

Displacement And Identity Crisis: A Study Of Cross-Cultural Confrontation In Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

Pinky

Research Scholar of English,
Singhania University,
Jhunjhunu (Rajasthan)

Dr Sandeep Kumar

Assistant Professor of English
B.A.R Janta College,
Kaul (Kaithal),

Every immigrant experiences injustice, inequality, discrimination, biases, prejudices and a threat to cultural identity in the unfamiliar country. Adjusting with the social, economic, political, psychological and environmental changes is also a challenge. The abrupt change in the lifestyle, culture, status, society causes emotional and psychological problems. Adjusting with the changing scenario of their lives is a challenge. The Indian Diaspora focuses on the varied aspects of life abroad. The Indian women Diaspora writers have created a niche for themselves in the literary world. Writers like Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri and many others have taken great pains to focus on the world of immigrants. These immigrant writers reflect, on one hand, their attachment to their motherland and on the other hand, their feeling of alienation and rootlessness. Diasporic writings also known as expatriate writings give voice to the traumatic experiences of the writers when they are on the rack owing to the clash of two cultures or the racial discrimination they undergo. To most of the diasporic writers, immigration is not a delectable experience. They often find themselves sandwiched between two cultures. The feelings of nostalgia, a sense of loss and anxiety to reinvent home obsess them, consciously or unconsciously. They

all voice the anguish of the people, living for away from their native land and being discriminated on the grounds of race, colour or creed.

Bharati Mukherjee is one of the most significant contemporary novelist and short story writers whose writings have received world – wide recognition. Like many other post-modern writers, she has taken up the problems and experiences faced by the Indian immigrants in the US or the Western world. The real strength of the modern literary imagination lies in its evocation of the individual's predicament in terms of alienation, immigration, expatriation, exile and his quest for identity. Mukherjee's stories have expanded to include the narratives of refugees and immigrants from other Asian countries as well as the voices of long-settled European Americans and Canadians. Bharati Mukherjee states:

I see myself as an
American writer in
the tradition of other
American writer
parents or
grandparents had
passed through Ellis
Island. Indianness is
now a metaphor, a
particular way of

partially
comprehending the
world (Mukherjee
3).

In her creative career of more than thirty years, Mukherjee has been engaged in redefining the idea of feminism and the diaspora as a process of gain, contrary to conventional perspective that depicts immigration and displacement as a condition of terminal loss and the condition becomes worse in terms of female immigrants. But in her fiction woman is always strong, determined, and assertive. Her fiction convinces that gender is a category open to variation and changes according to place time and situation. Most of her novels present the issues related to women and their identity in the society. They are typical representatives of young women particularly of the Third World countries, who cherish their dreams of immigration to America in pursuit of higher education, higher wages and finally to settle down there permanently. Mukherjee's depiction of women and their different relationship portrays the dominance of patriarchal practices of traditional society and their liberation and empowerment from this set status.

In fact the novel *Jasmine* is an account of the protagonist's various transformations from Jyoti to Jasmine, from Jase to Jane- and each time we encounter a different woman in her. She is a fighter, a survivor, and an adapter. This is the story of Jyoti, an Indian immigrant who is a village girl of Hasanpur in Punjab. Jyoti's childhood was spent in a small village. She being the seventh child of her parents is undesirable and curse for them. In the midst of her traditional village, Hasanpur, Jasmine is in quest for freedom. Her soul longs to fly high in the sky without having any bondage. She rebels against the blind beliefs and

superstitions prevailing in her small village and argues against the fate which is adumbrated by the astrologer by saying: "Fate is fate. When Beulah's bridegroom was fated to die of snake bite on their wedding night, did building a still fortress prevent his death?" (*Jasmine* 2)

Bharati Mukherjee shows Jasmine repudiating centuries old ugly Indian tradition of marriage after checking the boy's horoscope. She marries a Christian boy Prakash in the court and from there Jyoti becomes Jasmine - a city woman and wife of a modern man. 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)



The heroine's problems do not culminate in the resolution of tying a knot of marriage or walking out of it but to combat the challenges. The collapse of the heroine's submission to convention, aims to establish her independence. But, unfortunately, Jasmine's husband, Prakash's life proves to be very short and he falls a prey to the Khalsa Lions, the rebel demanding a separate land of Khalistan for Sikhs. Her grandmother reproaches her for her modern outlook of her marriage 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 picked none of this would have happened...God was displeased. God send that Sardarji boy to do that terrible act (*Jasmine* 98).

The reaction of Jasmine against this shows the assertive side of the heroine and the strong-willed power of her character. She blazes forth: Dida, I said, if God send Sukhi to kill my husband and then I renounce God, I spit on him (*Jasmine* 89). Jasmine decides to go to America, on forged papers and documents, to burn her as 'sati' in the campus of the same engineering college where her husband was admitted for study, as it becomes clear from the following statement: A village girl going alone to America without job, husband or papers? (*Jasmine* 97). Here we see Jasmine getting attached with the ancient Indian traditional practices where a woman becomes *sati* after her husband's death. But actually what comes into mind at this course of action is that though Jasmine is a freedom loving woman at global level, yet her heart is purely Indian and it denies continuing the

life without the love of her husband. Besides this another thing that comes into light is that she does not want to live the life of a widow and suffer all those that a widow in the society is subjected to. Here we can see the strength of a woman who has decided to move on a perilous journey to the new world to fulfill her husband's dream. Let's hear it in the protagonist's own words:

My husband was obsessed with passing exams, doing better, making something more of his life than Fate intended...If you could first get away from India, then all fates would be cancelled... We'd be on the other side of the earth, out of God's sight (*Jasmine* 85).

Here the pain of a woman can be clearly felt who wants to do anything in order to fulfill the last wish of her deceased husband. Jasmine too with the same spirit to fulfill the dreams of her husband leaves for America without having any clue of her forthcoming life. She travels to New York on a ship, where the captain of the ship, an ugly fellow, half-faced (a nickname as one side of the face was badly damaged in war) who had lost an eye, ear and most of his cheek, remorselessly rapes Jasmine and this outrage is too much for an Indian widow to tolerate. She decides to finish her life but before she could do so, the woman inside her realizes that actually she wants to live and her personal dishonor cannot disrupt her mission. She decides that in spite of ending her life she will destroy the devil that has outraged her chastity. She transforms herself into the image of vengeful goddess Kali. She extends her tongue and slices it; the blood oozing out gives her the perfect image of the goddess of destruction. She kills the demon and for some moment gets perturbed and in this state of mind she reacts:

No one to call to, no one to disturb us.
Just me and the man who raped me,

the man I had murdered. The room looked like a slaughter house, blood has congealed on my hands, my chin, my breast...I was in a room with a slain man, my body blooded was walking death, death incarnate (*Jasmine* 119).

Jasmine's killing of half face is a kind of herself assertion. Her decision to kill herself first is a decision of a woman who lives for her deceased husband but the woman who kills half faced is prompted by her will to live and continue her life facing the challenges that come on her way. She says:

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 could be a plenty of time to die...i extended my tongue and sliced it (*Jasmine* 117).

Bharati Mukherjee brilliantly fuses two archetypal images to enact this killing: the one of kali, the goddess of destruction and strength and another of the broken pitcher in which there is no difference between the inside and the outside and "we are just the shells of the same absolute." (p.15). It also symbolizes the death of her older self by the symbolic burning of her dishonored clothes and out of the ashes raises her new self that wants to live. 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 (Dayal 71). The credit goes to Bharati Mukherjee for transforming a village girl into the goddess of strength and showing that women are not meek and submissive but they are strong willed and assertive by nature. Her silence preserves the biggest storm in her and when it comes to personal honor, she, like the goddess, can punish the wrong doer and also kill and finish the biggest demons. She also

brings out the agonizing evil side of the society where the other sex becomes demon when it comes to physical gratification. At one place, Jasmine says:

For the first time in my life I understood what evil was about. It was about not being human...It was a very simple, very clear perception, a moment of truth, the kind of understanding that I have heard comes at the moment of death (Dayal 116).

She is reborned by the act of killing; to punish the monster in disguise she begins her journey. She had burned herself in the funeral pyre of her clothes behind in a motel in Florida. Here the novelist once again invokes the archetypal image of a broken pitcher and says that the pitcher is broken now and her body, which is merely the shell, is soon to be discarded to get reborned and her soul will find a new habitation:

I said my prayers for the dead clutching my Ganpati. I thought. The pitcher is broken. Lord Yama, who had wanted me, who had courted me, and whom I'd flirted with on the long trip over, had now deserted me...My body was merely the shell, soon to be discarded. Then I could be reborn,

debts and sins all paid for (Dayal 120-121).

The sanctity about the body is lost and she learns that body is a mere covering, which can be discarded when corrupted. The setting of the novel is of nineteenth century. The situation of women during this period was that women were expected to remain subservient to their fathers and husbands. Their occupational choices were also extremely limited. The middle- and upper-class women generally remained captive at home, caring for their children and running the household. The lower-class women often did work outside the home, but usually were too poorly-paid domestic servants or laborers in factories and mills. During this time the strong outcome of *Jasmine* by Bharati Mukherjee was widely accepted by the critics and readers because it showed the assertive side of the female protagonist.

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