

BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S *JASMINE*: CULTURAL CONFLICT AND QUEST FOR IDENTITY*

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Abstract

In the postmodern world, where identities are both reduced and multiplied ironically, concepts such as globalization and multiculturalism have emerged to define the new world order. While the world is shrinking into a global village where differences melt into similarities, cultures and groups outside the dominant ideology find out ways to put forward their diversity. On the other hand, so much confusion on the topic brings identity crisis forth which can be summarized as a difficulty of finding a fixed place for oneself. The Indian author Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* is the story of a young Indian woman who experiences identity crisis and cultural conflict both in and out of her own culture. This paper will shed light on the identity crisis and cultural conflict of the East and women in opposition to the dominant power of the West and men with references to Mukherjee's *Jasmine* within the framework of multicultural and feminist perspectives.

Key Words: *Cultural Conflict, Identity Crisis, East/West, Male/Female, Feminism*

BHARATI MUKHERJEE'NİN *JASMINE* İSİMLİ ROMANI: KÜLTÜREL ÇATIŞMA VE KİMLİK ARAYIŞI

Özet

Kimliğin ironik biçimde hem indirgenildiği hem de çoğaltıldığı postmodern dünyada, yeni düzeni tanımlamak için küreselleşme ve çokkültürlülük gibi kavramlar türemiştir. Dünya farklılıkların benzerliklerde eridiği küresel bir köye dönüşürken, baskın ideolojinin dışında kalan kültürler ve gruplar çeşitliliklerini ortaya koymanın yollarını aramaktadırlar. Öte yandan, konunun karmaşıklığı kişinin kendini tanımlayacak sabit bir nokta bulamaması olarak özetlenebilecek olan kimlik krizini ortaya koyar. Hintli yazar Bharati Mukherjee'nin *Jasmine* isimli romanı hem kendi kültürü içinde hem de dışında kimlik krizi ve kültürel karmaşayı tecrübe eden genç bir Hintli kadının hikâyesidir. Bu çalışma, çokkültürlü ve feminist bakış açıları çerçevesinde, Batı'nın ve erkek egemen toplumun baskın gücüne karşılık Doğu'nun ve kadının içinde bulunduğu kimlik krizini ve kültürel çatışmayı Mukherjee'nin *Jasmine* romanında incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Kültürel Çatışma, Kimlik Krizi, Doğu/Batı, Erkek/Kadın, Feminizm*

In the postmodern world, the concept of identity is in an ironical condition for the reason that identities are multiplied in a richness of various combinations within multicultural societies while they are reduced to a single dimension in the hands of globalization. According to Chris Barker, "identity is an essence that can be signified through signs of taste, beliefs, attitudes and lifestyles" (2003: 220). Identity has personal and social dimension both of which has the potential

of becoming more and more complex and wealthy thanks to the interactive relationships of our postmodern world. On the other hand, the trend of globalization, which is shaped by the dominant powers, creates a standard identity within which none of the differences are welcome.

As a natural outcome of this clash between the opposing powers of multiculturalism and globalization, postmodern self is decentred and fragmented and that is why "persons are

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composed not of one but of several, sometimes contradictory, identities" (Barker, 2003: 224). The tension between the mentioned opposite powers bring identity crisis forth for many individuals and groups, which can be summarized as a difficulty of finding a fixed place for oneself and of creating any sense of life and meaning.

The Indian author Bharati Mukherjee's 1989 novel *Jasmine* is the story of a young woman from Punjab, India who experiences identity crisis and cultural conflict both in and out of her own culture. In other words, the story narrates Jasmine's search for her true and unfragmented identity and the transformations she experiences in a positive and optimistic way. Thus, it becomes a tale of moral courage seeking for self-awareness. The novel is more than a classical bildungsroman since it only focuses on a short but very intense life span of the protagonist and it involves her struggle against not only the ordinary difficulties of the normal process which is experienced by every young person but also challenges related with her sexual, racial, national and cultural identity. Jasmine's life in India, her migration to United States and her struggle to define herself portray the similar stories of many others both as easterners and women. That is why this paper will discuss cultural conflict and identity crisis by focusing on the East and women in opposition to the dominant power of the West and men.

The metaphorical quest of Jasmine's protagonist starts as Jyoti in India where she stands against the role that was prepared for her by the patriarchal system of her homeland. Like most of the Indian women, she is born as the disappointing baby girl of her family and her whole life is under the control of her father and brothers. According to Indian tradition, a girl should be married at an early age with a dowry which is a burden for the families. Additionally, girls are seen as belongings of their future husbands. That is why families are reluctant about educating them or giving them extra facilities. In short, they are named as curses directed towards women "who needed to be punished for sins committed in other incarnations" (Mukherjee, 1991: 34) according to their religious belief.

Jyoti stands as a rebellious character in the patriarchal society that dominates India. She does not want to obey her society's predetermined gender roles which are summarized by Chris Barker as "the cultural assumptions and practices that govern the social constructions of men, women and their social relations" (2003: 240). Having interests and demands more than the usual girls, she wants to continue her education to finally become a doctor and to have her own choices in life unlike the village girls who are "like cattle" that follows "whichever way you lead them" (Mukherjee, 1991: 39). Instead, Jyoti likes "hearing the men talk" (Mukherjee, 1991: 56) since they usually talk about a world to which she is a stranger. Thus, the first conflict Jyoti experiences is the one between the dominant patriarchal system and the modern life that she desires. She loses her sense of belonging to the life and traditions of rural India and dreams a life which is impossible even to dream for many Indian girls.

Prakash, her Indian husband, is the man who gives her what she looks for. Prakash is a radical man with extreme ideas even for Jyoti. He believes that "there's no room in modern India for feudalism" (Mukherjee, 1991: 69), rejects the traditional large family life and forces his wife to call him by his first name in contrast to Indian traditions. However, his biggest impact on Jyoti is his Professor Higgins-like role in her life: like the professor aiming to create a lady out of the flower girl, Prakash intends to turn Jyoti into the ideal, modern woman of India:

"Pygmalion wasn't a play I'd seen or read then, but I realize now how much of Professor Higgins there was in my husband. He wanted to break down the Jyoti I'd been in Hasnapur and make me a new kind of city woman. To break off the past, he gave me a new name: Jasmine. He said; 'You are small and sweet and heady, my Jasmine. You'll quicken the whole world with your perfume.'

Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttled between identities." (Mukherjee, 1991: 70)

Although Jyoti wants to become Jasmine, still she is split into two just as her life is parted in two halves by her marriage with Prakash. Despite her eagerness for a more modern life,

even she hesitates to go beyond patriarchal rules at first:

"In contrast to the other men of the traditional culture, Prakash does not see marriage as the cultural sanctioning of patriarchal control and enforced obedience. He renames Jyoti as Jasmine, a symbolic break with her feudal past. Yet this break causes Jyoti/Jasmine deep conflict. As a traditional woman she wants to get pregnant immediately to prove her worth and to validate her identity. Indeed, in this society, pregnancy is the only available identity." (Ruppel, 1995: 184)

Instead of the expectations of the traditional Indian society, Prakash wants to see Jasmine as an individual interested in educating herself for the better. Unfortunately, Jasmine is left alone with his sudden and unexpected death after which she has to make a serious decision of either turning back to her old life or taking risks for a new one. Finally, she completes her rebellion against Indian patriarchy with her decision to go and live in America as Prakash always wanted. At that point, she clearly indicates that she is "a widow in the war of feudalisms" (Mukherjee, 1991: 88).

Mukherjee draws a line between Jyoti and Jasmine in India and other identities employed by her protagonist in America. Thus, the book becomes the combination of two stories that take place in two different countries and cultures. Following such a scheme, it is possible to say that the India part of the book is about Jyoti's survival under the hegemony of traditional patriarchy and her rebirth with the help of Prakash who gives her both a new name and a new life despite the fact that Jyoti's rebirth as Jasmine is possible only with the help of a man.

The second part of the book, which is the story of Jasmine in America, implies more problems for her to face with. She starts to feel her identity crisis more powerfully and in different ways in the United States. Chris Barker describes identity as "an essence that can be signified through signs of taste, beliefs, attitudes and lifestyles" (2003: 220). Leaving all the vital elements of her identity back at home, Jasmine is a complete stranger in this new country since identities are "wholly social

constructions" which "cannot 'exist' outside of cultural representations" (Barker, 2003: 220).

To start with, Jasmine's setting off for America is the start of her symbolic quest which is full of transformations and displacement far away from her homeland. Although she is willing for her migration, she is not welcomed in America since her journey which she calls her "odyssey" (Mukherjee, 1991: 91) is an illegal one and she is able to enter the dreamland she desires so much only from the back door:

"The first thing I saw were the two cones of a nuclear plant, and smoke spreading from them in complicated but seemingly purposeful patterns, edges lit by the rising sun, like a gray, intricate map of an unexplored island continent, against the pale unscratched blue of the sky. I waded through Eden's waste: plastic bottles, floating oranges, boards, sodden boxes, white and green plastic sacks tied shut but picked open by birds and pulled apart by crabs." (Mukherjee, 1991: 95)

Jasmine's American Dream collapses at this very first sight, but the worst is yet to come at the motel where she has to stop for her first night on this alien land. She is not only raped by the man called Half Face but also humiliated by him:

"He looked at me, and at the suitcase...He hefted the bag onto the bed and unsnapped the catches. Out came my sandalwood Gampati. He propped it up against a picture on the dresser. He noticed my photo album and picked it up. Pictures of Prakash and of Pitaji, wrapped in an old sari...At the bottom, the blue suit.

"Who's this for?" he demanded. "A kid?"

"It is my husband's," I said.

"Kind of a scrawny little bastard, ain't he?" He laughed and dropped the jacket back in the suitcase." (Mukherjee, 1991: 101)

Jasmine is so much irritated by his abasement that she kills Half Face to take revenge for the rape and humiliation she went through. She feels everything that is dear to her is invaded by the dirty hands of Half Face. Therefore, she burns them all in a metal trash bin imitating a sati ritual before leaving the motel.

Jasmine's first night in America is significant in many ways for she experiences another death and rebirth circle on this night. After being raped, she feels as if she is dead until she decides to take a quick revenge from the man who disrespects her in all possible ways. As Ruppel states "instead of killing herself and passively conforming to an identity politics that would define her solely as a victim, she decides instead to kill her attacker" (1995: 186) which means reclaiming her body. Slicing her own tongue first, she slaughters the man. This bloody ritual is followed by a purification ceremony of her body in the first American shower Jasmine sees in her life and Jasmine leaves the place after her funeral fire in full American clothes:

"I took out a blue-jean jacket bought for me in Delhi by my brothers...I buttoned up the jacket and sat by the fire. With the first streaks of dawn, my first full American day, I walked out the front drive of the motel to the highway and began my journey, travelling light." (Mukherjee, 1991: 107-108)

Instead of suicide, Jasmine decides to finish her mission which is to visit the campus and sit under that particular tree for Prakash. With the help of the symbolical steps she followed after the murder, she metaphorically kills her Indian identity and her past to find a new identity and a future in America which is why she defines herself as "walking death. Death incarnate" (Mukherjee, 1991: 106).

Jasmine's following days in America brings her new people, a new life style and the troubles caused by the new culture she is living in. The first impression she creates on people is that she is someone coming from somewhere in the eastern part of the world with blackish skin, speaking a language which may be Urdu, Sanskrit or Arabic. Although Jasmine knows who she is, a brown skinned Indian woman speaking Urdu, she also knows that it is impossible to tell these strangers about her life and identity which is left back in India. It is impossible to explain things to people like Darrel who thinks people in India speak Indian but not Hindi because "he comes from a place where the language you speak is what you are" (Mukherjee, 1991: 8). Furthermore, she discovers that she is either someone exotic

or an invader in America if she is not simply ignored as a result of some generalizations caused by her outlook. People from the university want her to help them on their studies about any subject on India and the traditional food she cooks, her vegetarian diet is so interesting for some others that "they get disappointed if there's not something Indian on the table" (Mukherjee, 1991: 7). At the same time, she feels her marginalization in the cruel words of an officer on TV who describes the illegal refugees: "The border's like Swiss cheese and all the mice are squirming through the holes" (Mukherjee, 1991: 23). In response to all, she tries to get Americanized as quickly as she can. She is described by Aneja as follows:

"Escaping an oppressive environment in rural India, the immigrant arrives in the land of opportunity, hoping to make a better life. Finding herself at the margins of American society, due to her immigrant status, Mukherjee's Jasmine does her best to insert herself into the flesh and blood of America, to the point where her body is literally impregnated by that of the white man." (1993: 73)

With the purpose of becoming a real part of America, Jasmine leaves the artificial Indian world of the neighbourhood of Professorji and adapts the American way of life in the different houses she lives and works as a babysitter. She feels the necessity of becoming American so deeply that she believes she has to murder herself first in order to "rebirth [herself] in the images of dreams" (Mukherjee, 1991: 25). She observes the life of Professorji and comes to the following conclusion:

"I got the point. He needed to work here, but he didn't have to like it. He had sealed his heart when he'd left home. His real life was in an unlivable land across oceans. He was a ghost, hanging on." (Mukherjee, 1991: 136)

Forgetting the past is inevitable for being able to create a future. As Ruppel puts forward "she must change to survive and to continue her journey" (1995: 183). In this context, Jasmine has a willing and moderate approach. She does not resist transformation but embraces the changes to adapt the new conditions. She lives through many lives in her short lifespan

similar to the Hindu belief of death and rebirth cycle and transformations finally to reach a united identity. Many people, especially men, call her with many names in America, too. She becomes Jane, Jase or Jazzy, each time moving a step closer towards a desired unification of identity.

In her spiritual quest, Jasmine mostly feels close to her adopted son Du who is a Vietnamese refugee in the United States. Du is a boy who suffered a lot and survived despite the hardest conditions. He does not share his own experiences too much. Yet, Jasmine and he share a bond which depends on the mutual knowledge of real face of their dreamland where "Du knows, mothers are younger than sisters, mothers are illegal aliens, murderers, rape victims; parents are unmarried, fathers are invalids" (Mukherjee, 1991: 200).

To summarize, Jasmine's quest is possible to be followed best by following some binary oppositions like the conflict between male and female relationships, eastern and western world and cultures and the effects of the past and the necessity of adaptation to the present for a better future. Despite the negative points in her story, as emphasized at the beginning, Jasmine's story has a positive attitude because she confesses that she desired the change herself. She admits that she changed because she wanted to do so, feeling that it would be cowardice otherwise:

"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 Viji & Wife. Jase went to movies and lived for today." (Mukherjee, 1991: 156)

Living for today becomes Jasmine's motto in America where nothing lasts forever, but learning how to live for herself and today and bringing her fragmented self together is her challenge that is clear in her words:

"Jyoti of Hasnapur was not Jasmine, Duff's day mummy and Taylor and Wylie's au pair in Manhattan; that Jasmine isn't this Jane Ripplemeyer having lunch with Mary Webb at the University Club today. And which of us is 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?" (Mukherjee, 1991: 114)

Besides being physically raped, Jasmine feels metaphorically raped in the United States where she has to sacrifice a lot to become someone finally. Despite her welcoming tendency towards transformation, it is obvious that killing one part of her identity each time is not so easy but she knows that no other option exists for her. On the other hand, from an optimistic perspective, she gains the "multiple" consciousness of the narrative" which shows itself in Jasmine's "cataloging her selves" (Carter-Sanborn, 1994: 582) and thus achieves to bring all her parts together.

Consequently, Jasmine's journey, from India to America, stands for her moving away from the pressures of her homeland. Each time she moves towards the west which is the symbol for her increasing American identity. As Yadav points:

"Jyoti, Jasmine, Jane, Jase, each of her different identities, took place in a different space, i.e. India, Florida, and New York, Iowa. Such a character who embraces wanderings is attempting to destroy traditional ways of conceiving female identity. She is marginalized by both gender and race and changes herself according to her surroundings which are characterized by an ever-changing uncertainty just as Jasmine herself is. Her continuous movement and vagueness in which nothing was rooted anymore and everything was in motion, makes her a diasporic individual" (2011: 4).

During her journey, she is the object of male domination starting within her family and going on with the men in her life. She is exposed to violence, rape, desire and lust all by men. Every time she runs away, she comes across with another man to control her life. Thus, she is unable to break the circle that prevents her finding her own identity totally. Finally, she chooses Taylor instead of Bud, which is the necessary step to break the circle. She describes her feelings towards Taylor in these words:

"The love I felt for Taylor that first day had nothing to do with sex. I fell in love with his world, its ease, its careless confidence and

graceful self-absorption. I wanted to become the person they thought they saw: humorous, intelligent, refined, and affectionate. Not illegal, not murderer, not widowed, raped, destitute, fearful." (Mukherjee, 1991: 151)

Jasmine claims "not choosing between men" but between "the promise of America and old-world-dutifulness" (Mukherjee, 1991: 213-214). However,

"the juxtaposition of "the promise of America" and "old-world dutifulness" immediately places the west on the side of excitement and change, and betrays India's reality to be an "older," more stable one. In this "older" culture, duty and honour are valued but there are no promises held out to the individual, while America privileges individual desires over domestic and communal obligations" (Aneja, 1993: 78).

Although she creates a new identity for herself not because Taylor wants this time but because she wants it herself, her choice of leaving the father of her unborn child is far from her devoted love once for Prakash which proves her liberated, American identity. In contrast to her innocence with Prakash, she finally has self-awareness through her experiences with men in America. She discovers her various identities by saying: "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." (Mukherjee, 1991: 175). As Hoppe suggests "Jasmine's postcolonial, ethnic characters are ...carving out new spaces for themselves from among a constellation of available cultural narratives, never remaining bound by any one, and always fluidly negotiating the boundaries of their past, present, and futures" (1999: 154) to finally reach the unity under the head title of being American which brings her conformity.

To sum up, Jasmine starts her journey as an Indian girl surrounded by tradition. She experiences both happiness and grief in every step she takes towards her final situation. She fights against not only the male dominance both in India and in the States but also the hostility between her Eastern and Western characteristics with the hope of total freedom and unity in her self. Though she eventually

seems to have whole control over her life, she is too much far away from where she started and what she desired. In other words, in order to survive as a woman from a third world country under the pressure of the male-centred Western culture, Jasmine sacrifices a lot proving the power of globalization mentioned at the beginning. The dominant values of the global world force Jasmine to conciliate all the elements of her multicultural identity. However, this conciliation does not mean the celebration of the wealth of her identity but unfortunately it is the victory of globalization which pushes her into a standard identity. The only but the most significant promise of globalization for Jasmine is its conformity which means she can have a place on the world as an American rather than being an outsider in every condition, which is too tiring as her story proves.

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