

The Postcolonial Diaspora: Cross-Cultural Conflicts in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

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The postcolonial diaspora of the mid – to the late twentieth century forms an important dimension of the postcolonial engagement with the globalization of cultures. The postcolonial theories aims for an extra – or national solidarity and deals with hybridity and diaspora which have come to characterize mixed or globalized cultures. Diasporic writing, a post – colonial scenario elaborates issues such as marginalization, cultural insularity, social disparity, racism, ethnicity etc. These writings address problems that arise from the transnational space created by a fluid community that is neither at home nor outside. Oscillating between the attractions of home and those from the new world, the migrants wage a constant psychic battle.

The ‘politics of culture’ as addressed by Edward Said in his deliberations on ‘Orientalism’ introduces the theory of migrant sensibility. Cultural politics, as specified by Said, is a component of location / space. Cultural politics becomes the battleground for arguments when the orient moves towards the occident, either for a merger, or to create a ghetto. In this stride towards the new land, there is a simultaneous nostalgia as the native land has its own rich tradition and people which are to be almost forgotten, and the subject is obliged to develop a sensibility which can be phrased as compromise, negotiation and assimilation.

Postcolonial literary theory tends to privilege ‘appropriation’ over ‘abrogation’ and ‘multicultural syncretism’ over cultural ‘essentialism’. The diasporic novel is entirely explicit in its reflection of hybridity of cultures. Positioned on the margins or interstices of two antagonistic national cultures, it claims to open up an in- between space of cultural ambivalence. As Homi Bhabha writes in *The Location of Culture*, such writing refuses to “oppose the pedagogy of the imperialist noun to the inflectional appropriation of the native voice”, preferring instead “to go beyond such binaries of power in order to recognize our sense of the process of identification in the negotiation of cultural politics” (233).

The culture of the Indian diaspora, as Amitav Ghosh points out in his prose piece,

“The Diaspora in Indian Culture”, 2002, is increasingly a factor within the culture of the Indian subcontinent. He elaborates that one of the “interesting features of the cultural representations of space in India is that India has always been constituted as much by the notion of the periphery as it has by the notion of the centre”. He finds that this notion of the periphery has now expanded to include the diaspora which he describes as “that part of itself which which is both hostage and representative in the world outside-it is the mirror in which modern India seeks to know itself”(250).

This paper analyzes the novel *Jasmine* by the Indian–American novelist Bharati Mukherjee from a predominately feminist and postcolonial

perspective. It examines the predicament of the women immigrants in America, as reflected in the life of the woman protagonist in the novel. Life in America with its immigrant problems turns out to be chaotic. This paper also highlights the confusion of gender boundaries, and the historical implications of cross – cultural phenomena, as they emerge in Mukherjee's fiction. Born into a wealthy, traditional Calcutta family in 1940, Mukherjee was raised and schooled in India, Great Britain, and the U.S. where she has lived since the 1980's. She received a Ph.D in English and Comparative literature from the university of Iowa and in the 60's lectured at American universities, and then later moved with her husband, Canadian writer Clark Blaise, to Montreal. After enduring the anti-Asian bigotry and violence that overtook Canada in the 70's, Mukherjee and her husband returned to the U.S. in the 80's.

The author of six highly praised novels, two collections of short stories and a smattering of non-fiction, Mukherjee reflects her personal experiences in crossing cultural boundaries in her writings. Over the course of her career her novels have shifted from an outside – immigrant perspective to an American point of view. The 1975 novel *Wife*, for example, concerns a traditionally raised Bengali woman's isolation in New York City and her subsequent descent into madness, murder and suicide. By contrast, *The Holder of the World* (1993) plays with time and culture from an opposite perspective. Here a young American woman becomes enmeshed in the life of a 17-century relative. She travels to India to track her ancestor, a puritan American woman who ended up as the mistress of an Indian king. This detective/love story plot uses legend as a trope to address the issues of colonialism and war and ambitiously crisscrosses the historical and the contemporary cultures of India and the U.S. In *Leave it to me* (1997) the novel follows the journey of a young American Sociopath who has rejected her adoptive parents and is seeking her roots with a vengeance. Mukherjee weaves together Hindu and Greek mythology to explore her character's complex drive to find who she is or, rather, to "become someone else" (145). Her journey charts the battlegrounds between reality versus fantasy, and eastern versus western cultures.

In *Jasmine* (1989) 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 via Florida, New York and Iowa. Jasmine the title character and narrator was born in a rural Indian village called Hasanpur in Punjab. She tells her story as a twenty four year old pregnant widow, living in Iowa with her crippled lover, Bud Ripplemayer. It takes two months in Iowa to relate the most recent developing events. But during that time, Jasmine also relates biographical events that span the distance between her Punjabi birth and her American adult life. These past biographical events inform the action set in Iowa. Throughout the course of the novel the title character's identity, along with her name changes and changes again from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jazzy to Jane. The narrative shuffles between past and present, between India of her early life and America of her present one. The past is Jyoti's childhood in the small village of Punjab, her marriage to Prakash who gave

her the name Jasmine. The present is her life as Jane in Iowa, where she is a live-in-companion to Bud Ripplemayer a small town banker.

The story revolves round Jasmine who leaves India for the U.S. after her husband's murder, only to be raped and eventually returned to the position of a caregiver through a series of jobs. Jasmine sways between the past and the present attempting to come to terms with the two worlds, one of "nativity" and the other as an "immigrant".

Thus caught between the two cultures of the east and the west, the past and the present, Jasmine constantly shuffles in search of a concrete identity. She debates whether to act according to the desire for freedom which the American life offers her or to be dutiful. The Indian consciousness in which she was raised, embodied by Dida, her grandmother, supports duty. The western consciousness embodied by her Manhattan employers Taylor and Wylie Hayes encourages desire. Jasmine's first encounter with America is a kind of regeneration through violence. She is raped by an ugly monster called Half Face in a remote Florida motel. Being robbed of her chastity, she tries to kill herself. But at this very juncture she discovers her inner urge to live. She cuts her tongue and blood oozes out of it. Now she is a perfect vengeful image of Goddess Kali, up to kill the monster. She stabs him. After this first act of self-assertion she moves further to New York and lives with Taylor and Wylie Hayes as caregiver to their adopted daughter Duff. She confronts the reality of American society where nothing lasts. As she narrates : "We arrive so eager to learn, to participate, only to find the monuments are plastic, agreements are annulled. Nothing is for ever, nothing is so terrible, or so wonderful, that it won't disintegrate"(163).

In this way through Jasmine Bharati Mukherjee critiques the American society and exposes the inner reality of American life. Jasmine's voice is the dilemma of an uprooted creature seeking for belongingness in a place where relationships are plastic rather than lasting. Finally she settles in a live -in-relationship with a middle aged divorcee Bud, the banker. Later on they add 'Du' a Vietnamese boy from the refugee camp who has survived eating worms and insects. American violence does not spare even the benevolent Bud who is also maimed. Instead of deserting him at this critical juncture, she plays mom to Du and a wife without marriage to Bud. Here we see a marked change in Jasmine's attitude. The girl who murdered Half-Face for violating her chastity, now willingly chooses not only to live with an American as a wife without being married to him but carries his child in her womb also. However when Du leaves for Los Angeles to join his sister, Jasmine who is now Jane feels betrayed for she had started identifying herself with Du because he was also an immigrant like herself. At this time her earlier employer Taylor proposes to her to accompany him and Duff to California and she decides to leave Bud. She explains her act by saying that : "I am not choosing between men, I am caught between the promise of America and Old world dutifulness"(140).

Thus for the first time she decides to live for herself and leaves the 'old world dutifulness' besides demonstrating the American spirit of freedom. In this transcultural novel, Mukherjee represents racial and ethnic identities through attitudes and values regarding East and West. Through exploring

the journey of a woman and her many identities, the influence of language, form, imperialism and postcolonialism contexts become evident. Constructs of people contribute to the ideologies and binarism, of race and ethnicity. Throughout the novel the concept of binarism creates two constructs of East and West, producing racial and ethnic identities and differences. The binary opposition between East and West is reflected and the relationship of India and America is explored. The influence of the Western world on the people of the east and the aftermath of the British imperialism in India is shown through the life of Jasmine.

In *Jasmine* Bharti Mukherjee rejoices the idea of assimilation and like other writers such as Bahadur Tejani, Bernard Mahamud, calls for an end to futile nostalgic engagements with the past and a bold affirmation of the adopted land. Assimilation, they assert, would be the answer to the discontents of diaspora. At the core of all diasporic fictions, nevertheless as is also shown through Jasmine, is the haunting presence of India –and the anguish of personal loss it represents, of absence that engenders an aesthetics of reworlding.

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