

CULTURAL SHOCK: A STUDY OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S JASMINE

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to make a study of 'The Status of Women in a Modern Socio-Cultural Context' with Particular Reference to Bharati Mukherjee's JASMINE. The first part deals with the brief introduction of Indian Women writings and the biography of Bharati Mukherjee that introduces her novel *Jasmine*. The second part analyses the character of the protagonist, Jasmine through her status in the society as a woman. The final part discusses how Jasmine is depicted as a successful woman in the novel *Jasmine* in a unique way.

KEYWORDS: Socio-Cultural, Indian Women, Protagonist and Unique Way.

INTRODUCTION

The history of Literature really began long before man learned to write. All art is the reflection of some truth and beauty. Literature preserves the ideals of people and the ideals of love, faith, duty, friendship, freedom and reverence are the part of human life most worthy of preservation. Literature art is the written record of man's spirit, of his thought, emotions, aspirations; it is the history, and the only history of the human soul. It is characterized by its artistic, its suggestive and its permanent reflections. The novel is an extended prose fiction dealing with the interaction of characters in a real or imagined setting. The word novel originates from the Latin word novella which means new. The term novella was applied by the Italian writer Giovanni Boccaccio to the short anecdotal prose narrative *Decameron*. The rise of the novel in India was not purely a literary phenomenon. The appearance of the novel as a literary form in nineteenth century India as it did in eighteenth century England synchronized with the raise of individualism and with all the consequent political and social reorientations which followed. The rise of the novel in India between 1818 and 1850 began with the emergence of prose. Feminism is, indeed, a serious attempt to analyze, comprehend and clarify how and why is femininity or the feminine sensibility different from masculinity or the masculine experience. The term Feminism has its origin from the Latin word Femina meaning Woman and thereby refers to the advocacy of woman's rights, status and power. The term Feminism is an ideology in the making. According to Oxford English Dictionary, the term Feminism was used in the latter part of the nineteenth century and it means having the qualities of females.

The term Feminism was first used by the French Dramatist Alexander Dumas, the younger in 1872 in a pamphlet L "homme-femme". Bharati Mukherjee, an award winning novelist has been acknowledged as a voice of expatriate immigrant sensibility. She is one of the most significant contemporary novelists and a short story writer. She is one of the prominent novelists among the writers of expatriation. There has been an ongoing quest from expatriation to immigration in her writings. She was born on 27th July 1940 in a Bengali Brahmin family of Calcutta. Her father Sudhirlal Mukherjee was a pharmaceutical chemist and her mother Bina Banerjee Mukherjee was housewife. She spent her first eight years as a member of a large extended family. Shortly after India gained independence. She lived with her parents and two sisters in London about three years, when she became fluent in English. In 1951, the family returned to Calcutta and Mukherjee joined the English speaking Loreto convent school, run by Irish nuns. She lived with her parents fairly comfortable

circumstances, as her father was a co-owner of a pharmaceutical factory. Bharati Mukherjee's novels truly reflect the temperament and mood of the present American society as experienced by immigrants in America. This movement coincides with her migration from Canada to USA. That is Mukherjee's interpretation of reaction to her experience in Canada led her to see herself as an expatriate and theme of expatriation reflected in her novels. Her third novel *Jasmine* reveals a more positivistic approach to the problem of immigration. The protagonist Jasmine faced with a loss identity and Mukherjee unravel the complicated layers of cross-cultural reality through a series of adventure which heroine undertakes during her odyssey from Punjab to California via Florida, New York and Iowa. Her struggle symbolizes the rest less quest rootless person piqued by a depressing sense of isolation all round. Mukherjee focuses her attention on the life of south Asian expatriates or immigrants in USA and Canada and the problems of acculturation and assimilation. Her novel shows her pre-occupation with the theme of cross cultural confrontation. This study focuses on her work *Jasmine* which we are concerned with the story of a young widow who uproots from her life in India and reroots herself in the search of new life and the image in America. It deals with the alien, illegal immigrant is one extreme type of diasporic body. *Jasmine* was written after Bharati Mukherjee migrated to US and hence reveals a more positivistic approach to the problem of migration. Jasmine explores the process of Americanization and brings out the conflict between assimilation and cultural preservation.

This research work deals with the immigrant woman's attempt to assimilate her, to find a place in the main stream of the life of an adopted land, abandoning the former life style of her country and trying to adopt new American culture. This research concentrates on the status of women in a modern socio-cultural context with particular reference to Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*.

THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN A MODERN SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S *JASMINE*

It is quite common in India to follow such a way of life: First, a student studies to become a success, then after all their education they move on to the European countries, or United States. This is quite common, and that is certainly not a temporary visit. The person who goes to the developed countries tries to remain there itself. However, they come back to India and get married, and once again they go back to America or other developed countries. After some years they get the green card and settle there as immigrants. But it is not always easy mingling with the natives as a foreigner, indeed the cultural difference is so stark that a shock is experienced

The world has changed rapidly in the past decades. People of the world have been brought closer by all the technological advancements. The world economies are rapidly globalizing and an understanding of cultural diversity is almost inevitable. At the present circumstance a cross-cultural communication is becoming a global issue. Thus, individual ability to adjust to the new culture is also being paid great attention. In fact a whole new literature called the immigrant literature has emerged to record all their thoughts about their experience in the foreign land.

The term cultural shock was first introduced by an anthropologist, Kalervo Oberg. He defined cultural shock as, "the psychological disorientation experienced by people who suddenly enter radically different cultural environment to live and work" (qtd. in CWW 75). In fact cultural shock in the simplest of terms is an emotional response to stress. It also has a close relationship to individual psychology. In this paper the main reasons for cultural shock will be discussed, and then its negative effects. Then, these reasons and effects will be applied to Jasmine.

Bharati Mukherjee won the National Book Critics Circle Award for her collection of short stories, *The Middlemen and Other Stories*. She is the first naturalized American citizen to do so. The stories are all about the immigrant experience. The stories are glimpses of the lives of illegal immigrants, students, motel clerks and maids, a strange mixture of Orient and Occident. *Jasmine*, in fact was a short story in this collection, but Mukherjee liked it very much that she wanted to write about it more. *Jasmine*, a novel, is a story of a woman from Punjab who takes her life into her own hands. She makes herself an American, very much like Bharati Mukherjee herself. "I think of *Jasmine* and many of my characters, as being people who are pulling themselves out of the very traditional world in which their fate is predetermined, their destiny resigned to the stars. But *Jasmine* says: I'm going to reposition the stars" (qtd. in *Jasmine* 134).

Jasmine is an individual who makes many mistakes, but who also has the courage to choose and take risks. But *Jasmine* making herself an American also brings in cultural shock. In *Jasmine* the immigrants are 'wily participants' in the dominant culture, and understanding that code is crucial for appreciating the novel. *Jasmine* is fluid, and Mukherjee attributes this fluidity to the American culture. This fluidity is exemplified in the main characters' 'metaphorsis' from Jyothi, a Punjabi village girl, to *Jasmine*, a loving and devoted Hindu Wife, to Kali, incarnation of destroying goddess, to Jazzy, a remade, non-immigrant, to Jase, a nanry in the home of a New York college professor, and to Jane, live-in partner of a bank official in Iowa.

Each of these character-transformations is marked by changes in behavior and personality, such as her successive 'rebirths' seems analogy to Hindu transmigration of the soul. While examining the codes associated with each of the six permutations, we discover that while some codes disappear, certain qualities do in fact 'transmigrate' from one young woman to the next. Jyothi, born in Punjab, is a survivor. The quality remains constant. She escapes infanticide, and kills a rabid dog in self-defense. Intelligent, beautiful and self-willed, she finds her way to America after widowed. Prakash, her husband, dies in a bomb blast.

Cultural Shock experts identify certain traits for immigrant individuals to reduce psychological stress. There are three approaches to reduce psychological stress: self-confidence and optimism, accepting new culture and seeking social support. In the field of social psychology, there is a term self-efficacy which means the conviction or belief of people that they can overcome the obstacles encountered. People with high self-efficacy usually believe that they have abilities to perform tasks well. They work harder and experience less anxiety when getting into trouble, because they have full confidence that they will succeed. Nevertheless, people with low self-efficacy often believe that they cannot perform works well, so they usually tend to give up easily and experience more anxiety when facing troubles. Lack of confidence is the most important reason for their failure.

Therefore, self-confidence plays a keyrole in decreasing anxiety and overcoming obstacles. Likewise, optimism is also very necessary when people experience culture shock, because explaining negative events optimistically can decrease depression and anxiety. This is also true in *Jasmine*, only because of her positive attitude; she was able to survive in US another way to reduce psychological stress is to accept the new culture. This means accepting other cultures' values and behaviors as not good or bad but simply different. Once people are able to accept them, they will be more comfortable and able to minimize psychological stress. Nevertheless, it is not an easy method. People need to understand with great willingness and pleasure not only what people do and believe, but also why they do it. Therefore, interest, curiosity and willingness are essential, and reluctant acceptance will cause more psychological discomfort. But in the case of *Jasmine*,

she completely accepts American society and culture, as her creator too. Thus she is not very much affected by cultural shock. She also feels it is her destiny to be an American.

I knew from the moment I got here that I wanted to stay...mine is a clear eyed but definite love of America. I am aware of the brutalities, the violence here, but in the long run my characters are survivors. Like Jasmine, I feel there are people born to the American. By American I mean an intensity of spirit and a quality of desire. I feel American in a fundamental way, whether Americans see me that way or not.(qtd. In Jasmine 158).

Given her bourgeois background, coupled with her desire to tell the stories of marginalized Asians in the US, Bharati Mukherjee tends to reproduce uncritically the imperialist project of salving the other or turning the other into self. Along with this, the question of privilege also becomes important when she renders herself, her own self-representation, transparent in the act of representing the other. In 'Immigrant Writing,' Mukherjee says: "All around me, I see the face of America changing but where, in fiction, do you read it? Who, in other words, speaks for us, the new Americans from non-traditional immigrant countries?" (qtd. in Jasmine 156).

In the process of international communication, culture shock is becoming more and more common because of cultural diversity. From one culture to another, the differences among them cause people's feelings of unfamiliarity. This result in a large amount of psychological stress such as depression, anxiety and feelings of helplessness. Before entering a new cultural environment, it is very important for all people to make full preparation. Understanding the process of culture shock and features of a new culture may be useful for all people, because knowledge can be acquired through a number of channels.

CONCLUSION

Jasmine is the heroic story of a poor, young and ambitious Punjabi woman who migrates from Hasnapur to USA. The heroine of the novel is the narrator of the story who gives a detailed account of her journey from no home to a new home. She is an embodiment of a dutiful wife, conscious of her sacred relationship with her husband and bought caught in disasters only to show her determination to change her destiny and explore infinite possibilities.

The novel is an account of the heroine's adaptation and adjustment to new social and cultural structures. The author compares the life of the past and the present and shows how woman have attained good position now. Though there is much change in the life style of woman, there is still harassment of women due to male domination. In future, study can be made in the psychological aspects of this novel.

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