
The Theme of Multiculturalism Portrayed in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

Dr. K. Nagarathinam,

Associate Professor of English, RVS College of Arts and Science, Sulur, Coimbatore

ABSTRACT:

India is a multicultural space accommodating many races, castes, languages, religions and cultures. Indian literature is an expression of the vital plurality and productive diversity of our nation. Multiculturalism implies a multiplicity of contesting cultural voices that are allowed to articulate the imagined community of the nation on their own terms.

*Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, is a novel that tells the story of a young Indian woman who tries to adapt to the American way of life in order that she can survive. Jasmine, the title character, and also the protagonist of the novel, changes her identities several times so that she can she can live up to the culture she thrusts herself into.*

Key words: *Multi- culture, Portrayal of Women, Description about Indian Tradition Vs Modern Tradition*

Jasmine happens to be one of those novels by Bharati Mukherjee that have been much acclaimed by the critics. It has often been described as the projection and depiction of the hypersensitive mind of a woman. Jasmine, the central character, rather, the protagonist of the novel travels through events and situations in the novel in such a way that each of her steps and activities gains remarkable dimension, making the literary work stand out with pride.

The journey of Jasmine, as presented in the novel, does touch the readers making them feel her and feel for her. Yet, the other themes that the journey of the central character involves and reflects cannot be ignored. The journey of Jasmine appears to have a direct association to with the subject of immigration, and in the process, offers an insight into the issue of multiculturalism. Before we attempt a critical analysis of immigration, multiculturalism and some other issues in *Jasmine*, let us have an overview of the story of the novel itself.

The backdrop of *Jasmine* is based on the idea of the marriage of the East and the West, with a story that portrays a Hindu Indian woman whose husband is murdered. Being widowed at merely the age of seventeen, Jasmine leaves India for the United States. Through a series of events including her facing a number of problems and even getting raped, she turns to be a health professional.

The way the author has developed the character of the protagonist and has made her go through the journey from India to the United States and shift from one culture to the other in the course of living, immigration, change of culture and multiculturalism can automatically be traced to be among the most important as well as most obvious themes of *Jasmine*.

The very typical aspect of the themes of immigration and multiculturalism in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* is that both appear to be the cause and well as the effect of the other. It is not that the immigration of Jasmine from a village in Punjab in India to Florida in the United States naturally leads to the projection of multiculturalism. If the line of events is analyzed with an introspective and critical view, it will appear that multiculturalism also has a great role to play in Jasmine's journey from India to the United States.

Jasmine, rather, Jyoti, born in Hasnapur in India, is the most beautiful and clever child in her family. The way she has been controlled dominated by the male members of her family, and the way it has been shown as taken for granted clearly reveals the side of male dominance over the female in Indian culture. Like the girls and women in most of the Indian families, Jyoti's life is also controlled by her father or brothers.

Culture is typically characterized by its tendency to change in various forms, is also revealed through the events in the novel. Marriage at an early age is still a part of culture in some parts of India. Yet, Jyoti has the mind to think in a different way as young generations in most cultures do. Though Jyoti does not deny to get married, she does have the desire to marry an educated man who does not believe in the dowry system. Thus she is married to Prakash, a man who is based in the United States and has the modern way of thinking.

It is after marriage that Jyoti's immigration becomes quite obvious. At the same time, Jyoti's shift from one culture to the other and also the shift from one identity to the other occur. Prakash encourages her to study English after they shift to the US. He also gives Jyoti a new name Jasmine. This change of her name is much symbolic of the change of her identity as well as of her shift from the Eastern culture to the Western one. However, though Jyoti was quite happy in her marital life, it is too short-lived as Jasmine is widowed after Prakash is murdered.

The second instance of immigration in Jasmine's life seems to have much to do with culture and also with multiculturalism. The time that Jasmine had spent in the US with Prakash had made her adapt to the Western Culture that is not, at least, as superstitious as that of India. When Jasmine returns from the US to her family in India, she has to choose either performing Sati according to the rigid tradition of her family, or to lead the life of Jasmine in America. Now she becomes an illegal immigrant to Florida, symbolizing her journey of transformations, displacements and shifts of identities.

In the course of migration and shifts of identities, and adapting to different cultures, the events also shows how America is perceived as a land of opportunities. Jasmine leaves her oppressive family in India and chooses to live in America, even if as an illegal immigrant. She did so for she had the hope that her search for a more fruitful life would be materialized in the United States. Prakash also had the same idea about America as a land of opportunities since both of them travelled to the United States after their marriage with the ambition of starting off a 'new life'.

Jasmine's journey towards the Western culture begins as her identity as a typical Hindu widow as she meets people like Taylor or Bud. Her identities as 'Jase', as Taylor called her, and as 'Jane', as Bud called her, are not only the reflections of her shifting identities but also her shedding one culture and adapting the other.

Bharati Mukherjee has depicted her transition as a positive and optimistic journey. It clearly reveals that the author herself is quite sympathetic to her protagonist in the novel and wants her not to be a victim of the rigidity of the Indian culture. Jasmine tries to and does create a new world of hers that consists of new ideas and values. To be specific, she is always upbeat to establish a new cultural identity through constant incorporation of new skills, desires, and habits. It is true that there have been changes in her attitude. At the same time, the change in her relationships with the men is also remarkable. Again, though Jasmine has tried a lot to change her cultural identity from one to the other, she has definitely faced problems. For instance, when Jasmine offers Du to help him in his homework she ultimately finds it impossible for her since Du was studying Teddy Roosevelt's presidency, a subject that Jasmine finds quite foreign. There is one more thing that needs to be mentioned here, especially when it comes to the subjects of immigration, changing cultures and multiculturalism. The way the character of Jasmine has been portrayed, especially her role as an immigrant to the United States, Jasmine seems to be a representative of the immigrants to the United States from the East. However, the attitude and the outlook towards life that Jasmine has, makes her stand out as a unique character, deserving to be the protagonist of a novel.

REFERENCES:

Primary Source:

- i. Mukherjee, Bharati. *Jasmine*. Perseus Books Group, 1999.

Secondary Source:

- i Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- ii Ghosh, Amitav. "The Diaspora in Indian Culture" in *The Imam and the*
- iii *Indian: Prose Pieces*. Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publ. & Permanent Black, 2002. 243-250.
- iv Mukherjee, Bharati. *The Holder of the World*. New York: Viking, 1993.