

Cultural rivalry in Bharati Mukherjee's Wife and Jasmine

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Abstract: Bharati Mukherjee Indian-born American novelist and short-story writer who represented in her writing the cultural changes and variance in the immigrant experience. Cultural conflict is the clash between two cultures. Culture is the prime identity of human life. They have disclosed the futility of Western glamorous life and baseless romantic views. Both novels Wife and Jasmine journeys of two young women to the US for different reasons, under various place. It manifests the East-West encounter and cultural conflicts in various forms. In this paper analysis, the cultural identity of the conflict arises in the novels. The main theme arises of extends that the writer who has a broad mind with the cultural problem in society. It focuses on the various reasons for cultural differences and possible causes of cultural conflicts.

Keywords: *Cultural rivalry , Wife and Jasmine, Bharati Mukherjee*

I. Introduction

Indian English Literature has attained an independent status in the realm of World Literature. Wide ranges of themes are dealt with in Indian Writing in English. While this literature continues to reflect Indian culture, tradition, social values, and even Indian history through the depiction of life in India and Indians living elsewhere, recent Indian English fiction has been trying to give expression to the Indian experience of the modern predicaments. There are critics and commentators in England and America who appreciate Indian English novels.

Bharati Mukherjee, born July 27, 1940, Kolkata, India, Indian-born American novelist and short-story writer whose work reflects Indian culture and the immigrant experience. Mukherjee was born into a wealthy Kolkata family. She attended an anglicized Bengali school from 1944 to 1948. After three years abroad, the family returned to India. Mukherjee attended the University of Calcutta (B.A., 1959) and the University of Baroda (M.A., 1961). She then entered the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, earning an M.F.A. in 1963 and Ph.D. in 1969. From 1966 to 1980 she lived in Montreal, which she found provincial and racist. She then moved to the United States in 1980 and began teaching at the university level. She became U.S. citizen in 1989 and that year accepted a position teaching postcolonial and world literature at University of California at Berkeley.

Mukherjee's work features not only cultural clashes but undercurrents of violence. Her first novel, *The Tiger's Daughter* (1972), tells of a sheltered Indian woman jolted by an immersion in American culture, then again shocked by her return to a violent Kolkata. *Wife* (1975) details the descent into madness of an Indian woman trapped in New York

City by the fears and passivity resulting from her upbringing. In Mukherjee's first book of short fiction, *Darkness* (1985), many of the stories, including the acclaimed "The World According to Hu" are not only indictments of Canadian racism and traditional Indian views of women but also sharp studies of the edgy inner lives of her characters. *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988) centers on immigrants in the United States who are from developing countries, which is also the subject of two later novels, *Jasmine* (1989) and *The Holder of the World* (1993). The latter tells of a contemporary American woman drawn into the life of a Puritan ancestor who ran off with a Hindu raja. Mukherjee's later works include *Wanting America: Selected Stories* (1995) and *Leave It to Me* (1997), which traces the journey of an American woman abandoned in India as a child and her return to her native land.

Desirable Daughters (2002) attracted considerable acclaim for its intricate depictions of Indian caste relations and the immigrant experience of reconciling disparate world-views. Mukherjee delved further into the family history of the characters from that novel in *The Tree Bride* (2004), broaching issues of the time-spanning ramifications of colonialism. With her husband, Clark Blaise, Mukherjee wrote *Days and Nights in Kolkata* (1977), an account of their 14-month stay in India, and *The Sorrow and the Terror: The Haunting Legacy of the Air India Tragedy* (1987). Mukherjee also wrote several works of social analysis, including *Political Culture and Leadership in India* (1991), an assessment of leadership trends in West Bengal.

Cross-cultural misunderstandings or conflict may arise whenever there are cultural differences. Cultural conflict is a type of conflict that occurs when different cultural values and beliefs clash. It has been used to

explain violence and crime. Cultural conflicts are difficult to resolve as parties to the conflict have different beliefs. Cultural conflicts intensify when those differences become reflected in politics, particularly on a macro level. An example of cultural conflict is the debate over abortion. Ethnic cleansing is another extreme example of cultural conflict. Wars can also be a result of a cultural conflict; for example, the differing views on slavery were one of the reasons for the American civil war. William Kornblum defines it as a conflict that occurs when conflicting norms create "opportunities for deviance and criminal gain in deviant sub-cultures".

Kornblum notes that whenever laws impose cultural values on a group that does not share those views (often, this is the case of the majority imposing their laws on a minority), illegal markets supplied by criminals are created to circumvent those laws. He discusses the example of prohibition in the interbellum United States, and notes how the cultural conflict between pro- and anti-alcohol groups created opportunities for illegal activity; another similar example he lists is that of the war on drugs.

Kornblum also classifies the cultural conflict as one of the major types of conflict theory. In *The Clash of Civilizations*, Samuel P. Huntington proposes that people's cultural and religious identities will be the primary source of conflict in the post-Cold War world.

Jonathan H. Turner defines it as a conflict by "differences in cultural values and beliefs that place people at odds with one another". On a micro level, Alexander Grewe discusses a cultural conflict between guests of different culture and nationality as seen in a British 1970 sitcom, *Fawlty Towers*. He defines this conflict as one that occurs when people's expectations of a certain behavior coming from their cultural backgrounds are not met, as others have different cultural backgrounds and different expectations.

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CULTURAL RIVALRY IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S WIFE

Cross-cultural relations as observed in Bharati Mukherjee's second novel *Wife* (1975). The protagonist Dimple Dasgupta is a product of a middle-class family in Kolkata. The class as a whole indoctrinates the values

obedience and submissiveness in women. Dimple has quite romantic illusions but considers her marriage to be a blessing in disguise. She dreams that her marriage will bring her freedom, fortune, and happiness. What she experiences is far from what she cherishes. She wants to eliminate the taboos and becomes an escapist. She has to face cultural shocks in an alien land. The blurring of facts and dreams finally brings the catastrophe. In Kolkata, Dimple moves from her parents' house to her mother-in-law's place. The reflections of Indian culture abound in the first part of the novel. The mirroring of the life in the West is noticed in the second part of the novel.

Her residence in Jyoti and Meena Sen's apartment has made her aware of the ways of the western lifestyle. Jyoti Sen has characterized American life as consisting of violence, rape, and murder. The material comforts and the physical facilities of the land of money, honey and prosperity are noticed by Dimple. Dimple gets Americanized totally and her assimilation with the American culture of the west is complete through Ina Mullick and Milt Glasser.

Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife* is a unique fictional work that probes into its heroine psyche; depicts the cultural conflicts that she faces as an immigrant and the psychological eccentricities of the heroine Dimple Dasgupta, Born into a middle-class Bengali family, Dimple sets her heart on marrying a neurosurgeon. She entertains the vision of her marriage as a portal to romance, freedom, love, and happiness. Marriage would bring her freedom, cocktail parties on carpeted lawns, fund-raising dinners for noble charities. Marriage would bring her love." (*Wife* 3) Amit finally comes with the news that they could immigrate to America and they decide to stay with Jyoti Sen, Amit's friend until he finds a job. Dimple being a 'plaint, docile and submissive girl' understands that it is quite difficult for her to adapt to the culture of America. She obviously experiences the cultural shock in the new country. She realizes that it is not so easy for her to adjust to the American ways of living, who is born and brought up in a totally different environment in India. The cultural and social gulf dividing the two worlds is too vast for her to accustom and bridge over. Dimple is also shocked to know that New York is the highest crime-prone city in the world. She is further shaken by the realization that it allows only a little freedom to Indian wives. She experiences total estrangement from herself and her surroundings as well. She finds a wide gulf between her fantasy world and the reality of her situation. She sinks into a world of isolation. Even Amit is totally unaware of Dimple's situation. He insists that Dimple must go out and make friends with Americans and must not stay at home always. But she is daren't to go out and mix with them. Mukherjee ascribes Dimple's mental state to the 'dilemma of cultures'. Dimple not only suffers from culture shock but also from inferiority complex and thinks that she is not able to win her husband's love and affection. Amit thinks that providing material

comforts are more than enough and hardly bother for her emotional needs. She feels that she is being ignored by her husband; often picks a quarrel with him and accuses him. “ I feel sort of dead inside you never listen; you’ve never listened to me. You hate me. Don’t deny it” (Wife 110). Mukherjee emphatically points out the difference between her two characters, Tara and Dimple.

Tara is engrossed in the memories of her home country, her family and friends; her attachment to her past makes her travel back to her country. Her expectations turn out to be disappointments. But for Dimple, she renounces her past and present for the sake of her future. Tara though undergoes the trauma of cultural conflicts and confrontations she does not behave in an eccentric way whereas, Dimple does. Her psychological eccentricity is evident right in her own country when she skips her way to abortion. She justifies herself by telling that she cannot afford to take any ‘relics’ from her old life to America where she hoped to begin a new life. The height of her psychic eccentricity is stabbing her own husband to death. Mukherjee in her novel rightly names her as ‘Dimple’ which means “any slight depression” and this is a symbolic representation of the depression within her character.

Dimple wants to break through the traditional taboos of a wife. This novel tells the story of Dimple, a seemingly docile young Bengali girl who, as any other normal girl, is full of dreams about her married life and so she eagerly and impatiently waits for marriage. She marries Amit Basu. She visualizes a new life for herself in America where Amit is expecting to immigrate. She is expected to play the role of an ideal Indian wife, stay at home and keep the house for the husband. Her frustration is built up gradually by the circumstances. One such way is here including a miscarriage by skipping herself free from pregnancy, which she views as a Basu’s property even in her womb. But herself-identity is avoided by marriage. She aspires for self-recognition and dreams fulfilled. But Basu behaves in a different way. He wants her to be docile and submissive. So Dimple hates Basu and his behavior. He needs her only for sexual enjoyment. She feels it’s a sort guilty. Finally, in her mentally upset state, she kills Amit in act of self-liberation and eventually commits suicide. An important concern of the colonial literature is related to place and displacement. The self may have eroded either because of “dislocation” or “cultural denigration” Beyond their historical and cultural differences, places, displacement, and a feature common to all postcolonial literature in English. Displacement frequently leads to alienation of vision and crisis in self-image.

CULTURAL RIVALRY IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE’S JASMINE

Cross-cultural relations in *Jasmine* (1989). The protagonist Jyoti undergoes different transformations as she leaves India and goes to America. She has a strong will power to fight against all odds and obstacles in her target of getting Americanized as her husband Prakash Vihj desired her to be. She oscillates between the claims of Indian tradition and the claims of survival in contemporary America as an independent woman. In spite of differences and contradictory claims of the two cultures, *Jasmine* is capable of forging the composite culture of the East and the West.

Her imaginative insight enables her to adjust to an alien country like the US. The traditional values of the East and the common features of the land, the people, their traditions and customs are reflected in *Jasmine*’s life prior to her departure to America. In her novel *Jasmine* by Bharati Mukherjee, the protagonist is portrayed to be embodying the realistic shape of human spirit who has attained empowerment as well. Not only she but her actions and reactions equally affected the Americans whom she interfaced or came into contact with. By way of her writings, Mukherjee is able to take on a positive viewpoint on the idea of transition from one set of surroundings or cultures to another.

At the same time, this perspective allows immigrant readers to remain hopeful about their involvements and ambitions. Deepika Bahri in her essay “Always Becoming: Narratives of Nation and Self in Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*” captures the interrelationship of women, America and movement by applying the narrative of dislocation and cultural hybridity, but she also does not take in to account the major role played by cultural factors and forces in determining the course and career of these women protagonists.

The author has created a fine line between the characters of Jyoti and *Jasmine* in India and other identities enveloping her protagonist based in America. The book becomes an amalgamation of two sub-stories or cultures from two different worlds. Taking the discussion forward, it would be acceptable to argue that the India part of the novel is about Jyoti’s survival under the scrutiny of old-fashioned patriarchy and associated customs or values ranging from tradition to modern, whereas, the America part of the book talks about the cultural dilemmas she faced in an alien western country. She rebels against the blind beliefs and superstitions prevailing in her small village and argues against the fate which is adumbrated by the astrologer. It was in the US where she felt at loss with her identity more powerfully than anywhere else.

During the flow of the story as reflected in the novel, Jyoti acquires many new names and identities, each requiring a newer role and expectations that highlighted the

various phases in her transformation towards “Americanisation” or, more particularly, cultural assimilation in her case. Notwithstanding the trauma and aftereffect of rape on her very first day in the white environs of the US, with the affectionate moral aid of certain well-intentioned people in America, she completely transforms herself from an ignorant, vulnerable migrant to a self-assured confident working woman. She confirms her various identities by observing, “I have had a husband for each of the women I have been. Prakash for Jasmine, Taylor for Jase, Bud for Jane. Half-Face for Kali” (175).

At each phase of her transformation from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jase and from Jase to Jane, one comes across a different woman in her, more adapted to the western world. She is reflected to be a born fighter. The shift in her identities is suggestive of the death of one person and an emergence of a new and she notes, “Indianness as a fragile identity to be preserved against obliteration, now it is seen as a set of fluid identities to be celebrated” (3). Through the novel, the author also brings out her anguish against the third world when she highlights that Jasmine needed to shift to America to achieve something significant in her life. According to her, she faced only despair and loss in the third world. Jasmine has emerged to be a novel of emigration and assimilation on physical as well as psychological aspects. Having gradually assimilated both the cultures in herself, she even allows herself to become an unwed mother and a hasty lover of sorts, an otherwise unsociable norm in the Indian society back at her village. Jasmine’s subsequent days in America transports her to a new lifestyle notwithstanding the problems created by a new culture she was now part of.

The initial impression she left on the natives was that of a certain someone, coming from somewhere in the eastern part of the world, with blackish skin, speaking a native language. In her initial attempts, she found it difficult for herself to share with strangers the finer details about her life and identity which she left back in India.

II. CONCLUSION

The cross-cultural relations depend on the recognition of uncertainty and unfamiliarity of interactions with others that belong to another cultural set-up. In case of mirroring of multiple cultures, the most appropriate illustrations are to be found in what is branded as diasporic literature. The diasporic writers like Bharati the stages of adaptation are noticed in the journey of the protagonist. She is required to undertake from the center to the periphery and then again from the periphery to the center. The sense of alienation, the phase of adaptation, the stage of reconciliation, the process of assimilation and the destination of acculturation are the progressive steps which end in the cross-cultural shift. Bharati Mukherjee desires that the novel wife and jasmine describe that cross-cultural encounters

should not lead to violence or corruption. It is necessary to move beyond the frontiers of race, religion, class and, nationality to understand the significance of cross-cultural relationships. It is essential to adopt a view that will embrace global proportions. The promotion of the positive global view is necessary to promote cross-cultural relations.

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