



Cross cultural crisis in ‘Bharathi Mukherjee’s Jasmine’

N. Sunantha¹ and G. Kumaresan²

Abstract

Bharathi Mukherjee moves across the cultures. Immigrants leave their homes, usually Calcutta to take up the residence in the United States. Mukherjee writes about early American settlers. The immigrants carry their homes, usually Calcutta to take up residence in the United States. Mukherjee writes about early American settlers. The immigrants carry their original cultures with them and simultaneously must change to survive in the new world. Characters are never fully at home in America, yet when they return to their homelands. The work that she is best known for concentrates on this density of existence as it plays out and across the lives of the immigrants to the United States.

Keywords

Cross cultural crisis, Immigrants, Survival.

^{1,2}Department of English, Bharath Institute for Higher Education and Research, Selaiyur, Chennai-600073, Tamil Nadu, India.

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1. Introduction

Bharathimukherjee was born on July 27, 1940 to an upper middle class Hindu Brahmin family in Calcutta, India. The second of three daughters of Sudhirlal, a chemist, and Bina(Banerjee) Mukherjee. Mukherjee earned a B.A with Honors from the University of Calcutta in 1959. She studied for her master degree in English and ancient Indian culture which she required in 1961. Having planned to be a writer since childhood, Mukherjee went to the University of Iowa in 1961 to attend the prestigious writer’s workshop. She received her M.F.A in 1963, then went on to earn her Ph.D. in English and comparative literature from the university of Iowa in 1969. In 1968, Mukherjee immigrated to Canada with her husband Clark Blaise, a Canadian writer and became a naturalized citizen in 1972. Her 14 years in Canada were some of the hardest of her life, as she found herself discriminated against and treated as she says, as a member of the “visible minority”. She has spoken in many interviews of her difficult life in Canada, the country that she sees as hostile to its immigrants and one that opposes the concept of cultural assimilation. Although those years were challenging, Mukherjee was able to write her first two novels, “the tiger’s daughter” (1971) and “wife” (1975)

while working up to professorial status at Mc Gill university in montreal. During those years, she also collected many of the sentiments found in her first collection of short stories, “darkness” (1985), a collection that in many section reflects the mood of cultural separation while living in Canada.

Bharathi Mukherjee considers her work a celebration of her emotions, and herself a writer of the Indian diaspora who cherishes the “melting pot” of America. Her main theme throughout her writing discusses the condition of asian immigrants in north America, with particular attention to the changes taking place in south asian women in a new world. The characters in all her works are aware of the brutalities and violence that surround them and survivors. Mukherjee has oft been praised for her understated prose style and her ironic plot developments and witty observations. As a writer she has a sly eye with which to view the world, and her characters share that quality. Although she is often racially categorized by her thematic focus and cultural origin, she has often said that she strongly opposes the use of hyphenation when discussing her origin, in order to “avoid authorization” and the “self imposed marginalization that comes with hyphenation”. Rather, she prefer to refer herself as an American of Bengali Indian origin.

Her works connection to the Jewish American writer Bernard Malamud’s and the exiled Indian novelist salmon Rushdie’s represents Mukherjee’s transition from exile to American immigrant. Bharati Mukherjee’s fiction, critical essays and memoirs span the decades of the late twentieth century. Painfully realistic, her work articulates the struggles and

confusions of the world's exiles, aliens and immigrants who seek to define themselves in both their new and old worlds. Although Mukherjee's work is still not widely known, she has enjoyed great critical success, winning multiple prizes, including the national book critics circle award for fiction.

Mukherjee's fiction immigrate to America, they encounter feminism and American representations of Indian women as seductive, wise and all knowing. The women must therefore struggle with their gender and define themselves in new territory. The tremendous difference between two ways of life, leads a person to a feeling of depression and frustration. This could be called culture shock. When a person leaves his own culture and enters another, his own values come into conflict with the new own he finds. In most of the writings including short stories and novels, Mukherjee has depicted the feminine sensibility. Her three novels 'wife', 'tiger's daughter' and 'jasmine' describe the feminine issues. Mukherjee's special insight into American life that of observer participant as Clark Blaise's wife this novel has about it the authentic ring of an experience tested against the pulse of the author's existence.

Mukherjee's own background in real life top family, top school, top caste, top city is worlds apart from that of her poverty-ridden heroine jasmine, living in a shabby dwelling devoid of minimum amenities like water and electricity. The similarity therefore is to use Bharathi Mukherjee's words in the shape of her life and of her desires. Bharathi Mukherjee is concerned about making her picture of Indian life intelligible and interesting to the American readers. But she is too good an artist to distort reality just to capture attention. Instead of writing of backwardness as an area of darkness, she focuses attention on her characters growing awareness of the dark spots in their courageous efforts to discover areas of light.

This search for light, for happiness and fulfilments subtly linked in her fiction to her protagonist's struggle for self-actualization. Jasmine is not prototypically Indian but is shown harbouring a desire for independence and a respect for success that appear incongruous in her Indian setting of poverty, gender discrimination and rigid social conventions. But while Mukherjee stay in Canada, she got various unpleasant experiences, full of confusion and darkness. She writes about her Canadian experiences. In Canada she was frequently taken for a prostitute or shoplifter, frequently assumed to be domestic, praised by astonished auditors that she did not have a 'sing-song' accent.

In comparison with Canada she prefers the united states because there is different 'environment' and different 'society'. Even in the united states she does not have good experiences. She writes 'in the united states, however she see herself in those same outcasts'. She cannot forget her unpleasant Canadian experiences, she writes, 'in Canada i feel isolated, separated in the vastness of this unpopulated country.' In this change a male migrant can face less hurdles and he can easily adjust with the change but female faces many hurdles, which mukherjee herself has felt.

Women has to migrate and transplant herself from one

place to another place in her life, in the childhood at her parents, place then in her husband's place. In this journey of migration and transplantation, sometimes she has to surrender the situation. In this journey is within the homeland, she might overcome the problems but if it is on the alien soul then she has to surrender the situation. This truth is beautifully and realistically depicted in the celebrated novel 'jasmine'.

Bharati Mukherjee in her third novel jasmine has shown a dual cultural shock. Jasmine leaves her respective country in search of her dream. This migration or 'cultural transplant' leads to a crisis of identity and a final reconciliation to the choice. Mukherjee has deliberately avoided the immigrant writer's temptation to fall in the trap of glorifying his native country and to be little and degrade the adopted country. Jasmine works first in an Indian owned motel, then as an pair. And by the end of the story, she is learned to see herself, as she makes love to the man whose child takes care of as a bright pretty girl with no visa, no papers, and no birth certificate. No nothing other than what she wanted to invent and tell a girl rushing wildly in the future an American with an American's freedom to shape her destiny.

Mukherjee's handling of jasmine's illegal immigration into the united states provides some of the novel's best pages. The longest lines between two points is the least detected, jasmine thinks as she moves through the world of refugees and mercenaries and guest workers, you see us sleeping in airport lounge taking out the hundredth time an aerogram promising a job or space to sleep dressed in shreds of national costumes the wilted plumages of intercontinental vagabondage" Mukherjee's stories about immigrants are related to Irish writer argues that the novel jasmine deals with the structure of society, the novel tends to concentrate on what he calls "the lonely voice ." in expanding the sense of marginality into the material of a novel Mukherjee has made her heroine emblematic of this nation of outsiders as a whole but she's done so without losing story's virtues above all its sense of speed and compression its sense of a life distilled into its essence.

In jasmine's childhood a fortune-teller wounds jane on the forehead when she refuses to accept her fortune as fate. Her sister mocks her, but she answers defiantly and calls the mark her third eye. Jane's life may be viewed as a series of escapes from the fate marked so clearly on her forehead. Her journey through life leads jasmine through many transformations. Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase and Jane through large geographical locals like Punjab, Florida, New york, Iowa and finally towards California. At every stage of the life jasmine revolted against her fate and the path drawn for her.

The narrative shifts between the past and the present, between India of her earlier life and America of the present. The past in Jyoti's childhood in the small village of Haraspur, Punjab, her marriage to Prakash, the young ambitious city man, who always thrashed traditions Pygmalion like he had given her a new identity and new name jasmine for she was small, set and heady and would quicken the whole world with her perfume. The present was her life as Jane in Iowa where she



was a live in companion to bud. Ripple Meyer, a small town banker. Bud was fascinated by the foreignness, but he never asked about India. It scared him. He courted her because she was alien. She was darkness, mystery and inscrutability.

In the process of her transformation Jane was seized by a longing to belong. She closely identifies herself with bud's adopted son 'du' a Vietnamese because he was an immigrant like herself. Both had seen death closely. They had hurtled through time tunnels, seen the worst and survived. Both du and jasmine were in a hurry to become American. They tried to forget the nightmares of their early lives. Assimilation in America was easy.

America, the land of dreams had many disillusionments in store for her Lillian Gordon, a kind quaker lady in Florida offered a home and also to several illegal immigrants. "the world's misery was a challenge to her ingenuity". This good Samaritan was tried in the American court for harbouring undocumented. In New York, jasmine was shocked by the sight of beggars, one of whom cursed her as a 'foreign bitch' when she refused his alms. The taxi driver in New York was a migrant doctor from Kabul, who lived like dogs, because they had taken everything from them.

The experience with the professor's family was even more frustrating. The biggest shock to jasmine was the truth of the professor's means of earning a livelihood. He was not a professor but an importer and sorter of human hair. America had not robbed him of his self-respect. The next identity of Jase was thrust on her by the hayse's family, where she worked as a 'care giver'. The twist given to the narrative where jase falls in love with Taylor is a weak link in the chain of events.

The transformation of jyoti had come half-circle. Jyoti was a sati-goddess. Jasmine lived for the future of vijh and wife and jase lived for today. Bharathi Mukherjee supplements jasmine's immigrant experiences with similar experience of letita from Trinidad and Jamaica from Barbados. While Jamaica cried her heart out every night because she was too proud to return back to her native country, Jane was shocked by the switching of relationships in America.

The final crisis of the book comes when Jane is confronted with the souring of the American dream through the suicide of Darrel. Du's departure from home in search for his family destabilizes her. She is caught between her duty towards the cripple bud and her love for Taylor. She makes the final choice. She doesn't feel guilty, but relieved. She has stopped thinking of herself as Jane. She feels potent enough once again to reposition her stars. Time would draw its own conclusions about her true identity. Adventure, risk transformation the frontier is pushing indoors. She cries through all the lives. A close experience of both the worlds the western and the Indian gives Bharathi Mukherjee an authentic and objective perspective with a delicious combination of charm, irony and sympathy. Bharathi Mukherjee pushes her heroine to the edges of her worlds and liberates her for a new world order. One can question whether being an immigrant has been a deterrent to Mukherjee's own creativity as she remains devoid

of the stability afforded by one's root. But it cannot be denied that hers is a voice which demands our attention and respect.

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