jasmine becomes pregnant due to Bud, who gives shelter and comfort. 'Bud has changed my life. I am grateful. I am carrying his child. I want to tell him that when I was a girl in Hasnapur only playboys in Bombay movies wore bathrobes, dark glasses, whiskey, cigarettes: these were shorthand for glamour that we Hasnapuris were meant not to have. I have triumphed' (231).

An optimistic sojourn:

Bharati Mukherjee has depicted Jasmine's transformation as a positive and optimistic journey with minimum pessimisms. It clearly reveals that the writer herself is sympathetic to her heroine in the novel and wants her not to fall as a prey of the rigidity of the Indian culture. Jasmine tries to construct a new world of hers that consists of the ideals which are contrary to the tradition. To limelight, she is always inquisitive to transform into a new cultural identity through her incessant zeal of learning new skills, desires, and habits. It is true that there have been changes in her attitude. At the same time, the change in her relationships with the men is also a notable factor. Though Jasmine tries a lot to change her cultural identity, she faces lots of challenges. For instance, when Jasmine offers help to make Du study, she ultimately finds it impossible to construe as he was studying Teddy Roosevelt's presidency, a school of higher standards. The novelist speaks through Jasmine. Even her assimilation from India to Canada and then to America was like a conundrum and she conveys this in several interviews. Nagendra Kumar in his book 'The Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee: A cultural perspective' comments on the verse of the author in nexus with immigration: 'I have been murdered

and reborn at least three times, the very correct young woman I was trained to be, and was very happy being, is very different from the politicized, shrill, civil rights activist, I was in Canada, and from the urgent writer that I have become in the last few years in the United States'(11).

The element of love:

True love is exhibited in Jasmine, when she falls for Taylor, correlated with the author's love for Clark Blaise, whom she married in her real life. She takes up the work of care taker in Taylor and Wylie's house and finds Wylie's love for another man, Stuart Eschelman, an Economist. Jase though, feels for Wylie's decision, loves Taylor and comforts him. In Mukherjee's imagination, America is a place in a flux, a metaphor that represents freedom from Indian values and practices. Drake in her article 'In looting American culture : Bharati Mukherjee's immigrant narratives' comments: Like Wylie, who barter her husband and child for true happiness, Jasmine too needs a certain kind of home, home as comfort, home as talisman for regenerating herself into an American immigrant(JSTOR).

American zeal:

The open- ended departure at the end of the novel and the choice she makes, without being forced by anyone, shows the emergence of her new identity and exemplifies the American spirit. At last she feels happy to move to Taylor's family, the family she loved. She is more likely to be passively situated in a diasporic predicament and then forced to quickly react to the circumstances to survive. Bharati reinforces the image of third world woman, who is dominated by her gender rights. Chandra Mohanty points out in *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses* –'such an image of the third world woman posits western women as secular, liberated and having control over their own lives '(JSTOR). The writer, however, suggests that America is certainly no Elysium in certain perspectives; it is a brave new world that includes; violence, rape, murder and suicide.

Wrap-up:

Holistically, Jasmine has endured with her own sense of values and ethics, quite different from the set of ethics followed in the Indian society. She no longer belongs to the Indian sub-continent, but to the whole world. She 'cocoon the cosmos' and walks ahead with Taylor, even without bidding farewell to Bud and mother Ripplemeyer. She marches to Taylor as the lines showcase her mindset 'greedy with wants and reckless from hope' (240).

Bharati's protagonist, Jasmine has not only transcended space, but also the stereotypical and default notions of the culture, color, creed and ethnicity. Jasmine stands on the highest pedestal in Mukherjee's creation. Bharati's own comment on American impact of her characters is highlighted in her interview with Alison : 'My characters want to make it in the New world. They are filled with a hustlerish kind of energy. Although they are often or depressed by setbacks in their new lives and occupations they do not give up. They take risks they would not have taken in their old comfortable worlds to solve their problems. As they change citizenship, they are reborn' (654) .

Conundrum unleashed:

The conundrum gets resolved in the conclusion when Jasmine sets out her journey with Taylor, the life she wanted breaking all the shackles of the society. To conclude, Jasmine in 'Jasmine' surpasses all the protagonists of Bharati by possessing daunting courage and resolute spirit. The writer's experience as a native and alien acts as a driving force for penning this novel and she believes that only transformation according to the place along with the mettle to meet out the challenges helps an individual to achieve one's target. Bharati through Jasmine quotes in the text: "There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself. We murder who we were, so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams."(178)

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