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Cultural Reconciliation through Self-Reinvention in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

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Abstract:

The writings of Bharati Mukherjee mainly focus on the lives, experiences, and struggles faced by immigrants in the reconciliation between their dual identities in the new land. Her novel Jasmine not only features the cultural clashes that are prevalent in the cultural exchange, but also migration leads to alienation from its own roots. Jasmine is a novel that deals with immigration history and its impact. Assimilation of the people became prominent only with the advent of the twentieth century and with the development of a new mode of navigation and exploration, which made cultural exchange a more frequent phenomenon. The novel is set in the present, and the story deals with its protagonist, a young Indian woman in the United States of America. She tries to mould herself in the Western way of life and changes her identity in several ways and several times. Her transformation from a girl living in the village of Hasnapur as Jyoti to Jasmine, Jase and finally as Jane living in America shows the fluidity and evolving nature of an immigrant identity. Mukherjee's autobiographical element is dominant in the novel, and we see several changes, displacement and dislocation that she underwent in her own life that are visible in the lives of the protagonist. The identity crisis that is prevalent in the immigrant is evident in the novel. The present paper scrutinises how Jasmine's changing identities allow her to survive personal loss, displacement and cultural alienation during her reconciliation with conflicting cultural influences.

Keywords: Assimilation, Culture, Displacement, Hybridity, Immigrant, Identity, Tradition.

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INTRODUCTION:

Bharati Mukherjee is a prominent Indian women writer who is chiefly known for her depiction of the hapless situation of women

burdened by patriarchal society and ideological dominance is the society that makes women vulnerable to the adverse situations. Her main

focus is on the problems faced by migrant women. Exposed to western society they become easy victims. Also cultural crisis and search for identity and also alienation from the basic roots of society is evident in her works. This paper deals with problematic situation to which the protagonist of the novel Jasmine is confronted to. The word “identity” as defined by Oxford Dictionary is “The characteristics determining who or what a person or thing is”. Identity is not just confined to a word in which name, address and race are important elements but also it has stupendous characteristics with many-fold elements such as nationality, culture and gender. Identity of a person assimilates all the above elements.

From the very initial phase of their development, girls are treated differently to boys in patriarchal society that is prevalent in undeveloped or underdeveloped countries. Adjustment to adverse situations and complying with those situations is taught in the family. Mukherjee deals with women characters who compromise with adverse situations only to emerge as strong character.

Cultural clashes are evident as Eastern culture has a different viewpoint regarding the society; Eastern culture is more confined, more traditional and orthodox in nature while Western culture is vice versa. Migrants from

Asia suffer various problems once they try to establish contact with the foreign world. Jasmine deals with this issue in which foreign contact leads to dissolution of one’s own identity and emergence of a more complicated and hybrid personality.

In the novel Jasmine, the female protagonist named Jyoti belongs to a small village in India, and due to the demise of her husband Prakash, she leaves for America only to fulfil her dead husband’s dreams. The historical point which can be counted as the crucial point at which the Hindu tradition, which is prevalent in the southern part of Asia, and the Western tradition was engrossed in and burdened by centuries of stagnancy and foreign domination, whereas if we talk about the Western civilisation, then it emerged as a champion in the field of science, navigation, technology, in the field of exploration and above all colonization over three-fourths of the world. All these developments led to the formation of two separate civilisations in which one can be regarded as backwards in some respect while Western civilisation was much ahead of its time.

During the period of ninetieth and the beginning of the twentieth century, while Western civilization was trying to explore new arenas in the field of development, industrial

revolution, on the other hand, civilisation in the Asian countries lay dormant in the state and were at the lowest ebb of society. Sociologist Yogendra Singh in his book *Modernisation of Indian Tradition* asserts, “The western tradition was steeped in the philosophies of optimism, of universal progress, rationalism and hedonism” (88)

Despite the domination of Western culture and relative disadvantage, Hinduism was able to survive the onslaught of the time and was able to uphold the best possible aspect in it, and Western culture and its influence remained peripheral and localised in its impact.

Bharati Mukherjee is an Indian-born American novelist and short-story writer who expresses in her writings the cultural changes and theme of alienation that were among the immigrants. Her personal experiences are responsible for the development of such ideas and thoughts that are prevalent even in her works. Immigration from one country to another has a bright future; it opens avenues for new understanding and the assimilation of culture also. But there are certain repercussions regarding the cultural exchange also that it could also lead to identity crisis and can further lead to problems in many forms.

Mukherjee’s work not only features the cultural clashes that are prevalent in the cultural

exchange but also shows that migration leads to alienation from one’s own roots. *Jasmine* is a novel that deals with immigration history and its impact. Assimilation of the people became prominent only with the advent of the twentieth century and with the development of new mode of navigation and exploration that cultural exchange becomes more frequent phenomenon.

The novel is set in the present, and the story deals with its protagonist, a young Indian woman in the United States of America. She tries to mould herself in the Western way of life and changes her identities in several ways and several times. Mukherjee’s autobiographical element is dominant in the novel, and we see several changes, displacement and dislocation that she underwent in her own life is visible in the lives of the protagonist. The identity crisis that is prevalent in the immigrant is evident in the novel.

The story revolves around a seventeen-year-old girl widow. Her husband succumbs to his injuries after the bomb attack he suffers. After the marriage, they had planned to move to Florida, but on account of the death of her husband, she is left to herself, and it is for this reason, that she then decides to move alone. The story of *Jasmine* is filled with many hurdles that she is determined to overcome. In

the beginning of the novel, Jasmine in her paternal house known as Jyoti then expresses her desire to her father that she wanted to be a doctor, “I want to be a doctor and set up my own clinic in a big town” (51). But as she grows, she accepts the desires of others and more or less, to love them and satisfy them is the main occupation that she thinks she has.

Indian subcontinent is known for its patriarchal structure, and chiefly this patriarchal structure is responsible for the subjugation of the free will of women in the Indian sub- continent or other underdeveloped countries. “Village girls are like cattle; whichever way you lead them, that is the way they will go (46). But Jasmine does not confine herself to this identity; rather, she grows with an identity that is true to her own self and accepts new people who come into her life. The immigrants are seen to accept the changes given by Western society, and she compromises with the new identity every time on one hand by adhering to the norms of older values of care, of support and of true love.

Jasmine was not a popular name in India. The protagonist of the novel Jyoti, is a resident of Jullundhar district, Punjab, India. Here in India, she is christened as Jyoti, but she undergoes much transformation due to her immigration. She loses her identity step by step when she immigrates to America. Jyoti in her village is a

very simple girl, yet she is talented. Jyoti is persuaded by her English teacher to continue her education in English instead of getting married. But soon after the sad demise of her father, she meets a man, Prakash and marries him. It is Prakash who, for the first time, calls Jyoti Jamsine.

Prakash is a hard-working man, and she involves himself in two different jobs and also studied for his diploma exams. On the other hand, to meet the family expenses, Jasmine also sells detergent. Prakash’s life changes as he receives a letter from Professor Vadhera, who persuades him to come to America. But fate has different plans for Prakash, and he is eventually killed in a bomb explosion when he is involved in shopping.

All the happy plans and glorious plans of Prakash and Jasmine get shattered and eventually, Jasmine is left alone. She has no other options left but to carry the plans made by both together. Sexual violence prevalent against women is also displayed in the novel. The vulnerability of women is evident in the novel as Jasmine continues with Prakash’s plans, she encounters various problems. As she travels through air, water and train, she is confronted by a vicious character, Half-Face, who molests her at a motel. Jasmine is completely shattered and even contemplates

killing herself, but instead kills Half-face. She then burns Prakash's suit and eventually leaves the motel.

Jasmine meets Lillian Gordon, who takes care of her in her distressed situation. She is the one who changes her name again from Jasmine to "Jazzy", and eventually she helps Jazzy to meet Professor Vadhera. Lillian is later sent to jail for some minor offence. Jasmine is again left with the sympathy of a stranger, Professor Vadhera. For five months she can find accommodation with him, and she calls him professorji. But as the time passes, she is eventually gripped with the fear of being sent back, as without a green card it would become difficult for her to stay in America. It is then Professor manages to get a green card for her by paying three thousand dollars or fifty thousand rupees.

In the want of money, Jasmine starts working for Wylie and Taylor Hayes. She moves later with them in Manhattan to take care of their adopted daughter. Taylor calls her "Jase". In a dramatic change, Wylie falls in love with Stuart and eventually leaves Taylor. Wylie leaves Taylor, and then Duff's care comes directly under Jase's care. She is then left with no option and eventually falls in love with Taylor. But one day when they were at the park, three of them, and Jase identifies Sukhwinder, the man

who was responsible for killing Prakash. She flees to New York for Iowa. She leaves Taylor and Duff in the absolute fear that the Khalsa terrorist, who was responsible for the death of her husband in India, Prakash, could also harm them.

It is then that she moves to Iowa. Iowa is a state in the Midwestern United States, bordered by the Mississippi River to the east and the Missouri River and Big Sioux River to the west. Luckily, she can meet another benefactor, Ms Ripplemayer, where she was able to secure a job in Iowa bank. She is also able to win the heart of the banker Bud Ripplemayer. Jasmine, for the time being, adapts to the new situation and readily accepts the new responsibilities that have been conferred on her. She accepts her role as step- mother to Du. Du is the adopted son of Bud, who is a sixteen-year-old boy. Du is a victim of the Vietnam War. Bud is a person who also lives a solitary life as his grown-up sons have already has abandoned him. It is for this reason that Jasmine take pity on him and eventually starts living with him again happily. Jasmine's ill destiny plays role again and again and in a tragic change Bud suffers terrible problem. After a disgruntled farmer shot Bud from point blank this leaves him crippled downwards.

Adversity, pain and disaster become central part of Jasmine's life. Her name undergoes transformation every time a change occurs in her life. When attached to Bud she acquires new identity from "Jane" to "Jase." She is also able to establish a cordial relationship with Bud's wife Karin and informs her that she never intended to separate them. To live happily, they need to reconcile with each other. She never intended to hurt anybody. Things hardly change for Jasmine, but she keeps on waiting for love and affection in her life.

She always found attention and care from everybody but never remains in peace either due to circumstances, or due to fate. It is only at the end of the novel that Taylor returns and insists that he would take her back. It was a pleasant surprise for her. She returns to Taylor and Duff and reconciles with her own self.

Rajnath expressed his view on cultural hybridity regarding the exchange of culture as propounded by Edward Said as, "Cultural hybridity, a term frequently used by Said, has come to stay and no amount of effort can fence off the East and the West" (Rajnath 45). The result of educational changes during this period was also two-fold: first the inculcation of western values and culture in the new educated class and later on ideologies became an important part of these immigrants.

Even though Jasmine stays in America, she still clutches the happy memory of her past and thinks of an astrologer in the very first page of the novel. The novel gives us faith and belief in superstition that is common to Indian culture, as well as the grim reality of American life also. Jasmine's war can be divided into two separate identities and ideologies emerging from two diverse cultures: Eastern world dutifulness and the progressive America; it is in the end that she is able to reconcile between the two divergent aspects. Jasmine's concept of love for Taylor is guided by the force of inner feeling that is not guided by only carnal desire; rather it is guided by the entire feeling of comfort that Taylor, in the form of Western civilisation, can provide for, Jasmine says, "the love I felt for Taylor that first day had nothing to do with sex. I fell in love with his world, its ease, its careless confidence and graceful self-absorption." (Mukerjee Jasmine 171)

Jasmine is not easily cowed down by the feeling of inferiority; rather she is determined to live life to its full ease. She is not the person who can be dragged by the past and remain buried in it forever; rather, she moves ahead reconciling between the forces of dissent. She says, "I wanted to become the person they thought they saw: humorous, intelligent, refined, affectionate. Not illegal, not murderer

not widowed, raped and destitute, fearful.”
(Mukherjee Jasmine 171)

In the concluding part, I can assert that cultures are so mixed up that one tends to assimilate the qualities of diverse cultures. Jasmine’s new identity is created by the mixing of two different cultures. A new identity is created from the ashes of old tradition and old identity. Jasmine turns out to be a strong and lovable character as time passes by critic Nagendra Kumar in his book *The Fiction of Bharati Mukerjee*, comments on the transformation of Jasmine as, “She is a path finder and pierces her way through the dense jungle of problems. Every movement adds to her self-confidence and her experiences guide her future course of action.” (121).

Her old identity of a small village girl who is genuine, guileless, innocent and naïve gradually transforms and evolves into a resilient and lasting character. Her self-support and self-determination grow gradually also she realises it is not the western culture that brings reconciliation with her pains but the bygone days of the past remains in her memory. She comes to term with her own self in search of peace.

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