

Exploring The Complexities Of Cross-Cultural Interactions: A Study Of Bharati Mukherjee's Jasmine

Priya Nair

Assistant Professor of English
NAM College, Kallikkandy

Abstract

There is a paradigm shift in the writings of Indian writers in English with the emergence of modern Indian women writers. These women writers have moved away from traditional depictions of meek, docile and self-sacrificing women to confident female characters searching for space and identity of their own. Many women writers of Indian Diaspora have brought to light the issues confronted by Indian immigrants especially women like cross-cultural dilemma, ethnic struggle, alienation, estrangement and identity crisis.

Among the Indian Immigrant Writers, Bharati Mukherjee holds a prominent place. Mukherjee deals with various issues like immigrant sensibility, search for identity, confrontation between values, trying to establish one's individual identity in an alien culture. The present paper is confined to the study of "Exploring the Complexities of Cross-cultural Interactions: A Study of Bharati Mukherjee's Jasmine". The protagonist of the novel Jasmine experiences a state of exile, a sense of loss, the pain of separation and bewilderment. Despite facing such trauma, Jasmine develops a quest for identity in an alien land. Jasmine, the protagonist of the novel, goes through several transformations during her journey of life in America, from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jane, and often experiences a deep sense of estrangement. Consequently that results in a fluid state of identity. This journey becomes a tale of moral courage, a search for self-awareness and self-assertion.

Keywords: Identity, Diaspora, Immigration, Indian Writing in English, Culture

The Sphere of modern literature has been not confined to the rising tide of globalization. The works of literature of contemporary writers are not confined to the borders of nations and cultures. In the modern era, migrant writing has been one of the most popular trends. Modern Indian women writers have embarked on making their new mark on English novels. Several talented Indian women writers are able to establish themselves by bringing about a change of interest among the readers and thereby emphasizing the necessity to face a new reality.

The theme of alienation and quest for identity get reflected in her novels effectively. Her female characters are not ordinary women. They are adventurers and explorers rather than refugees and outcastes. They are portrayed as part and parcel of new changing America, the land of immigrants having an immigrant culture. Gaijan remarks in this regard,

Bharati Mukherjee has skillfully portrayed Indian Women. Man's migration and adjustment with the new world is considered as adventurous or heroic but the same adventures of women are considered from different angles. Woman suffers during her journey to get adjusted with the change (Gaijan 96).

Through Jasmine Bharati Mukherjee explores the complexities of cross-cultural interactions through a series of adventures which the protagonist, Jasmine undertakes during her journey. Jasmine, the central character of the novel, takes her life into her own hands and makes herself an American. Her journey, which is marked by widowhood, murder, rape, illegal documents and an uncanny instinct to survive through all situations, leads Jasmine through many transformations - Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase and Jane. At every step Jasmine is faced with a loss of identity but she manages to evolve a new identity at every stage. Thus, through Jasmine, Mukherjee traces the significant milestone of an immigrant's final absorption in an adopted cultural milieu.

Born as Jyoti in the small village of Hasnapur in the district of Punjab, India, Jasmine marries a broad-minded young Indian man named Prakash Vihj who then renames her Jasmine. While in India, Jasmine believes that being American is equivalent to being white, and when Prakash shows her a brochure for the Florida International Institute of Technology, Jasmine is surprised to see just how diverse America actually is. Jasmine also has a rather negative conception of the sexuality of American women, and she worries about Prakash studying there because "there will be all those hot-blooded American girls. You know what they are like" (Mukherjee, Jasmine 91). At this point in the novel, Jasmine is oblivious to the complexities of racial and ethnic identities in America, and rather conservative in her attitudes toward female sexuality.

For Jasmine, the trauma of her rape results in the greatest change in her identity; the experience that breaks her down the most is also the one that builds her up and allows her to come into her own. Thus, Jasmine's identity is paradoxically formed not through constructions alone, but also destructions of her existing self.

Jasmine then meets Lillian Gordon, the woman who provides her with a temporary home while teaching her how to "become American," or at least begin the process of assimilation. Lillian is the next figure in Jasmine's life to rename her, bestowing upon her the Westernized nickname "Jazzy", a symbol of her entrance into and acceptance of American culture. When Jasmine moves with Lillian, she learns how to walk, dress and speak so that she will blend in more easily, for "...if you walk and talk American, they'll think you were born here, Most Americans can't imagine anything else" (Mukherjee, Jasmine 134-135).

Jasmine suppresses her sexuality because she associates it with the shame and dread of her rape by Half-Face. Instead, she attempts to bury it under a change of personality: a transformation into a woman who is confident and refined but somewhat asexual, and to a certain degree, the woman that she believes Taylor wants her to be.

As the relationship progresses, Jasmine cannot ignore her attraction to Taylor nor his to her. Taylor views Jasmine as a sexual being, and he embraces her different ethnicity but without orienting her into an eroticized fantasy. Jasmine realizes that her desire to change for Taylor was not only unnecessary, but also born out of what she believes to be her own desire to erase her associations with her sexuality. "Taylor didn't want to change me. He didn't want to scour and sanitize the foreignness... I changed because I wanted to" (Mukherjee, Jasmine 185). At this point, Jasmine appears to be expressing a change in the nature of her agency, and it seems that she is taking full responsibility for the creation of her new identity. As compared to Prakash's creation of Jyoti, Jasmine thinks she is assuming a new identity because she wants to, and not only for the man in her life. While Half-Face did in fact elicit a desire within Jasmine to change, it was a desire born out of a violent response to her rape. In contrast, when she is with Taylor, Jasmine's transformation seems to stem not from a reaction, but rather from her very own yearning for personal change.

Jasmine loses even her agency of self-expression when the past enters her present through the figure of Sukhwinder, the killer of her husband. Thus her self-perception is suddenly complicated when she is made to realize her former identity. Due to the simultaneous existence

of the past and present, memories of India and her current life in America, Jasmine is forced to view herself from the perspectives of "Jasmine," "Jase," and "Jassy" all at once.

It becomes evident from the novel that Jasmine does not ever rename herself, for it is always the significant figures in her life that choose her name. With each new identity, Jasmine believes that she is acquiring more agencies in its development. Jasmine will always be disrupted, for destruction is the manner in which she ultimately transforms and recreates herself.

Thus, in this novel, agency is not equated with the individual's total power to transform herself, but rather it is the ability to develop an identity that is based upon the perceptions and desires of others as well as the destruction of the existing aspects of one's identity.

America becomes as migratory as Jasmine herself, for while she once idealized America as the paradigm of unity and cohesion, she soon finds that each new city presents her with another aspect of American life, just as each new location results in the creation of another identity for her.

It is difficult to know the real self of Jasmine because the fluidity of herself emerging from one experience to another erases the edges of her identity. The speed and the incomprehensible compulsion of changing relationships in America reduce Jyoti to a mere creature struggling to go on with life breaking into fragments like a broken pitcher. The Americanization of Jasmine is not her liberation though it hints at breaking of the rigid behavioural norms of the traditional Indian society. Though bold and assertive, still Jasmine's character delimits the definition of woman as a function. In America she takes the support of men such as Prof: Vadhera, Mr. Taylor or the banker Bud Ripplemeyer. The only positive step in the direction of establishing her selfhood is that she has exercised her freedom of choice.

Jasmine, who is subjected to multiple codes of society and geographical locale, assimilates herself to the mainstream culture of the adopted land. The past has to be wiped out.

Bharati Mukherjee admits that life of an immigrant involves a series of reincarnations. In one of her interviews, she has disclosed.

I have been murdered and reborn at least three times, the very correct 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 (Nabar 20).

The shifting of Jasmine's identity from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jane to Jase is suggestive of the death of one personality and an emergence of a new one but it does not have negative-implications.

It is difficult to know the real self of Jasmine because the flexibility of herself emerging from one experience to another erases the edges of her identity. The speed and the incomprehensible compulsion of changing relationships in America reduce Jyoti to a mere creature struggling to go on with life. Thus Bharati Mukherjee explores the immigrant sensibility, recognizing its duality as well as its flexible identity.

Conclusion

This article discussed the impact of globalization on modern literature, particularly focusing on the trend of migrant writing by contemporary Indian women writers. The analysis centers around Bharati Mukherjee's novel "Jasmine," highlighting the protagonist's journey of identity transformation in the context of migration to America. The themes of alienation, quest for identity, and the complexities of cross-cultural interactions are explored through Jasmine's experiences, including her marriage, rape, and the process of assimilation into American culture. The narrative underscores the fluidity of Jasmine's identity, which undergoes multiple transformations, reflecting the challenges and opportunities of immigrant life. The author, Bharati Mukherjee, is noted for skillfully portraying the struggles and evolution of Indian women in a new cultural milieu, emphasizing the need for a flexible identity in the face of changing relationships and societal expectations.

Works Cited

- Mukherjee, Bharati. *Jasmine*. New York: Grover Press, 1989.
- Dhawan, R.K. Ed. *The Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee A Critical Symposium*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1996.
- Christine Gomez. "The On-Going Quest of Bharati Mukherjee from Expatriation to Immigration" in *The Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee A Critical Symposium* Ed. R.K. Dhawan. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1996.
- Jasbir Jain. "Foreignness of Spirit: The World of Bharati Mukherjee's Novels". *Journal of Indian Writing in English*, XIII No. 02 July 1985.
- R.K.Dhawan Ed. *The Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee A Critical Symposium*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1996.
- M.B Gaijan. "Indian Woman in America and Canada: A Study in Connection with Bharati Mukherjee's *The Middleman and Other Stories*". *Indian Women Writings in English* Ed. M.F. Patel. Jaipur: Mark Publishers, 2011.
- Renu Josan. "A Study in Globalization, Alienation and Quest for Identity". *The Quest*. Ed. Ravi Nandan Sinha Vol. 27 No. 1 June 2013, New Delhi: Anubhuti Foundation, 2013.