



## Multicultural Diaspora: Examining Cross-cultural Consciousness and Multicultural Adaptations in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

Dr. G. Serwani Swamy

I/C HOD, Dept. of English and Humanities

Department of English & Humanities

Anil Neerukonda Institute of Technology and Sciences

Visakhapatnam

INDIA

**Abstract:** This is an attempt to bring about the nuances of diasporic consciousness mapping multicultural dynamics, in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, negotiating regeneration and transformation in multicultural dimension. It focuses the notion of cultural crisis due to spatial dislocations. These immigrants are shown in cultural confrontation striving for the identity in the host country, encountering alien and ethnic identity. Bharati Mukherjee's world of immigrants and their desperate need to belong to the new world bring a sense of cross-cultural adventure to her novels. Her characters undergo exilic and immigration conditions, which also produces a number of psychological issues. They symbolize cross-cultural consciousness and multicultural adaptations that portrays ability to survive and transform. The paper aims to explore Bharati Mukherjee's intriguing character *Jasmine*, a portrayal of new diaspora, with the diverse identities, evolving in multiple ethnic communities in multiple displaced places every moment striving to acquire a new identity and modern host culture. The regeneration and transformation of identities in the cross cultural alien nation is the result of existing multiculturalism. *Jasmine*, the main character exhibits stages of metamorphosis, in terms of identities, character and culture in predominant society, around which probes Hall's concept of cultural identity. Through Mukherjee's novel, Indian cultural identity is depicted in a state of vacillation, establishing multiculturalism in multinational country.

**Key words:** Immigration, Cultural Identity, Regeneration, Transformation and Multiculturalism.

Bharati Mukherjee's third novel, *Jasmine* (1989), is an accomplished novel which presents an intriguing character *Jasmine*, a portrayal of new diaspora, with the fusion of identities, evolution of multiple ethnic communities in multiple displaced places every moment striving to acquire that is new and modern in host culture. The crisis in the cross culture is the result of dual identity and multiculturalism. Bharati Mukherjee portrays the protagonist *Jasmine* in an optimistic image, where she projects, diasporic consciousness in multicultural perspectives. She is a portrayal who fights oddity and advances to be 'reborn' after every tormenting dislocation, burying the past, regenerating and transforming herself, in various culture and identity 'moulds' to adapt in an alien country. Bharati Mukherjee describes the character passionately in an interview with Runar Vignisson:

She is mistreated her first night in Florida and the journey, the odyssey to the new world is so zig-zaggy and so perilous and she makes a lot of mistakes in the United States. But that risk taking, the freedom to take risks and to reverse yourself is both painful - I have a sentence there that you have to murder your old self in order to be reborn every time. And murder is a very violent word (Runar Vignisson 1993: 34-35).

Bharati Mukherjee is an expatriate Indian American writer who experienced sexism and racial prejudice as an immigrant which reflected in her earlier writings like in a collection of short stories, *Darkness* (1985). In her interview with Alison Carb she says "I was followed by detectives in apartments and assumed a shop lifter or treated like prostitutes in hotel" (Alison Carb 29, edit. Bradley C. Edwards). On becoming a target of expatriation which is common for all immigrants, she portrays some of the powerful characters on cultural displacement. Her writings focus on characters mediating migrating especially to North America negotiating physical movements and reflecting psychological impacts, to be precise an encounter of 'cultural displacement' in host country. The concept of dislocation, the spatial movements thereby contribute to unbalanced forms of identities. The reflection of immigration on self in correlation to alienation culture is 'ambivalence' (Homi Bhabha 95). Bharati Mukherjee's fiction focuses on immigration to the United States and development of American identity. It engages with a mosaic of contexts of immigration, multiculturalism, post colonialism, and globalization. She is as a distinguished writer in short stories and novels. She also accomplished in different genres like investigative journalism, travel writing, essays memoirs and book reviews. Bharati

Mukherjee's novels are acclaimed for their representation of immigrant experiences in America. Her novels throw special focus on the plight of Asian immigrants who come to America from totally different cultural backgrounds and try to struggle against overwhelming oddity. Bharati Mukherjee has so far produced five novels namely, *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971), *Wife* (1975), *Jasmine* (1989), *The Holder of the World* (1993), *Leave it to me* (1997), *Desirable Daughter* (2004) *The Tree Bride* (2006). In addition two short story collections, *Darkness* and *Middle Man*.

These immigrants are shown in multiple cultural confrontations, of the origin, ethnic identities with the host alien identities. Bharati Mukherjee's world of immigrants and their desperate need to belong to the new world bring a sense of cross-cultural adventure to her novels. Her characters undergo exilic and immigration situations, which produces a number of psychological issues. They represent a blend of cross-cultural consciousness and multicultural adaptations, portraying ability to survive, regenerate and transform.

The characters are apparently in oscillation of cultures and transformations, they sway between the ethnic Indian culture and the alien culture. Jasmine, the main character exhibits stages of metamorphosis, in terms of identities, character, culture, society around and developing theories and critical discussion on globalization and multiple identities. Through Bharati Mukherjee's novel, Indian cultural identity is depicted in a state of vacillation, by the immigrants and the relationships established, between the multinational individuals in America. Bharati Mukherjee being an expatriate herself faces racial, cultural discrimination and undergoes rejection in Canada and faces multiple cultural encounters in America. The hardships matured her to develop a thought to think differently. Unlike many expatriate writers like V.S.Naipaul, she openly declares her affiliation to V.S. Naipaul in the introduction given by her in *Darkness: Days Nights In Calcutta* (1977). She also adapts projection of irony inherited by British writings which is evident in *The Tigers Daughter* (1972) and *Wife* (1975). She shared native values, in the female characters set in Caribbean. In response to V.S.Naipaul's view on post-colonial world by a short-story entitled *Jasmine*, published in her collection of *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988). V.S. Naipaul who belongs to the old form of and culture of Indian diaspora according to Sudesh Mishra, (2003: 276). The immigrants who left the country from 1830 to 1917, which has been a period effected by indentured labour to Caribbean. Later Bharati Mukherjee changed her style of writing she emerged as a trend setter in modern English literature and considers herself different from other European writers.

"I am very different from other non-European writers in saying, to me the loss of old culture is exciting. Is exhilarating, is a plus rather than minus...made me realize that I was thrilled to have the opportunity to give it up, to assume a new identity. (Qtd in D.Akhila 79-85).

She acquires immigrant identity that belongs to the group of diasporic writers who focus on third world taking challenges in the first world countries and especially America. Her themes are a blend of immigrant woven ethnicity with a touch of modernity, transformation and regeneration, negotiating multicultural identity. Multicultural consciousness gives rise to issues of 'culture shock,' and the predicaments of multiple identities in the coat of multicultural perspectives which affect the ethnic traditional values of Indian traditions. It is within the context of displacement and cross-border migrations and transformations of Indians in America in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*.

Her portrayal of characters is resilient to immigration in other sense adaptive and is adventurous. She depicts a picture of Indian life in a lucid and interesting way to the American readers through her novels. She has been criticized in many ways by the resident Indian critics and reviewers, who feel offended on showing issue with a negative portrayal of Indian culture and traditions, such as in *Wife*. She is targeted for being American writer though her roots are Indian and her writings reflect on Indian essence. She does not portray stereotyped versions and sentimental exaggerations but retains the beauty of narration in displaying the displaced issues through her mirrored experiences in her writings. As a writer, Bharati Mukherjee is concerned about depicting a picture of Indian life, intelligently interesting to the American readers through her novels. "Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* goes overboard in the opposite direction, validating the American dream while panning all things Indian" (Uma Parmeshwaran 30-39).

Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, is an eponymous character, which is portrayed as strong and determined and a self-assertiveness that forms the root of self-fashioning in a host society. It is a utopian task for a young woman of seventeen to migrate from a small village like Hasnapur in Punjab to cross the ocean and migrate to a total novice country America, the name of which she only heard of. Jasmine's fate was predicted by the astrologer but she defies her stars 'Cheat[s] the stars' (Sudesh Mishra, 287) and marches ahead all by herself with forged papers to America, which becomes her dream mission. A country she and her husband foster a beautiful life to test her own destiny. She falls under the type, voluntary immigrant, according to Cohen's ninth category. In the same way Tara of *The Tigers Daughter* and Dimple of *Wife* fall into the same category. All the three stand on the cross roads of opposing cultural encounters, all to achieve their American dream but in varying situations. Jyoti an adventurous, but innocent and resourceful girl from Hasnapur, a small village in Punjab. The novel very interestingly begins with an astrologer's prediction of Jyoti's, fate at the age of seven of 'widowhood and exile'. (1) She was too young and too practical to believe such a thing as fate, she retorts, "you don't know what my future holds" (Jasmine 3), she doesn't believe him. The man hits her as a gesture of her defiance and she falls on the ground, bits her tongue and gets a scar on the forehead. "It's my third eye.... "Now I'm a sage" (5). She shows her tact to covert negative situations to positive.

Jyoti (the name means light in Hindi) who comes from a small village, confined to traditions and feudalism. She and her family live in abject poverty and hopelessness background. She has nothing substantial except for her beauty. She is born eighteen years after partition. Her family migrates from Lahore to Punjab and become simple peasants. Jasmine is the fifth of daughters and seventh of the nine children. She is portrayed as an unlucky girl and a curse to be born fifth daughter. Though she is beautiful; it was too late for her to gain from her looks. She is born tough girl who fights and kills a dog and encounters first violence in her life. At the age of fourteen she falls in love with a voice, the voice of Prakash Viji a friend of her brothers, a twenty four year old electronic student, to whom she marries later. There was "no-dowry, no guests Registry Office wedding" (75). Prakash's dream grows to be her dream. Moving away from her feudalistic family and aspiring in her husband's dream seems a life of contention for her after many unfortunate happenings. "Village girls are like cattle: whichever way you lead them, that is the way they will go" (46). Prakash changes traditional upbringing, and trains her to look beyond the traditional horizon, The first transformation of identity takes place Prakash names her 'Jasmine' and changes her to a modern woman moves her from feudalistic village, Hasnapur to urban Jullundhar, "Pygmalion wasn't a play I'd seen or read then, but I realise now how much of professor Higgins

there was in my husband....he gave me a new name; Jasmine....Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttled between identities.” (77). Bharati Mukherjee repeatedly implies a term ‘rebirth’ after every transformation. The novel is set at historical back drop of political turbulence. This was the time when Punjab rocked by Sikhs demand for independent Khalistan. Prakash is a supporter of secularism and therefore gets targeted by his Sikh friend Sukhwinder and Prakash becomes a target at the hands of Sikh terrorists. Jasmine becomes a widow. She reflects on herself herself that, “there is no dying; there is only an ascending or descending, a moving to other planes. Don’t crawl back to Hasnapur and feudalism. That Jyoti is dead” (96). So there is no looking back. Her mission is to perform sati and fulfil her husband’s dreams. On her way to America the country of their dreams going through widowhood, illegal documents, lands on the shores of Florida. She encounters Half-Face, who mercilessly rapes her without giving heed to her pleadings, “you are a grieving widow....and where I come from, cancels out” (115). The fact that even her widowhood does not shield her from treacherous men like Half-Face shocks her. Half face is a representation of a white rapist. Jasmine represents a Goddess Kali and takes revenge, by slitting her tongue, as an image of Kali, the goddess of destruction of the evil. She stabs and kills the him. “Blood had congealed on my hands, my chin, my breasts, for the second time in three months, I was in a room with a slain man, my body blooded. I was walking death, death incarnate” (119).

Bharati Mukherjee uses Indian mythological strategy as Sandra P. observes, “Indian mythology in order to validate passages that would be considered “unrealistic” according to western standards, perfectly legitimate with fictional account”(89). Also to reinforce a transformative model mediate the gap between the continuity and change. Here killing of Half-Face is ‘self – assertion’(Nagendra 110), Nagendra expresses that killing herself means a decision who lives for her deceased husband, and the woman who kills half-face is prompted by will to live to continue her life. Her survival at the moment is to accomplish her mission.

“The new geometry that mirrors a universe that is rough, not rounded, scabrous not smooth. It is geometry of the pitted, pocked and broken up, the twisted, tangled, and intertwined” (James Gleick, *Chaos* qtd. in *Jasmine*1989). A quoting at the beginning of the novel, Jasmine says, her life as an immigrant seems knotted and leading nowhere. As on every occasion, Jasmine gives up her past without regret ventures ahead in modern attire and never looks back. Jasmine, with a determination decides to finish her mission which is to visit the campus and sits under a particular tree for Prakash and performs sati by burning his suit and her sari in a trash bin near a motel indicating killing of her ‘Indian identity’ and the ‘widowhood’ symbolically, leaves the past towards future. Her first saviour on an alien land is Lillian Gorden a quaker woman. She teaches her not only to walk and talk but also makes her physically and emotionally strong and to face the challenges in America. Jasmine transforms totally into an American, a western looking woman and she is named ‘Jazzy’ leaving behind her Hasnapur ‘modesty’. Jasmine later, takes shelter with Prakash’s Professorji, Mr. Vadhera. On revelation that he was not a professor but importer of Indian hair, she feels claustrophobic in the midst of artificiality. Like many immigrants who become puppets in the hands of immigrant identity which makes them dance to any tune, they even forego their native dignity and values. “He had sealed his heart when he’d left home. His real life was in an unlivable land across oceans. He was a Ghost, hanging on” (153). Mr. Vadhera is an immigrant image who try their hand at making money in a foreign country at any cost, a display of a hollow identity, a shadow without a soul. Jasmine’s transformed personality cannot bear the traditional ‘Indianness’. She wants to flee from the uncomfortable environment. Gabrielle sudeng emphasizes that:

“The America which Jasmine encounters has lost the legendary new world assertiveness. The places she crosses like Florida, New York, and Iowa, she is obstructed by corruption, complacency and conservatism but not racism,....an illegal immigrant, she has no legal recourse when she is raped, and the scam which got her into America also admits her husband’s murderer”( Gabrielle Watling 61-62).

Jasmine’s takes up a new job as a care giver, a paid nanny to Duff, who is daughter, of Taylor and Wylie Hayes, a glamorous couple. Jasmine does not reveal her true ‘Indian identity,’ she wants people to assume that she is someone coming from some region with blackish skin, speaking a language like Urdu, Sanskrit or Arabic. Jasmine becomes a member of the family. This shows her change in identity. Taylor becomes a trainer to Jasmine and transforms her to Jase. Jasmine observes that, “In America, nothing lasts....only to find the monuments are plastic, agreements are annulled. Nothing is forever, nothing is so terrible or so wonderful, that it won’t disintegrate” (181).

Jasmine’s life takes another turn, the past comes back to destroy her present when she sees Sukhi, her husband’s murderer in the park. She decides to leave New York for Iowa for a resettlement. This time it is Budd Ripplemeyer a fifty year old banker. Eventually Jasmine takes charge of a teller girl in Bud’s bank in Baden Iowa. Bud falls in love with her. Yet another transformation into another identity awaits her. She switches herself into a live -in-relation, and looks after their adopted son Du. They are in a harmony of multi-ethnic family with Bud an American, Jasmine an Indian and Du Vietnamese. Jasmine is renamed as Jane who takes full charge of Bud but he is suddenly shot and permanently crippled by a farmer. Jasmine’s American multicultural attitude shows insensitive change of roles, from a caregiver to ‘temptress’ (36).

The changing culture in diaspora is represented by theory of cultural identity put forward by Hall (1987). Hall opines that a distinctive type of structural change is transforming modern societies in the late twentieth century. This according to him is fragmenting the cultural landscapes of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race and nationality, which gives firm location of social individuals (597). He postulates three concepts of identities (a) Enlightenment subject, (b) sociological subject, and (c) post-modern subject. According to Hall the enlightenment subject was based on a conception of the human person as a fully centered, unified individual, endowed with the capacities of reason, consciousness, and action, whose “center” consisted of an inner core which first emerged when the subject was born. He says that every individual is born with an identity of its own with no influence of the society as such. Jyoti is the native identity naïve subjected to innocent rebel displays at the age of seven when she confronts the astrologer (1-2). The second, sociological subject reflects in the growing complexity of the modern world, the subject is not autonomous and self-sufficient, but is formed in relation to “significant others,” in this sociological conception, bridges the gap between the “inside” and the “outside” - between the personal and the public worlds. Jasmine, Jazzy, Jase and Jane are formed in relation to “significant others. Hall recognizes this identity as “shifting” unlike the natural identity, is persuaded and influenced by social concept confronting changes. Hall further signifies the third concept of post-modern subject, conceptualizes as having no fixed, essential, or permanent identity. Identity becomes a “moveable feast”: formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways the subjects are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround (Hall, 1987).The transformation of identity in Jasmine from Jyoti to Jane is an example complementing concept of post-modern subject.

The immigrant identity in multicultural perspective is in fact the 'duplicious mask' to hide the immigrants' in-securities owing hidden fears and sometimes aimless motion of people. Transformations in Jasmine are a multicultural perspective. From an innocent shy girl to modern wife to Prakash, a naive widow to destroying Kali, to half-face, from a nanny to lover, to Taylor from caregiver to temptress, to Bud. This transformation of Jasmine from semi educated Punjabi rustic to an American is not psychologically convincing, says Sushma Tandon, She opines that perhaps in Bharati Mukherjee's fiction the reality of the experiences of the floating elements in American society, the immigrants who are trying to establish themselves, is fulfilled (151). The novel bedazzles the reader with metamorphosis identity matching with the changing places. For every place she has a special identity Jyoti for Hasnapur, Jasmine for Jullandhar, Kali for Florida, Jazzy for Queens, Jase for New York, and Jane for Iowa. "Jyoti of Hasnapur was not Jasmine and Duff's day mummy and Taylor and Wylie's aupair in Manhattan; that Jasmine isn't this Jane Ripplemeyer having lunch with Mary Webb at the university club today(127). America has transformed her to take a decision without guilt. From Hasnapur, village in Punjab, a state in India to Californian via Florida, New York and Iowa in the U.S. Her struggle is a symbolism of a relentless quest for utmost desire for inner fulfillment. The multicultural adaptation brings in her a new image and identity which shows a rebirth of Jasmine.

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