

# PREDICAMENT OF WOMEN IN THE CROSS-CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S JASMINE AND ANITA DESAI'S BYE-BYE BLACKBIRD

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Modern world is on the verge of forgetting distance with the easiest means of communication and the advancement of science and information technology. People can move easily from one place to another. Sometimes they feel delighted to be at unknown and distant place of totally different socio-cultural milieu but sometimes these experiences create havoc in the form of fragmentation, alienation, disorder and identity crisis. It is often observed that the diasporic community is very complex having the complicated situation.

It can be easily observed that the number of cross-cultural marriages and immigration is increasing day by day. In this changing scenario the woman is a subject to suffer more than the man. Cross-cultural conflict is the clash between two cultures. Of course, culture is the prime identity of human life. But when a person takes refuge in an alien land of unknown culture where he encounters several problems as psychological, social, global, economical, emotional, ideological, religious and so on then it is called cross-cultural conflicts.

Rootlessness is the most significant issue in the life of the immigrant as they hang between homeland and adopted land being culturally different, and remain rootless in their entire life. He lives rootless and dies rootless. The entire energy expends in the adjustment of alien life and culture with nostalgic feeling for motherland. It leads to a clash between the culture of the past and that of the present:

Curious accretion of a homing desire and a state of homelessness; a state of belonging and the awareness of not being able to belong; the contradictory pulls, the nostalgic longing for the home left behind and the desire to feel at home in the new dwelling; and the discrepant centrifugal pull of staying at the margins of the centre to maintain cultural difference and the centripetal seduction of assimilation in the adopted culture. (Raj 17)

Although Indian women writers have different approaches to look at the problems of diasporic women yet they carry a collective diasporic consciousness. We find the fullest expression of women problems through display of various themes in the novels of Indian diasporic writers. Bharati Mukherjee and Anita Desai occupy a prominent place among them. These women novelists share a common heritage in that they emigrated abroad from India. Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* and Anita Desai's *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, both give real depictions of psychological turmoil after being caught in the whirlpool of cultural differences. Their experiences of immigration make them possibly strong in giving a keen observation into the major issues of their societies.

Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* digs into female identity through the story of an Indian woman whose journey takes her from Punjab to Florida, to New York, to Iowa, and to California. With each new move the protagonist reinvents herself with a new name – Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase, Jane – and with each new name she moves closer to her dream of being an American, of belonging to the New World. Jasmine's ongoing journey is an effective source of exploring her rootless position and her search for identity. The move to California suggests that Jasmine has finally found her identity in America. The protagonist, Jasmine, is very much like Bharati Mukherjee herself, as she says:

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. (Schoch, 2008)

Jyoti was born into a traditional family. In the very beginning of the novel, the astrologer predicts her widowhood and exile in the future but Jyoti refuses to accept the fate. Right from her childhood, she was very conscious of her identity. Her psyche was born out of two complexes – her existence as a woman and her so-called derogatory status for being a 'village girl'. She asserts very frankly:

...that big-city men prefer us village girls because we are brought up to be caring and have no minds of our own. Village girls are like cattle, whichever way you lead them, that is the way they will go. (*Jasmine* 39)

After marriage with Prakash, she becomes a true wife in the Indian sense of the term. He, with his generous efforts, transformed Jyoti into Jasmine – the sweet smelling flower, thus pulling her out from the rotten Hasnapur stench. Her new name is a mechanism of the transformation of her new identity. Unfortunately the astrologer's prophecy comes true and terrorists kill Prakash. At once all the dreams of Jasmine shattered in a moment. Her life was totally changed through this blow of the destiny.

In her second phase the captain of the ship known as Half Face, tried to seduce her for being an ignorant woman. The horror of rape aggravates her, and out of rage she sliced her tongue and she stabbed him. After the horrible memories of rape and murder, Jasmine's second encounter with Lillian Gordon in California adds new dimensions to her identity. The maternal care of Lillian gives a new strength and purpose in the life of Jasmine. She calls her 'Jazzy' and such a loving address urges her to resume a new chapter in her life. In her long journey, the next stage is her encounter with Prakash's professor – Mr. Vadhera. She becomes his servant and caretaker of his elderly parents. But she feels uncomfortable in that house because she wants to get away from the claustrophobic traditional Indianness: "I wanted to distance myself from everything Indian everything Jyoti like...to them, I was a widow who should show a proper modesty of appearance and attitude" (*Jasmine* 128).

Finally, she abandons the Vadheras and sets forth for the new life. In the new ambience with Taylor and Wylie Hayes, at Claremont, she works as a nanny to their adopted daughter, Duff. Jasmine becomes more Americanized, more confident of her proficiency in English but her instinctive Indian values do surface now and then. She becomes conscious of her own identity as Jase. As Pushpa N. Parekh states:

This period in Jasmine's life is the most restful and comforting, emotionally and psychologically, intellectually however, it is a phase of minute observations of complex inner deliberations on, and keen involvement in her new environment (Parekh, 113).

As the time and circumstances changed, she changed her name also from Jasmine to Jane. She likes Iowa because it is very much like Hasnapur. Jasmine's flight to Iowa and her renaming as Jane is indicative of a slow but steady transformation of her identity.

Another man Bud is attracted towards her because she is exotic, mysterious and intensely sexual. In the end, Jane is expected to become Bud's wife and the mother of their expected child. But her growing sense of isolation and loss of self in this suffocating world is intensified by her inability to share with him her memories of reflections of the past. In evaluating her past and present, and conceiving of her future, she confronts the complexity and multiplicity of her identity as an immigrant woman. She herself is very perplexed about her own identity:

I still think of myself as caregiver, recipe giver, and preserver. I can honestly say all I wanted was to serve, be allowed to join, but I have created confusion and destruction wherever I go (*Jasmine* 215).

In her restless wandering from one place to another, Jasmine betrays her alienation and disharmony with the American society. Her Indianness seems to emerge to the surface as Indira Bhatt comments:

Even Jyoti to Jasmine, to Jase and Jane may appear to be real transformations of the personality of the protagonist; From Hasnapur to Jullundhar to Florida, Manhattan, Iowa may appear to be moving from old world values to the brave new world. But the person we see at the end of the novel moving away with Taylor, is very much the same person we encounter at the earlier stages in the novel (179).

She personifies different woman at different stages, and for each stage she encounters a man. As she says: "I have had a husband for each of the woman I have been, Prakash for Jasmine, Taylor for Jase, Bud for Jane, Half face for Kali." (*Jasmine* 216) Through Jasmine Bharati Mukherjee encapsulates many aspects of the

immigrants' experiences in America. The process of transmutation as Jyoti, Jasmine and Jane is figuratively centered in the death of one's own self and the birth of new self. Jasmine constantly reinvents herself in order to connect her surroundings. Every time she changes her name, the change in name indicates the change in her identity.

Like Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Desai's in *Bye-Bye Blackbird* also handles the dark shades of human psyche of immigrants. Anita Desai herself admits this,

Their (immigrants) schizophrenia amused me while I was with them and continued to tease when I returned to India. I wrote it in an effort to understand the split psychology, the double loyalties of the immigrants (Desai 24).

Here in this novel Anita Desai is concerned not only with characters who are immigrants but also with their psychological effects after moving after from one culture to another. As she comments herself, "whereas there is concerned with action, experience and achievement, a woman writer is more concerned with thought, emotion and sensation" (Sharma).

In *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, all the leading characters face dilemma in finding their identity when they try to adjust with either the place or the society or the self. Dev and Adit, the two immigrants in England face the cultural alienation and Adit's wife Sarah also joins them and faces the problems of adjustment and loneliness. Ultimately, they all experience a sort of hollowness and meaninglessness of their personal experience when they are disillusioned with their own ideas.

The very first morning in England gives Dev a lesson that nobody cares other except himself. He thinks painfully about:

...the cup of tea that would have been brought to him if he were at home in India now by a mother fresh from her morning prayer, or by a servant boy scorched and sooty from a newly made fire. ... it was the first lesson his first day in London taught him, he who wants tea must get up and make it (*Bye-bye Blackbird* 63).

Dev being an Indian had a very soft corner for India. But being an immigrant he was forced to accept a new culture. For this reason he was trying to survive by establishing a bridge between the two quite different cultures. He is in a state of indecision as to whether he should stay here or not:

In this growing uncertainty he feels the divisions inside him divided further, and then re-divided once more. Simple reactions and feelings lose their simplicity and develop complex angles, facts, shades and tints. He is in too excited, or agitated, a condition to hold the weighing scales with a steady hand and see whether his pleasures outweigh his disappointments, or vice versa (*Bye-bye Blackbird* 94-95).

On one hand, he loves his own culture but on the other he himself discarded this very culture for the sake of accepting a new culture which was totally out of tune with him. Two diverse streams of accepting and rejecting were going on simultaneously in his mind. This is the stage of dilemma that breeds tension, anxiety and despair. A futile search for a new identity makes him emotionally disturbed and intellectually dissatisfied. As Andre Beteille observes,

Inequality is not merely a matter of individual abilities and aptitudes; it is above all a social fact. The opportunities an individual has and even his abilities are in part governed by his position in society (15-60).

Dev's friend Adit Sen's marriage with an English lady establishes new parameters of living which were absolutely different from the settled ways of life. Apparently, he seems to be happier and freer than ever before but the more freedom from their conventions the Indian get, the more problems it creates for them. M.E. Derrett observes about Indian, "Their new self-awareness makes it impossible for Indians to go back, their cherishing of Indianness makes it difficult for them to go ahead" (179). In hearts of heart Adit wants to avoid humiliation. He intentionally gets married to Sarah to cover up his feelings of alienation and loneliness. But he fails to forget his Indianness. He only poses to be happy but a feeling of isolation tortures his inner self constantly. He is treated like an outcast by many people like Mrs. Miller and the Rossommon-James. This rejection utterly frustrates him. His attempt to establish new ties by marrying Sarah has failed. In the end he finds one option as a solution of his psychic state that he must return back to motherland which is his only paradise where he can live in harmony with people of his own kind. Marry Warnock rightly observes,

Desai's protagonists suffer from a sense of alienation, rootless ness, ungratifying interpersonal relationship, anxiety and despair. In their pursuit for an authentic existence they seek to withdraw from the world of action and involvement (115).

Sarah's predicament is worse than that of Dev and Adit because Adit and Dev will be accepted by their own society but Sarah is treated as an outsider by her own people. Her life becomes a long tale of mental sufferings after marriage. She is constantly under tension, which makes her life unreal. She regularly asks herself:

"Who was she— Mrs. Sen who had been married in a red and gold benares brocade sari one burning, bronzed day in September, or Mrs. Sen, the Head's Secretary... They were roles— and when she was not playing them, she was nobody. Her face was only a mask, her body only a costume. Where was Sarah? (*Bye-bye Blackbird* 31)

She does not know where she belongs to. After her marriage, she faces an identity crisis. Sarah tries to avoid people talking about her life. She also feels ashamed of being called an Indian. She is making efforts to know India. Her sense of shame is clear when her colleague Julia argues, "If she's that ashamed of having an Indian husband, why did she go and marry him (*Bye-bye Blackbird* 34-35). Maddi argues that such a person plays social roles perhaps very well indeed, and satisfies quite adequately his biological needs. He further says that such a person suffers from 'existential neurosis' for he has merely gone along with society instead of creating his own identity. In the same sense Sarah has inward emptiness but she tries to be an ideal and faithful wife (311-325). Sarah feels suffocated. She just wants freedom; the freedom not for the society but from the self which is attached to 'Mrs. Sen.' Her neurosis is caused by her inability to establish her with the environment. At this stage Sarah, being a woman can only think about protest but can't enact it. She has to remain in mental conflict without any protest and reaction. She is forced to do whatever others want. Thus in the end Adit orders Sarah for going back to India without even trying to know about her decision. But she does it with a heavy heart. "She felt all the pangs of saying good bye to her past twenty four years" (*Bye-bye Blackbird* 37). It is a kind of subjective experience. When an individual tries to establish his new meaningful identity in an alien world, it results out of a deep anguish, a sense of fundamental purposelessness of life and despair. It shows man as a being engaged in a hopeless question of identity.

Anita Desai and Bharati Mukherjee belong to the Diasporic Indian community. They throw light on the individual sensitivity. Anita Desai is essentially a novelist of moods and states of mind of her characters. Her pioneering contribution lies in sketching the self-consciousness of her oversensitive characters, who seek fulfillment in the assertion of their self-identity in the postcolonial society. The conflict in their minds invariably is between their search for authentic existence and the limitations of the human situation in which they are cast and which prevents them from achieving self-fulfillment. They remain hapless victims of being unfulfilled and unsatisfied. Bharati Mukherjee highlights the suffering of their female protagonists, their journey of becoming self-dependent and creating identities of their own on their own terms. That's why her characters seem to be more satisfied than Anita Desai's protagonists on some point or the other but their search of self and identity is on the same verge with the same intensity.

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