

Cross-Cultural Conflicts in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

URWASHI KUMARI

Abstract. *Jasmine* is a novel of immigration and assimilation, both on physical and psychological levels. In this novel, Bharati Mukherjee fictionalises the process of Americanisation by tracing a young Indian woman's experiences of trauma and triumph in her attempt to a new identity for herself. In this novel Mukherjee tries to unravel the complicated layers of cross-cultural confrontations through a series of adventures which the protagonist undertakes during her odyssey from Punjab to California. The impact of diasporic experiences on immigrants' psyche depends on their level of belonging in an alien land. Bharati 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. Mukherjee, moulded and transformed by the cultures of her countries of origin, movement and settlement has earnestly engaged herself in re-conceptualising the idea of diaspora as a profitable affair as opposed to the popular belief that render immigration and displacement as conditions of loss. Her novels are bulging with women protagonists of staunch spirit and celebrating credence who win the tussle with cultural, conflict and in the process involve and emerge as winners. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how Mukherjee's heroine Jasmine in her novel of the same name involves her self with cultural changes, endeavour for self-realisation and finally takes control of her destiny.

Keywords : Destiny; Americanisation; immigration; trauma; odyssey

Bharati Mukherjee is one of the major novelists of Indian diaspora who have achieved enviable position within a comparatively short creative span. As an expatriate in the United States, she has captured evocatively the Indian immigrant experience in her five novels and two collections of short fiction. The creative odyssey that started with *The Tiger's Daughter* and produced *Leave it to Me* recently has kept her seriously involved in exploring the complexities of cross-cultural interactions. She has gone through different cultures and citizenships. She is assimilated in American set-up. Her experience as an expatriate in America and Canada forms the main source of her creative writings. Mukherjee's works focus on the phenomenon of migration, the status of new immigrants and the feelings of alienation often experienced by expatriates, as well as India women and their struggle. Her own struggle first for identity as an expatriate from Indian, then as an Indian exile in Canada and finally as an immigrant in the United State are the stages of her life so far. Bharati Mukherjee has attempted to create the picture of the Indian woman's consciousness. Her narrative is characterised by the distinctive features of her gender, race, religion and homeland. The transformation from Indianness to Americanness is key note of her non-fictional as well as fictional writings.

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Jasmine is the third novel written by Bharati Mukherjee. The protagonist, Jasmine undergoes the experiences of expatriates in the land of multicultural society. She as a fighter for civil rights in Canada, reflects to some extent in *Jasmine's* characters. Jasmine has been created as rebellious and adventurous from her childhood. She rebels against the conventional set-up of the traditional feudal society. Jyoti Vih, the protagonist, is widowed by a terrorist's bomb consequently her fate is a life of isolation and despair. She dislikes her widowhood. Her intense feelings against the feudalism are expressed in the line:

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. (*Jasmine* 97)

The story opens with the village astrologer under the banyan tree foretelling Jasmine's 'widowhood and exile'. It all turns out just as hastily as he says it will, but at the same time Jasmine is a survivor, a fighter and adapter. Her journey through life heads Jasmine through many transformations – geographical locales like Punjab, Florida, New York, Iowa and finally California. At every step Jasmine revolts against her fate and the path drawn for her. The narrative shuttles between past and present, between India of the narrator's early life and America of her present one. The past is Jyoti's childhood in the small village of Hasnapur, Punjab, her marriage to Prakash Vih and the consequences leading to her departure to America.

The fortune-teller chuckes hard on her head and she falls on the ground getting a star-shaped scar on her forehead. The scar is seen as a curse to her but she treats it as her "third eye" and feels like becoming "a sage". She does not believe in the prevalent conviction :

Village girls are like cattle; whichever way you
lead them, that is the way they will go. (46)

To exhibit the force of her belief she refuses to marry the widower, selected by her grandmother and eventually ends up marrying Prakash Vih in a court of love. The cursed and helpless village girl in Jyoti becomes Jasmine, a city woman, wife of a modern man Prakash, who wishes her "to call him by his first name" The christening means much to her :

... he gave me a new name : Jasmine,

He said:

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You are small and sweet and heady, my Jasmine.
 You'll quicken the whole world with your perfume.
 (77)

After marriage she becomes a true wife in the Indian sense of the term identifying her husband's wishes with those of her. Prakash's ardent wish is to secure admission in some obscure American Institute of technology. They start dreaming about their life in America but as the ill-luck would have it, Prakash falls a prey to the Khalsa Lions, the rebels demanding a separate land of Khalistan for Sikhs. On the very eve of his departure Jasmine is rendered heart broken and alone. It is a born-rending tragedy to deter her courage. She plans to visit the supposed institute where Prakash had to get admitted and to burn herself a "sati" on the campus of that engineering school. Jasmine's decision leaves her family aghast and they wonder :

a village girl, going alone to America, without job,
 husband or papers ? (97)

However she travels to the new world on a Shrimper called "The Golf shuttle". The captain of the ship is an ugly fellow, Half-Face,

who had lost an eye and ear and most of his cheek
 in a paddy field in Vietnam. (104)

He takes her to a remote motel of Florida and makes before her indecent proposals. Jasmine requests him that she is a deplorable Hindu widow and her "mission is to bring my husband's suit to America" (114). He laughs at her idea :

Getting your ass kicked halfway around the world
 just to burn a suit. I never heard such a fool notion.
 (114)

He remorselessly rapes Jasmine and this outrage is too much for an Indian widow. Jasmine goes to bathroom and decides:

to balance my defilement with my death. (117)

But before she could do so she discourses that she wants to live. Instantly she realises:

I could not let my personal dishonour disrupt my
 mission. (118)

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She extends her tongue and slices it, a perfect vengeful image of Goddess Kali out to defy and destroy the ‘devil’ who has violated her chastity. Her 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. She burnt out the suitcase and escaped from the tension of her past. Lillian Gordon and mother Ripplemeyer are her ideals who contributed significantly in the formation of Jasmine’s career as an American. She stays with Lillian for a week. She meets Taylor, who is a real professor. He introduced Jasmine to Wylie Hayes; he is an editor at some place. She lives as a care giver for two years with Hayes at Claremont Avenue Apartments, Columbian University. This is the best period of her stay in the states. Taylor gives her a new name “Jase” and she is all excited about her life with the Hayes. She recalls :

Duff was my child, Taylor and Wylie were my
parents, my teachers, my family. (165)

In the new surroundings of marked personal warmth, Jasmine becomes more Americanized, more confident of her proficiency in English. In the second year Taylor arranged a part time job for Jase in the Mathematics Department for answering the phones. Taylor also expressed his love. The incident ends in grim and serious silence by the appearance of Sukhavinder Singh as a hot dog vendor. She felt it was dangerous for Hayes if she stayed at Claremont with them. Sukhi has recognised her and traced her out. She decides to go to Iowa. Jasmine met mother Ripplemeyer in the personal office of the University hospital. He lived with Ripplemeyers for four years. In Baden Iowa she became Jane Ripplemeyer, a resident of Iowa and a member of unsteady and unconventional American family. She was pregnant from Bud Ripplemeyer. He wants to get married before the child is born. She got new life in Baden. Jane rejuvenates Bud. She gives him her trilogy. Gene and Caral Lutz were their neighbours. Darrel, a university graduate is Gene’s son. He is Jane’s secret lover and thinks to marry Jane. Meanwhile Jane gets three letters from Taylors. The end of the novel is pathetic but sentiments have no place in American society. Taylor and Duff’s arrival made Bud sad. Taylor needs his ‘Jane’ and ‘Duff’ her day mummy. Though Jane is pregnant, Taylor is willing to take her with him. Their would be an unorthodox family. Jane was not choosing man but she was caught between the promise of America and the old World Baden and started towards California where ‘Du’ lives with his sister. Du and Jasmine both are the birds of same wings. Both have seen death up close. Jasmine’s speech shows it :

Du and I have seen death up close. We’ve stowed
away on boats like Half-Face’s, we’ve hurtled
through time tunnels. We’ve seen the worst and
survived. Like creatures in fairy tales... (240)

Jasmine in *Jasmine* is very practical and ambitious by disposition who keeps adapting herself to her changing circumstances. She never lets her past become an impediment in the realization of her dreams. She is a survivor in the true sense of the word as she dares to face the hard realities of her life despite adverse circumstances and mounting odds with great courage, strength and determination. Each of Mukherjee's protagonists faces a different situation and has a different approach to life. Like Dimple and Tara, these protagonists come to realise their problems and choose different means to solve them, but do not succeed to the same extent. They are not averse to confronting their problems and do not give in before them.

Mukherjee does not consider Jasmine "a good person". She is a "black mailer" and "a murderer". But she considers her a "love goddess", a "life-force". She is not moral in the conventional sense but her morality is her own way of looking at life. She is a "path-finder" and pierces her way through the dense jungle of problems. Every moment adds to her self-confidence and her experience guides her future course of action. She is fluid and adjusting and justifies her each and every role. Mukherjee's following observation borders on confessional note:

The kinds of woman I write about ... are those who are adaptable. We've all been raised to place, been trained to be adaptable as wives, and that adaptability is working to the women's advantage when we come over as immigrants (Connell, An Interview with Bharati Mukherjee)

Outwardly Jasmine responds very promptly to the behavioural patterns of the American Society and instantly inculcates it in her character. However, a tenacious Indianness seems to cling to the subsurface of her adaptations. Indira Bhatt pertinently comments :

Jasmine takes a bird view of the American life and does not touch the deeper layers of values there. (179)

Bharati Mukherjee's protagonists move into an even wider world by leaving Indian shores far abroad. They try to build a home away from home but fail to break themselves free of the traditional Indian ideas and attitudes. In *The Tiger's Daughter*, Tara's sense of rootlessness is the main cause of her feeling homesick both at Vassar and at Calcutta. She is too western to accept life in Calcutta, and too Indian to be happy and contented in the U.S. Despite the lure of the bised and an American husband, she fails to develop a sense of belonging to the west. Dimple in *Wife* is a hypersensitive and neurotic character. She is a middle-class, ordinary looking girl

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while Jasmine is a rural girl with the courage and determination to face the wide world on her own. Anita Desai's protagonists like Maya and Monish too, lack the strength to face situations. When they crop up, it is only Jasmine who shows the strength to face crisis, overcome obstacles, and the capacity to adapt herself to the ever-changing conditions.

Bharati Mukherjee deals with the theme related to Indian women particularly the problem of cross-cultural crisis and ultimate search for identity. In the novel, *Jasmine* Bharati Mukherjee takes up the theme of cross-cultural conflicts. She writes how the female protagonist tries to tackle the problem of loss of culture and endeavours to assume a new identity in the U.S. The protagonist—Jasmine leaves her country to fulfil her husband's wishes. On reaching the U.S. She begins to search for self-independence she struggles hard to achieve it and at last she realises that self independence is not to be an Indian and American but to have peace with herself, Sumita Roy aptly remarks that :

Consequently to read Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* is an ambitious endeavour to outline the life of a woman engaged in a serious quest for values in rewarding (Roy 7-8)

The novel is in fact, a saga of suffering of an immigrant woman in an alien culture. Yet, it is journey towards the fulfilment of wishes what she cherished in her heart. Mukherjee has tried to show her feminist assertion to illustrate how a woman can equal a man in all respects. She would neither surrender nor be a subordinate to anyone.

Urwashi Kumari

Research Scholar, Dept. of English
Magadh University, Bodh-Gaya

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