Multiculturalism in Bharati Mukherjee’s Novel *Jasmine*

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Abstract

In the postmodern era, when identities are paradoxically diminished and expanded, terms like globalisation and multiculturalism have evolved to characterise the new world order. While the globe continues to shrink into a global village in which differences become indistinguishable from similarities, civilizations and groups outside the prevailing ideology find methods to assert their uniqueness. The purpose of this Paper is to examine the identity problem that has resulted from Indian migration to the United States of America, as well as the nostalgia that has accompanied immigration and other difficulties. Additionally, the cross-cultural struggle is discussed extensively, with allusions to Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* from multicultural and feminist viewpoints. On the other side, such misunderstanding about the subject results in identity crisis, which may be defined as the inability to establish a definite position for oneself.

Keywords: Globalization, Multiculturalism, Identity and Immigration.

In the postmodern world, the concept of identity is in an ironical condition for the reason that identities are multiplied in a richness of various combinations within multicultural societies while they are reduced to a single dimension in the hands of globalization. The concept of post-colonialism permeates all diasporic discussions. Literature on the diaspora deals extensively with problems of location, travel, crossing boundaries, identity, and so on. Both Gayatri Spivak and Edward Said stress the effect of culture and empire on post-colonial literature. Edward Said expressed Orientalism as “a western style for dominating, restructuring, heaving authority over the orient” (3). Gayatri Spivak has voiced her views about subaltern. ‘Subaltern’ means the colonized/oppressed subject whose voice has been silenced. Both Colonialism and patriarchy resulted in the oppression of women and it is really difficult for the subaltern to articulate her point of view and “there is no space from where the subaltern subject can speak.”

Multiculturalism in India serves as a marker of the country’s pluralism. A state’s political identity has always been heavily
influenced by its language. Each state is free to speak its own language and practise its own traditions inside its borders. Religions and caste systems are intertwined in India since the country is such a diverse nation. A mode of life style is connected to other fellows of the similar group belonging to a particular tradition, region and culture. Culture and intellectual structure are unique to each human community. Ethnic pluralism is a beneficial concept in India since it allows all people to openly practise their cultures and put forth their own meaning of India. Rootlessness, racial prejudice, identity crisis, displacement, cross-cultural contacts, nostalgia, and marginalisation are common themes in diasporic literature. Many of India’s best authors have relocated to the United States, Canada, and other European countries, where they have encountered a variety of cultural differences. One can see the fusion of cultures and the longing for home in their paintings. The distinctiveness of diasporic literature has earned it the title of a great work since readers may trace multicultural features while reading. The Indo-American community has produced some of the greatest writers of our time as it is one of the most influential diasporas in the literary world.

Bharathi Mukherjee, an award-winning Indian-born American author, is known as a writer of immigrants’ experiences. Among her works are the novels The Tigerʼs Daughter, Wife, Jasmine, The Holder of the World, and Leave it to Me. She has also published short tales such as Darkness and The Middleman and Other Stories. The Middleman and Other Stories and novels like Jasmine address the internal cultural conflicts of her immigrant characters. She is, without a doubt, the pinnacle of South Asian immigrant literature. Indian expatriate isolation is addressed in Mukherjee’s debut novel, The Tigerʼs Daughter. As she was born in India and later immigrated to the United States, her life is a shining example of how two cultures can coexist harmoniously. She is well-versed in the difficulties of navigating two cultures, which comes through in her writing. Writing, according to her, is always challenging the status quo. In a press conference, Mukherjee stated that she thought of herself as an American writer, and not as an Indian Diasporic writer. Hyphenation may be off limits to her, but her origins are not. She enjoys attending the Durga Pooja festival and wears an Indian sari on occasion.

Mukherjee’s novel, Jasmine, discusses the cultural transition the protagonist experiences throughout the narrative. Immigration and integration are also themes in this work, both physically and psychologically. Bharati Mukherjee adapts the methodology of Americanization by identifying a young Indian woman’s personal experience of distress as she tries to forge a new authenticity for herself. Self-identity and integration are examined by Mukherjee. Jasmine’s name is always changing to suit her various circumstances. Immigrants are compelled to act in accordance with the laws and customs of their new country.

As a means of survival for newcomers, Mukherjee examines absorption, adaptation, and conversion in her book Jasmine. After Prakash Vijh’s death, Jasmine migrates to the United States, only to be rescued by Lillian Gordon, who helps her evacuation to Iowa, where she lives with Bud and their adopted son Du before finally deciding to leave with Taylor and Duff in hopes of a better life. All of these events show Jasmine’s immigrant mindset. In her essay, Jasmine discusses the process of amalgamation that occurs when two or more cultures merge. The novel’s heroine, Jasmine, goes through several transformations as an expatriate in America, including a sense of loss, the anguish of separation, and sheer perplexity. Because of the frequent experiences with a profound sense of solitude, Jyoti’s identity tends to shift from time to time from Jasmine to Jane. One’s search for self-identity and consciousness becomes the theme of this voyage. As an immigrant from India who has been uprooted from her homeland, Jyoti makes a heroic attempt to integrate herself into this new and strange environment.

When the central protagonist, Jasmine, undergoes a series of identity shifts during the course of the novel, the reader is left with a feeling of unpredictability. She defies the rigid and patriarchal
Indian culture that she grew up in, where her father and brothers are in charge of her every move and define what it is to be a woman. “village girls are cattle; whichever way you lead them that are the way they will go” (JME46). An educated and sophisticated individual is Jyoti’s ideal husband, as she has no faith in dowries or traditions. As a result, she finds Prakash, a modernist. Jyoti is inspired to study English through Prakash. Through his contemporary views, he transforms Jyoti into the exquisite aroma flower known as Jasmine. It provides her with some respite from the nauseating odour of Hasnapur. The new name gives her a complete identity makeover. With Prakash by her side, Jasmine is experiencing the high of a lifetime. He fully transforms Jyoti: “To break off the past, he gave me a new name: Jasmine”. He said, “You are small and sweet and heady, my Jasmine. You will quicken the whole world with your perfume.” (JME 77)

A country girl who lives under the protection of her father and brothers begins to change. Prakash, her conventional American spouse, who grants her complete freedom of movement. In their minds, they see themselves living in the United States. Khalistan Lions kill Prakash, who is a victim of the Khalsa Movement. In a split second, Jasmine vanishes off the face of the Earth and vanishes from consciousness. She’s always got a positive attitude, no matter what. For the sake of her husbands’sati’, she wants to know where he intends to enrol at the Institute. Jasmine’s joy will be short-lived. She is still a widow, and she must choose between following her family’s strict traditions and performing Sati, or continuing to live as Jasmine in the United States.

In a patriarchal society, Jyoti remains a standout figure. In the words of Chris Barker, she doesn’t want to conform to society’s rigid gender roles as “the cultural assumptions and practices that govern the social constructions of men, women and their social relations” (240). Jyoti wishes to complete her studies, dreaming of becoming a doctor in future. She enjoys listening to men’s chat since they frequently discuss topics that are unfamiliar to her. As a result, Jyoti’s initial struggle is torn between her traditional upbringing and her aspirations for a more modern lifestyle. When she leaves rural India, she loses her feeling of belonging and dreams of a life in union with Prakash. However desirous she is of a more contemporary existence, not even she is willing to break free of traditional patriarchal norms 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 184)

She is caught in the middle of two worlds, one as a “native land” and the other as an immigrant. She has no problems travelling to the United States using fictitious identification documents. However, she becomes aware of the destiny of her thoughts and desires, and thus starts her metaphorical journey of metamorphosis, displacement, and a search for identity. When she meets Taylor, Jasmine undergoes her next transition from a devoted traditional Indian wife to Jase, and she goes on to become Bu’s Jane. The author paints a picture of a gradual and upbeat journey through this process of conversion and change. Throughout the book, Jasmine reveals her history to build a new cultural identity by teaching the new longings, skills, and lifestyles of her readers. It’s not just her mindset that’s changed, but her connection with men as well.

In her event with many Jyoti and Jasmine personalities, where Jasmine feels like she floats between the traditional and contemporary worlds, Jasmine maintains the morality and culture of two divergent realms. After meeting Lillian Gordon, Jasmine begins her integration process by learning how to be an American. For her training, Lillian Gorden refers to Jazzy as a “Jazzy” and calls her such. She makes an effort to adapt to the new circumstances. Another person’s life is being remade from the ground up. She tries to erase all traces of her Indian heritage and forget about her history.
Prakash wants to perceive Jasmine as a self-motivated individual, not as a product of Indian society’s expectations. As a result of his untimely death, Jasmine is now forced to make a difficult choice between returning to her previous life or taking the risk of a new one. With her choice to go to the United States, she has finally completed her revolt against Indian patriarchy. She makes it obvious at this point that she is adamant as she is “a widow in the war of feudalisms” (JME 88). With Jyoti and Jasmine, Mukherjee emphasises a distinction between her protagonist’s Indian and American selves. As a result, this book is a mashup of two stories that take place in two separate nations. Jyoti’s survival under the hegemony of traditional patriarchy and her rebirth with the help of Prakash who gives her a new name and a new life is the focus of the novel. Despite the fact that Jyoti’s rebirth as Jasmine is possible only with the help of a man, Prakash is able to help her. Starting with her departure for the United States, Jasmine embarks on a transformative and disorienting journey distant from her native nation.

The travel is deemed unlawful. Therefore, the only way she can go to the fantasy realm she longs for is through the back door. In the first glimpse of the motel where she would spend the night in this new country, Jasmine’s American Dream is shattered, but the worst is yet to come. In addition to raping her, the guy known as Half Face humiliates her. Jasmine is so enraged after being raped and humiliated by him, she murders Half Face in order to avenge her treatment. Half Face’s filthy hands have encroached on all that she holds dear. Before she leaves the motel, she burns them all in a metal garbage can, mimicking a sati rite.

Jasmine, a normal Indian woman, chooses to take care of herself. When she saw this depraved act, her morals as an Indian lady was outraged and she recognised that the loss of virginity for a woman means a life of death for her. Using the Goddess Kali’s destructive power. She fills her rapist with her own sex and kills him. As a metaphor for the loss of her older self, she burns all her shameful clothing. For changing the village girl to the good of strength and showing that women are not mean and subservient, but rather strong-willed and aggressive by nature, the author is to be thanked. When she punishes the wrongdoer, she exposes the excruciating scope of a society in which the other sex is reduced to the status of a monster in the name of sexual fulfilment. A few days after she kills the rapist, Jasmine encounters Lillian Gordon, a well-wisher for illegal immigrants like herself. He helps her get in touch with Vadhara’s professor. When she spends some time with them, she gets an opportunity to observe the family’s effort to keep their Indian culture alive in a foreign nation, but Jasmine is unable to comprehend it and thinks it’s fake. Jasmine is forced to wear saris in Vadhara’s house since she is a widow. She is not a fan of Indian culture, and so she fled to New York City in order to get away from it. It’s possible that the widow may observe Jasmine being influenced by Indian culture when she was a toddler. With Taylor and Wylie, and their adoptive daughter Duff, she re-enters society in Mahatten. She accepts the American way of life and dresses like a young American lady in her new life. She begins her life in a consumerist society and culture in the United States. In spite of her efforts to adapt to the Western way of life and accept Western values, Jasmine’s cultural sensitivity is evident when she learns that Duff was adopted by Taylor. Because of American consumerist culture, Jasmine realises that Taylor’s relationship with Wylie isn’t going anywhere for a long time. Jasmine’s joy is short-lived, and she worries that the terrorist responsible for Prakash’s death may hurt Taylor and Duff as well. So she has decided to travel to Lowa to defend them. Bud Ripple mayor introduces her to his wife, Jane, and they begin a new life together. When Jasmine becomes pregnant, one can tell that she has been living with males she needs and has adopted American society, which has caused her to feel guilty about acquiring the cultural ideals. As a result, one can observe the class and conflict between Indian and American cultural ideals at every step. Indian ideals are continually beaten by the values of American culture. Taylor and Duff’s feelings for Taylor and Duff were put in jeopardy by Jane’s
inability to forget about her connection with Taylor even though she was living with Bud. Her ultimate decision shows that she places greater weight on her personal well-being and is eager to learn about Western ideals.

Hence it is appropriate to conclude that this novel shows how a country girl who grows up in fearful and unsure conditions becomes an independent and strong woman in the United States. As a newcomer, Mukherjee feels the vivacity of life as an immigrant firsthand. Attempts to integrate into the dominant culture are made by immigrants. In order to integrate into the new society, Jasmine undergoes the process of metamorphosis into Jazzy-Jane. After a period of adjustment, Jasmine realises who she is as a new American citizen. When it comes to Indian traditions and culture, Jasmine never shies away from challenging the norms that oppress women in Indian society. She also disdains the moral exploitation of America. Consequently, the criteria of cultural assimilation are examined by an Asian-American immigrant’s life. Jasmine, Mukherjee’s novel about an immigrant family’s cultural integration, provides a wide range of family dynamics. When they are trying to keep the cultural norms of their native ethnicity, they engage in adapting to the dominant US culture’s practises.

All of the characters in Jasmine, from the protagonist Jasmine to the others, are exiles, expatriates, wanderers, and individuals on the go. As refugees from persecution and poverty in the Third World, they are also Americans who move from coast to coast, tiny villages to big metropolises, trading one spouse for another in quest of a dream that seems to evade them time and again. They are a mixed bag. They must pay a heavy price for the boundless opportunities and freedoms that America provides: a sense of dislocation, a lack of a sense of home. Everyone in Jasmine seems dazed and confused by the rapidity of transformations and events.

Mukherjee has delved deep into her subject matter to uncover all of its nuances. A remarkable metamorphosis from a Punjabi rustic to an American occurs in Jasmine’s character. It’s possible that Mukherjee has achieved her goal of introducing to modern American literature the truth of the struggles of immigrants seeking to make a life for themselves in the country. Breaking one’s connection to one’s own culture and overcoming the “aloofness of expatriation” are difficult tasks. Immigrants looking to build a reputation for themselves in the United States can be considered Jyoti as a replica of Jasmine, Jase, and Jane. In quest of a clear sense of self, Jasmine is perpetually “shuttled” back and forth between the East and West, the Ancient and the Modern, the Old and the New.

References