

# **BHARATI MUKHERJEE 'S *JASMINE* – A *MULTICULTURAL NOVEL***

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In the present international global culture, with great advancement in science and technology and glorified principles of human rights, culture plays a pivotal role. There is displacement within cities and states even within a country. Even inland displacement within a country needs proper understanding and tolerance in order to lead a peaceful life. Culture moulds person physically and mentally. Culture has a huge bearing on anthropology, history, literary studies, sociology and politics. All kinds of art, music, drama, language, architecture, handicrafts are manifestations of culture. It is a way of life making one a perfect human being. It enables one helping to lead a harmonious and balanced life. In the words of Abidi Hussain, " Culture is a sense of ultimate value possessed by a particular society as expressed in its collective institutions, by its individual members in their depositions, feelings, attitudes and manners as well as in significant forms which they give to material objects" (3). In the context of multiculturalism one's attitude towards other social systems, habits, custom is very important.

Literature and culture are not independent. They are interdependent. Literature reflects the life of a person, his knowledge, beliefs, values, ethics and his way of life. A literary writer presents the contemporary social, cultural changes that take place in his country and in the

world. The impact of diversity in the present society stressing the need for understanding and coexistence is depicted in the works of cross-border writings. The concept of coexistence began with the writings of Mulk Raj Anand. The cultural conflict between East and West is buried in the works of Raja Rao. R.K. Narayan does not pay attention to cultural tension in his works. Nayantara Saghals characters move between native and foreign cultures. Conflict between cultures was seen in Anita Desais *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, Ruth Praver Jhabwalas novels dealt the encounter between Indian and foreign cultures. V.S. Naipauls *A House for Mr. Biswas* was an example for the uprooted chaotic cultural milieu. Jhumpa Lahiris characters move between the cultures of India and America. Rohinton Mistrys characters move towards the West looking for resettlement. Arundati Roy's *The God of Small Things* could be viewed from a multicultural point of view. In the words of Ashok Chaskar " The term 'multiculturalism' was primarily used in the U.S.A. in connection with the demand of the black and other minority communities for equal representation in American society including schools and colleges... It insists that American society has never been 'white' but has been multi-racial having diverse backgrounds. As a movement, multiculturalism seeks to underscore the values of distinctly different ethnic, racial and cultural communities which cannot be allowed to melt into a common culture" (5).

Bharati Mukherjee's novel "Jasmine" presents the trials undergone by the protagonist Jasmine in the multicultural society of America which has been bias towards immigrant population. This paper aims at bringing out the sufferings of the protagonist of the novel "Jasmine" in America which views Asian, African nationals and their cultures as inferior and minor ones. One is reminded of Sachidananda Mohantys words, "... Nathan Glazer's celebrated dictum that" we are all multiculturalists today", conceals many of deeper dissensions and dilemmas endemic to multicultural theory and practice especially in America. We need to

therefore undertake a deeper inquiry of multiculturalism beyond the commonly accepted “feel good “ factor that all enlightened societies and individuals tend to prefer and profess” (51).

Bharati Mukherjee, born in 1940 in Calcutta had her education in London. She continued her B.A. and M.A. degrees in English from the University of Calcutta and University of Baroda respectively. In 1961, she got a Degree of Master of Fine Arts from the University of Iowa’s Writers Workshop where she met Clark Blaise and married him in 1963. Moving to Canada, she started her career as a writer. In her short stories she cited the hatred of whites towards immigrants. Racial discrimination, cultural dominations, violence, abject negligence faced by non-whites in Canada and U.S. were the themes of her short stories. Discrimination and racism experienced by Mukherjee as an immigrant in Canada made her settle in United States. Though democratic by principle America also practices cultural prejudices against its immigrants subtly.

In the novel “Jasmine” Jyoti the protagonist, had her childhood in Hasnapur, a small feudal village in Julludhur, Punjab. Jyoti’s elder’s sisters were married off at a very early stage. Her brothers Hari-Prar and Arvind-Prar took care of the family as scooter mechanics in Hasnapur. No wonder Punjab as a part of India had pluralistic society with Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims living in peace. Hari-Prar and Arvind-Prar had Suckwinder Singh, a sikh as their friend. From time immemorial India has been gracious enough to accept groups and races of people all over the world. The country has become a place of mixed culture, religious ideas and different languages. Even mixed India gave due respect to those who invaded. it. Yet there are certain sectarian fanatical Sikhs who refused to understand the impeccable social heterogeneity of India. They considered Hindus as impure and denigrated and Hindu women as whores and prostitutes. They called themselves as Khalsa Lions. Suckwinder Singh was one among the Khalsa Lions

nurturing hatred towards Hindu women. Having married Prakash, an engineer by profession Jyoti moved to Jullundhar. Prakash was idealistic, self-reliant, independent and let Jyoti live a happy life. He named her as Jasmine. From Jyoti she became Jasmine. Prakash got admission in a college in US with the help of his Professor Devinder Vadhera in US. It was planned that Jasmine could visit U.S. after a year. When Jasmine and Prakash went for shopping in Jullundhar Sukhwinder Singh killed Prakash by throwing a bomb at him. Though India takes stringent measures to maintain unity in diversity, there are secessionists like Sukhwinder Singh disrupting its cultural harmony. Jasmine's widowhood at the early age was the result of the threat to the multicultural polity and reality of India.

Despite her widowhood, underage, lack of higher education Jasmine planned to visit America. She thought of it as her mission to visit the university where Prakash got admission and wanted to burn his suit at least. The oddities underwent by her during her travel only strengthened her mind to enter the university ground. They were treated as refugees with uncertainty and insecurity, with utmost ruthlessness. "... we are refugees, mercenaries and guest workers, you see us sleeping in airport lounges. You watch us unwrapping the last of our native foods, unrolling our prayer rugs, reading our holy books taking out for the hundredth time an aerogram promising a job or space to sleep, a newspaper in our language a photo of happier times, a passport, a visa, a laissez-passer... We ask only one thing; to be allowed to land, to pass through, to continue" (Jasmine 100-1).

With forged documents Jasmine was frightened every moment to be caught by the police. She was dismayed by long hours of voyage by sea, by air by land. "What country? What continent? We pass through wars, through plagues... I phantom my way through three continents. The small airports in the middle East lit by oil fires and gas flares, the waiting rooms

in Sudan with locusts banging on the glass, landing always in the smaller cities, the disused air fields” (101). Her heart bled to see Filipinos, Srilankan Tamils, Missionaries, Muslims speaking Farsi and Pashto, Ugandans, Jamaicans, Mauritians entering America with forged documents to be used for cheap labour. Venders, mechanics, hotel servers, cooks, toilet cleaners, trash cleaners were the cursed lots from South Asia, Africa and China. These labourers did not get any insurance, security, medical facilities in America.

The ship named ‘The Gulf Shuttle’ was trafficking illegal immigrants. The captain of the ship was well-known in west Caribbean islands. He was a demolition expert, lost his cheek in a paddy field in Vietnam during the act of demolition, nicknamed as Half-Face. The Jamaican was kind towards Jasmine, and noticing her young age and vulnerability to dangers, warned her not to trust the captain of the ship, Half-Face. As a safety measure, he presented Jasmine a penknife.

Jasmine’s helplessness, naivety, the big suitcase heightened her position as an object to be seduced and to be exploited. She was inexperienced and could not discern from the fellow passengers that too much luggage for illegal immigrants would land them in trouble. Always in America undocumented Asians, Africans, non-whites were treated with contempt. Half-Face offered a lift in his car and took her to a remote hotel. When he tried to seduce her, she begged his mercy narrating her mission to visit the university in Tampa. He was monstrous, unmoved, unscrupulous to understand a poor young Indian widow’s loyalty, love, anxiety to fulfil her dead husband’s dream. Half-Face was contemptuous towards South-Asians “... I been to Asia and it’s the armpit of the universe”(112). He beat her severely. She lost her virginity to the

monster who in turn was killed by Jasmine. Her very first night's stay in America proved to be brutal and bloody. Half-Face's attack on Jasmine's virginity was not only a breach of harmonious co-existence; metaphorically it stood for cultural imperialism hegemony of West upon East. Edward Said opined, "In any society, not totalitarian, then, certain cultural forms predominate over others just as certain ideas are more influential than others; the form of this cultural leadership is what Gramsci has identified as hegemony an indispensable concept for any understanding of cultural life in the industrial West"(7)

Not all Whites /Europeans treat non-whites with inhumanity. Jasmine was rescued by Lillian Gordon a seventy year old Quaker lady. Gordon's genuinity was revealed when she gave Jasmine her daughter's old shirts. There were three Kanjobal women at Gordon's house .Lillian Gordon gave them training in house-keeping."Lillian taught us all to cook hamburgers and roaststo clean toilets with cleaners that smelled sweeter than flowers and to scrub pots and pans with pre-soaped balls of steel wool instead of ashes and lemon rinds ,so we could hire ourselves out as domestics"(134). Jasmine's ignorance of American Walk and Deportment her illiteracy never bothered Lillian Gordon. Lillian even learned Kanjobal language to act as an interpreter. To help the needy and poor immigrants was her mission. She was tolerant with them, never bothered about the repercussions of this service. The American government and public were frightened of intruders and illegal immigrants. The world needed facilitators to maintain good relations in human society and tolerance was the most valuable positive energy needed in a multicultural setup."When Jasmine about to visit Prof Davinder , Lillian Gordon was worried that Jasmine's deportment would be noticed by U.S police and would become suspicious of Jasmine's stay in US. She trained Jasmine to use the elevator confidently and to pronounceWords like Americans. The harsh treatment at the hands of police frightened Lillian

Gorden and she was worried about Jasmine's safety. Sachidananda Mohanty opined, "...the American State denied political space and civil rights to coloured immigrants"(54).

Jasmine's stay with Professor Vadhera's house at Flushing as an unpaid servant was highly atrocious. They were vain and pompous people and they made Jasmine feel that she should be grateful for her accommodation. As a young Hindu widow, Jasmine had to be subservient to all in Vadhera's family. Vadhera's bogus life was brought to light when Jasmine contacted him at the instant of his aged father's injury. "Professorji was not a professor. He was an importer and sorter of human hair. The hair came in great bundles from middlemen in villages as small as Hasnapur all over India. The middlemen shipped hair in switches. Every weekday Professorji sat from eight O'clock till six on a kitchen ladder-stool in a room he rented in the basement of the Khyber Bar BQ measuring and labeling the length and thickness of each separate hair" (151). Jasmine was astounded to know the truth about his profession. She wanted to escape from the shock and shame. She got appointed as Day Mother to a child in Taylor and Wylie Hayes' family through Lillian Gordon's daughter Kate. The Hayes' family paid her \$95 per week as salary. She was overjoyed and felt secured. The Hayes treated her as one among them. Jasmine looked forward to a bright future. "Jyoti was now a sati-goddess she had burned herself in a trash can funeral pyre behind a boarded-up motel in Florida. Jasmine lived for the future for Vijn & Wife. Jase went for movies and lived for today" (176). Taylor, a professor of sub nuclear particle physics called her Jase and was moved by Jasmine's sincerity and affection towards his adopted daughter Duff. Jasmine was often reminded of Hasnapur and Jallundhur. In an alien land, without education, without legal documents for her stay in US, Jasmine was exploited at all levels. As an undocumented coloured immigrant, she had lost her identity for survival. "Jyoti of Hasnapur was not Jasmine, Duff's day mummy and Taylor and Wylie's aupair

in Manhattan... And which of us in the undetected murderer of a half-faced monster, which of us has held a dying husband, which of us was raped and raped and raped in boats and cars and motel rooms?" (127).

As "Jase" and as day mother for Duff Jasmine was safe with Taylor and Wylie. The cultural war raised by Khalsa Lions in Punjab India which killed Prakash, extended its tentacles to America also. Sukhwinder Singh, the murderer of Prakash, identified Jasmine sending shivers to her bones. Her illegality as a labourer in America prevented her from complaining about Sukhwinder Singh to police. Being socially and politically powerless, Jasmine was always hunted by murderers like Sukhwinder Singh.

Leaving Taylor's family, Jasmine was appointed as Teller in an agricultural bank giving loans to farmers in Iowa. It was run by Bud Ripplemayer. Bud's sons were farmers. Jasmine moved into Bud's house in order to take care his aged mother. She was "Jane" to Bud and he wanted to marry Jane despite their vast age difference. Though Bud helped her becoming financially secured, Jasmine was not ready to marry him. "How many more shapes are in me, how many more selves, how many more husbands"(215). Jasmine had been a care giver to the child Duff, preserver of life to Budd Ripplemayer, adopted mother to the Vietnamese boy D-Theien-Bud's adopted son.

Jasmine's priority to equal respect and value to all cultures was shattered by violent, impulsive and self-centered people. The ship captain Half-Face, an uncouth, destroyed Jasmine's vision. Wylie deserted her husband Taylor even before their divorce. She implied that it was Jasmine's entry which made the wedge wider between her husband and herself. Karin, Bud's



first wife had divorced him, yet she was envious of Jasmine. Jasmine's adaptability to various situations raised envy among selfish people.

Darrel, 23-year old neighbour of Bud fell in love with Jasmine and she refused to marry Darrel. Darrel charged Bud that being a German he refused to loan Darrel. Bud never thought himself to be a German. Darrel's plan to sell his fertile farm to hotel builders was not successful. His failure in his business as well as marrying Jasmine forced him to commit suicide. Once again Jasmine smelled the impending danger upon her stay in Iowa. She joined Taylor and his adopted daughter, expecting to deliver Bud's child.

The novel "Jasmine" had few more characters who suffered due to cultural domination, economic exploitation and subjugation. Undocumented Asians, Africans, Chinese, Japanese were called as illegal aliens. In America "People were getting a little scared of immigrants and positively hostile to illegals" (137). The taxi driver who drove Jasmine to Vadhera's house in Flushing was a respectable doctor in Kabul. In New York he had struggled hard to make both ends meet. He was suspicious of Jasmine that she could not pay the taxi fare. "In Kabul I was a doctor. We have to be here living like dogs because they've taken everything from us... He went on about the wrongs. Bitterness seemed to buoy him, make him special... on the streets I saw only more greed, more people like myself. New York was an archipelago of ghettos seething with aliens" (140).

Women from Trinidad and Barbados worked in America as labourers. Letitia from Trinidad and Jamaica from Barbados came to Brooklyn in search of decent employment but ended up with cheap labour.

Du-Thien from Honolulu who had survived from refuge Vietnam camp by eating worms and toads was adopted by Bud. He never wanted to be nostalgic and never talked of his family and their torture in the camp. He survived in Iowa gulping his past. But his teacher in Iowa, Mr. Skola implicitly pointed out his alienness trying to speak in Vietnamese. "This country has so many ways of humiliating, of disappointing. There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself. We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dream" (29), Du-Thien expected that a non-homogenous nation would welcome him to its multitude. On the contrary, most of the Americans and Europeans take advantageous positions over South Asians. As a result these communities are in a disadvantageous position having been deprived of their rights and opportunities.

The hard reality is that though America is badly in need of services of cheap labourers, it refuses to give them due respect, identity and equal rights. The ethnic identity of Kanjobal women from Guatemala and part of Mexico was relegated to the margin. They are unable to read, write, speak English and are engaged as domestics. The Kanjobalan people of Huchuetenango in western Guatemalan high lands and adjacent parts of Mexico immigrated into America illegally. Language barrier had created vast gap between the locals and the immigrants. Their illegal stay in US had made them fearful of getting help from consulates. With no common language to communicate, to express their wishes, they had been put into the danger of losing their ethnic identity. No political party had supported immigrants. The public was hardly friendly with poor immigrants. Mechanics, coolies, hot dog vendors, bar tenders suppliers in hotels, room-service men were illegal immigrants and they were paid low wages. Most Kanjobalan people were marginalized and exploited with more work and less payment. In general, people of America were afraid of undocumented people and a feeling of hatred and animosity prevailed

over cheap labourers. “The border’s like Swiss cheese and all the mice are squirming through the holes” (28).

Despite the oddities she underwent in America. Jasmine survived as typical Indian woman. Passive and brave, she endured all hideous assaults upon her. Inland terrorism cruelly uprooted Jasmine from Jullundhur. As a typical Indian woman she was loyal to her husband and his mission made her stay alive. The spirit of resilience of Indian women made her raise up to the occasion. She adapted herself to the need of the hour. “America may be fluid and built on flimsy, invisible lines of weak gravity, but I was dense object, I had landed and was getting rooted” (179). She was sincere with families she worked for.

Scepticism was the pitfall of Western World. Jasmine’ sincerity in her service towards Bud when he was crippled aroused jealousy in Karin, Bud’s former wife. She was caught between compassion and duty to Bud. In a way Darrel’s suicide paved her the way for better future. As an immigrant without documents she knew Darrel’s death would create problems for her. Angry locals in Baden, Iowa would act against Jasmine. So she agreed to move with Taylor and Duff. With Bud’s child, she moved with Taylor and his adopted daughter Duff. Theirs was an unconventional American family. Sheer will power and strong determination made Jasmine survive the atrocities leashed upon her. In real spirit the family life chosen by the robust willed Jasmine was multicultural. As a social chronicler “Jasmine” stresses the need for a shared future in a global multicultural scenario.

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