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From Hyphenation to Amalgamation: A Study of Multicultural Elements in Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*

V. Vinod Kumar & R. Chitra Shobana

Bharati Mukherjee, an exponent of Immigrant sensibility, discusses in her novels the ambivalences caused by the sudden transplantation from the familiar to the exotic. Her protagonists suffer the separation from their homeland and mostly they are lonely figures. “The immigrant alienated from his homeland, his people and his family feels the wrench of separation. He had been pushed violently from the nest of his birth. It proved a shattering experience and he longed to be back yearning for the security and warmth of the feathery place” (Tandon 13). Being an immigrant Bharati Mukherjee feels very comfortable in dealing with immigrant’s life. Most of Mukherjee’s heroines suffer intolerably as they are unable to adjust to the new culture. Quest for the definition of self and search for identity are the main features of her women who are seen caught in the flux of tradition and modernity. Mukherjee’s fiction does not only depict the multicultural society of America but also portrays the Indian society through contradictory images. Mukherjee’s 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 the New World.

*Jasmine*, Mukherjee’s most acclaimed novel stems out of an earlier short story “The Middleman and Other Stories” and was expanded to a story of a young widow Jasmine, who uproots herself from her life in India and re-roots herself in search of a new life in America. It is a story of dislocation and relocation as the protagonist moves into new roles every now and then, shedding off the past. Mukherjee has carved out the assimilation of the third world immigrant into the American “melting pot” using flashbacks and crosscuts techniques. “Jasmine takes the bird-view of the American life and does not touch the deeper layers of values there. The novel looks at American life from an immigrant point of view leaving aside the American experience of the immigrants, their
legal and illegal entry into their country and its consequences” (Indira 176). Mukherjee tells the story of Jasmine from her early days in Hasnapur to her extra-ordinary adventures in the United States. As the novel gets going with its multifarious techniques a portrayal of mutually alien cultures and locals is effectively displayed.

Jasmine is the story of a young Punjabi girl born and bred in a small village named Hasnapur. She is given the name Jyoti by birth but then she is called Jasmine, Jase, and Jane during various periods of her life that correspond to different men in it. Jasmine is herself dizzy at the speed of her transformation, the fluidity of American character and the American landscape. “I feel at times like a stone hurtling through diaphanous mist unable to grab hold, unable to slow myself, yet unwilling to abandon the ride I’m on. Down and down I go, where I will stop, God only knows” (Jasmine 138-39). Jasmine though born in a remote village to poor parents was lucky enough to get a good English teacher at school, who inspired her to develop a flair for English. She was married to an ambitious young engineer Prakash around the age of fourteen. Prakash is such a nice person that he, unlike other Indian husbands, encourages his wife to maintain an identity. It is he who changes her name from Jyoti to Jasmine. “He wanted to break down the Jyoti I’d been in Hasnapur and make a new kind of city women. To break off the past, he gave me a new name Jasmine . . . Jyoti, Jasmine I shuttled between identities” (77).

Prakash’s greatest ambition was to go to America and live a “real life.” His inspiration was his former professor who had migrated to America. He prepares to go to America and as he was about to complete his formalities, he is killed accidentally in a terrorist attack. After leading a miserable widowhood at Hasnapur, Jasmine decides to follow her late husband’s footpath by migrating to America. Armed with forged papers she reaches the US soil. Violence is what Jasmine encounters as soon as she lands in America. The captain of the ship she took to Florida exploits her innocence by taking her to a remote motel and seduces her. Being a sincere Indian wife Jasmine could not tolerate that she has been molested. At first she thinks of immolating herself, but later she decides to take revenge of her seduction and kills the rapist Half-face assuming herself as goddess Kali.

With the help of a kind Quaker lady Lillian Gordon, whom she happened to come across after killing the captain, Jasmine was able to find the Professor’s home she came in searching for. She lives with the
professor’s family for some months in their home. The family lived in the Queens with Indian families as neighbors. They spent their whole time speaking their native tongue and watching video cassettes of Hindi movies, maintaining a kind of artificial Indianness in their home. Jasmine lived the life of an unpaid servant in Professor Vadera’s home. Being a born rebel, Jasmine could not bear with such kind of living for a longer period. So soon she sets out from Mr. Vadera’s home in search of a new job and new living.

With the help of the forged Green card she managed to get from Mr. Vadera she finds a job at Mr & Mrs Taylors’ home. She works as a caregiver to Mr. Taylor and Mrs. Wyile Taylor’s adopted daughter Duff and it is here that Jasmine gets her real expatriate experience. It is here Jasmine gets the initial changes to amalgamate in to the American society. She says “I became an American in an apartment in Clarament avenue” (165). Had she not left the Professor’s home she would never have had the chances of getting into the American society. She had many experiences at Taylors’ home. “Even on the first morning I saw naked bodies combing their hair in front of dressing mirrors. Truly there was no concept of shame in this society” (171). She was shocked at the idea of Taylors bearing up a non-genetic child and equally shocking was the concept of a small child sleeping in a separate room. But slowly and steadily she was immersing herself into the American society. “I took in everything. Every morning the news sank into my brain and stayed. Language on the street, on the forbidden television at the Hayases’ dinner . . . all became my language which I learned like a child, from the first words up. The squatting fields of Hasnapur receded fast” (174). Jasmine’s loved her life at the Hayases. The two cultures she knew got blended in her and it leads to a gradual transformation in her. Though she willingly gets transformed into an American, she does not forsake her innate Indianness and feels uncomfortable at the speed of her transformation. She could not believe herself when she holds the giant lizard in Kate’s apartment. She feels “Truly I had been reborn. Indian village girls do not hold large reptiles on their laps” (16). Taylor called her “Jase”; his innocence, open mindedness, and smile make Jasmine fall in love with him. Every week end she was paid 95 dollars in cash in an envelope with a happy face and “Thanks.” “On Claremont avenue in the Hayases’ big clean brightly lit apartment, I bloomed from a different alien with forged documents into an adventurous Jase” (176). Pushpa N. Parekh opines that Jasmine’s stay at Taylors’ home for two
years is the most fruitful period in her life in America. "This period in Jasmine’s life is the most restful and comforting, emotionally and psychologically, intellectually, however, it is a phase of minute observations of complex inner deliberations on and keen involvement in her new environment" (qtd. in Kumar 114). Such a happy life ends miserably as she accidently happened to meet Prakash’s murderer Sukhwinder Singh. In spite of Taylor’s repeated comforting, she is afraid that she and her accompanies would be harmed by him. Therefore she flees from the Hayases to Iowa where she gets a job as the teller of a bank.

At Iowa her employer Bud Ripple Meyer falls in love with Jasmine and as a result he divorces his wife with whom he lived for 28 years for the sake of Jasmine. He calls her Jane. "Jasmine’s every movement is a calculated step into her Americanization and each development as a vital change is marked in her personality. Jasmine’s flight to Iowa and her renaming as Jane is indicative of a slow but steady immersion into the mainstream American culture" (Kumar 4). Though she adapts to the American life style, she could not kill the Indian woman residing in her. She is loved by all for the Indianaess in her, which had made her a lovable mother and a caring wife. She says to Bud, "I’ll wait supper for you. Indian wives never eat before their husbands" (Jasmine 213). Again at another instance she would say, "A good Hasnapur wife doesn’t eat just because she is hungry. Food is a way of granting or withholding love" (216). Such statements reveal that though living an American lifestyle she is an ideal Indian wife.

Again she faces violence in the form of a discontent client who shoots at Bud. The shot cripples Bud and as a result he becomes invalid. When he and Jane decide to have a child it was possible only through artificial semination. Though Bud had two married sons he decides to adopt a Vietnamese child. The child is Du, a survivor from a refugee camp. His parents and his brothers have been killed and a sister alone survived. Du, now the child of Bud and Jane, grows up as an American teenager with all its fashion and foibles. But one day he suddenly leaves them as he comes to know of his sister’s arrival at California. Du’s departure foregrounds Jasmine’s own going away. When Taylor comes there to reclaim her, she readily goes with him without feeling the least for the crippled Bud. For Jasmine there is no going back; the only home is the one she creates for herself. She has found a new identity in the alien nation. She is an immigrant who is
reborn in an adopted culture. It is much better to adapt into a culture rather than living as a hyphenated person. Jasmín’s amalgamation into the American “melting pot” is certainly better than being torn between two cultures. Usha Anand observes: “The new woman in the novel Jasmine rejects the moribund traditional values and avidly accepts America and American values” (216). Jasmine stands on a uniquely constructed bridge, connecting the painful past with an optimistic vision of the future. Wandering between two worlds, she realizes the American dream with all its dangers as well as possibilities. Thus she bridges the cultural gap and her growth from hyphenation to amalgamation, either forced or voluntary, epitomizes that Jasmine has crossed all the phases of acculturation and merges herself in the multiethnic and multicultural nation like America.

Works Cited


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Cross-Cultural Crisis in Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*

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The tremendous differences between the East and the West lead the immigrants to psychological ailment and frustration. When a person leaves his own culture and enters another, his own values come into conflict with the new one he encounters. Culture is a psychological reality which exists as a series of constructs in the minds of the individual. “Growing cultural interaction between the East and the West and the consequently changing social ethos after Indian independence have given an added impetus to the writing of novels on the theme of East–West confrontation – a theme still being written on variously” (Naik 218). Bharati Mukherjee is at her best in the depiction of cultural clash between the East and the West. Most of her Protagonists are exiles from India who come to live in America for their betterment. Being uprooted and transplanted in an entirely new culture, they encounter many problems. They experience great cultural conflict. The tremendous difference between two ways of life, one East and the other West, leads them to psychological ailment and frustration.

Bharati Mukherjee’s novels mainly focus on depicting the condition of Asian immigrants in North America. Mukherjee’s plots moves across cultures – immigrants leave their home, usually from Calcutta to take up residence in the United States. “The theme of adjusting to a new culture, the trials, tribulations and traumas that afflict immigrants trying to make it in the new land have been deftly handled. Bharati Mukhejee appears to have gone into the psyche of the culturally uprooted…” (Tandon 35).

In *Wife*, Mukherjee presents the story of a young Bengali girl Dimple Das Gupta, who like any other girl of her age, had many dreams and hopes about her marriage. Her dream was to marry a neurotic surgeon and live a free and happy life. She believed such a marriage “would bring her freedom, cocktail parties on carpeted lawns and fund raising dinners for noble charities.” (*Wife* 1) Against her wishes, she happens to marry an ambitious
engineer Amit Basu. But she reconciles herself that along with Amit she would soon settle in America. Her initial experiences at her in-law’s home are bitter. She soon understands that neither her sister-in-law nor her mother-in-law had any liking for her. So her only hope was to get away to a country like America along with her husband. That is why when she becomes pregnant she induces self abortion by skipping ropes until her legs became numb. She believed that a baby at that time would “clutter up the preparation for going abroad. She did not want to carry any relics from her old life”(23). She gets prepared to live a carefree life in the new world where “she wanted everything to be nice and new”(41).

The day she expected came but not as she wished it, as they had to migrate to America in a hurry-burry even before Amit got a job there. Dimple’s early experience at America toppled up all her expectations about the new land. She was terrified to know from Jyoti Sen that New York was a violence-prone city and that even young boys had guns with them. The couple found a place in the Sens’ home. The Sens’ had a deep disgust on the American culture and the American way of life. “For them the country of adoption is a temporary abode and they try to pass their time preserving their own identity and upholding their own cultural and religious values”(Kumar 47-48). Dimple’s early phase in America leads her to a frustrated state. Even on her very first day she feels like collapsing inwardly. She tries to convey her fears to Amit, but he is not ready to listen to her problems as he had more problems to worry such as his joblessness and weak economic condition. While joblessness puts Amit in jilter, Dimple realizes that her marriage “had not provided all the glittery things she had imagined” and she feels betrayed (Wife 115).

Dimple is at sea in the adopted culture. She takes for granted the social circle of the American Indians as the cultural experience. It prevents her from experiencing life on the outside that would shape her view of American society. She fails to find her space within the confines of an Alien culture. One day she goes to the market along with Meena Sen. Meena encourages Dimple to go to the shop alone and to buy what she needed. Emboldened, Dimple goes alone to the shop to buy her favourite cheesecake and asks for it. The shopkeeper stares at her for some time and goes on doing his work unmindfully. Again she repeats her demand and this time the shopkeeper questions her if
she does not know the law of the country and draws his closet and searches something there. Dimple assumes that the irritated man is searching for his gun to shoot her. Frightened, she runs out closing her mouth and nostrils. This first exposure to America leaves a traumatic effect in her mind. She fails to understand why a man selling beef cannot sell cheesecake. Dimple is terrified by the shop owner’s response and believes that she has to pay dearly for her imperfect English and cultural ignorance by being shot on the spot. Dimple analyses the American society with her own initial encounters with it and from the perspective of her own cultural moorings. “In Calcutta she’d buy from Muslims, Biharis, Christians, Nepalis. She was used to many races; she’d never been a communalist … she was caught in the crossfire of an American communalism she could not understand” (60).

Amit believes that providing material comfort alone is enough to make a wife happy. He gets a decent job and the couple moves to a better flat, a fully furnished one. Their living conditions improve but the breach between husband and wife widens day by day. America has outwitted her and she is gripped by a sense of nostalgia. It is beyond her understanding how she could live, “in a country where every other woman was a stranger” (112). She is afraid of every little thing outside. She is scared of self service elevators, of policemen, of gadgets and appliances; she does not want to wear western clothes as she thinks she would be mistakenly taken for a Puerto Rican. She always thinks of her peaceful life in Calcutta where she was never frightened of the outside world. So she preferred to live within the four walls of their home glued to watching TV, in which violence and sexism are shown endlessly. She often indulges in a sense of nostalgia thinking about her happy life in Calcutta with her relations and friends. The psychic abnormality of Dimple is due to the cross-cultural impact. She finds life impossible with people who did not understand Durga Puhja. For Indians, religion is an integral part of life and Dimple’s failure at assimilation with America is due to a lack of shared faith.

Dimple’s very soul gets corrupted in her isolated new environment. “Dimple is trapped in a dilemma between American culture and the traditional constraints surrounding an Indian wife, between a feminist desire to be assertive and independent and the Indian need to be assertive and self-effacing” (Shyam
42). Her psychological starvation and isolation leads her to a psychological disintegration. In this state of psychological drift she hits herself upon the idea of violence against herself, as well as Amit. She is constantly hitting upon new ways of either committing suicide or killing Amit. She never considers murder seriously. The idea of murdering Amit makes her feel like an American somehow. She believes that talking about murder in America was like talking about changing weather. Disappointment in Amit and isolation from the outside world ultimately leads Dimple to kill her husband. Mukherjee suggests that Dimple’s loss of sanity may be attributed to her sense of alienation from her own and American culture.

In this novel Mukherjee deals with the complications that come from being thrown between two worlds. As an immigrant Dimple is caught between the conflicting cultures in her attempt to find an identity of her own. She undergoes the traumatic process of acculturation in her search for identity in an alien land and consequently fails in her attempt. Thus the cultural encounter of the East and West has brought about the downfall of a traditional Bengali wife. “Dimple’s portrayal reveals the cultural shock due to the uncertainty whether to stick to the Indian tradition or to adopt the unlimited freedom of the Indian women. The novelist presents her as a prototype of all such first generation Indian women migrants to the West who develop incurable neurosis, failing to determine any clear cut priority” (Dodiya 311).

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