

## CULTURAL ENCOUNTER IN THE NOVELS OF BHARTI MUKHERJEE'S WIFE AND JASMINE AND JHUMPA LAHIRI'S THE NAMESAKE

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The globalisation of world economy can be looked upon as a natural offshoot of multiculturalism and intercultural interaction. In ancient times, the western culture was practically confined to a certain territory and likewise, the Eastern culture had also a limited area to flourish with hardly any possibility of mutual exchange between them. With the passage of time, many adventurers explores from the west started discovering new wonders and the Indian culture and civilisation was one of their findings. This coming together meant enhanced interaction and mutual co-operation between nations in the field of industry, technology, information and education. Now many sporting events are being organised every year in one part of the world or the other partly to encourage inter-cultural and inter-racial awareness. Every culture has its own peculiarities and predilections which evoke a mixed response in one from a different cultural milieu.

It is a common tendency to confuse culture with civilisation. Civilisation has a reference to an advanced state of society judged on the basis

of its culture, science, industry, laws, government wars, transport, and communication, architecture, and planning of cities. Culture concerns only the intellectual and human side of all his achievement. Civilisation pertains to the entire population of a country or nation and civilisation may sometimes act against culture. That is why T.S. Eliot categories culture of society in two ways,

Now there are of course higher cultures and lower cultures, and higher cultures in general are distinguished by differentiation of function, so that you can speak of the less cultured and the more cultured strata of society, and, finally, you can speak of individuals as being exceptionally cultured.<sup>1</sup>

Eliot believes that there is very close relationship between culture and religion. It is religion of a people which makes them culturally different from the people. Eliot begins his enquiry into the relationship between culture and religion as,

No culture has appeared or developed except  
together with religion..... culture will  
appear to be the product of religion or the  
religion the product of the culture.<sup>2</sup>

This shows that culture and religion are complementary to each other. But though religion forms a sound basis of a culture, in actual life, culture and

religion are not so completely united. As well as, the survival of the culture of the higher class is dependent upon the health of the culture of the people in general and as a whole. Thus according to Eliot there are three ways of regarding culture: as the culture of the individual as the culture of a group or class, or as the culture of a whole society. Eliot is of the view that,

The culture of the individual is dependent  
Upon the culture of a group or class, and that  
the culture of the group or class is dependent  
upon the culture of the whole society to which  
that group or class belongs. Therefore, it is the  
culture of the society that is fundamental.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, the class which moves out of its cultural, contours, has no love lost for its mother land moreover, there is so much of cultural mixing in the post-colonial era that it has given birth to 'hybrid-culture' In every country the highest class (especially in India) is worse affected by this phenomenon.

Bharti Mukherjee's creative world best manifests immigrant experience through this cultural point of view. The relation between literature and society is reciprocal, both serve as cause and effect to each other. Of all the literary forms the novel is considered to be socially oriented because it depicts human relationship in its varied aspects. One of the most significant theme of modern Indian fiction is that of man women relationships. Writers as varied as Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sehgal, R.W. Desai, Mohan Rakesh, Bharti Mukherjee, Shobha De have treated this subject most intensely and extensively. The age old institution of family and marriage have been under a tremendous strain in the modern times.

Commenting upon the breaking up of the family one of the major factors for the disintegration of the families is the rampant promiscuity in sexual relation. Yet another cause is that by winning a right to enter the labour market women have found a degree of economic freedom that makes marriage less necessary, resulting an estrangement between man and his wife.

The journey, which began as a research scholar, slowly transformed into a journey of self realisation which at first glance looked obscure, slowly unfolded themselves. Psyche of Bharti Mukherjee is the basis of each of her novels. Bharti Mukherjee at an early stage of life came to encounter the various facets of life of Indian culture where a bride commits suicide due to dowry demands. Atrocities inflicted on women moulded her bent of mind. Adaptation and transformation became her two weapons very early in life. Passivity in outside world makes her more rebellious, when after marriage she has to settle in Canada and face the problems of racialism and multiculturalism. Her attitude to adaptation helps her to make the decision to reside in U.S.A. as an immigrant than to struggle to be accepted as an expatriate writer in Canada. It is a fact that everything changes with time. But the people, who leave behind their motherland, try to maintain the same attitude towards the old world. Bharti Mukherjee tends to change herself due to her western education, but a tradition - bound wife, Dimple does not change for the fear of displeasing other people. Bharti Mukherjee's early exposure to western education helped her to broaden her attitude whereas Dimple Dasgupta's sudden exposure to western culture imbalances her already split personality. Changing countries eventually made Bharti Mukherjee resilient and more tolerant and adaptable to all kinds of situations. Accepting and adjusting to new situation seems to be a regular feature of her life. . Bharti Mukherjee's fiction truly reflects the temperament and mood of the present American society as experienced by immigrants in America. One of the significant themes of modern literature is the depiction of cross-cultural crisis, a subject which has assumed a great significance in the present world of globalisation. Bharti Mukherjee is one of the best examples of this kind of writing or rather she is a writer from the Third world. She strongly opposed racial prejudice, and became a civil right activist. She wrote essays about the devastating effects of racism. Her mind was, diverted from creative writing to matter-of-fact writing. Bharti Mukherjee through her writing suggests two advantages of women liberation, one, it allows them to realise their potential as individuals in the wider society, and two it is the only way by which they could achieve personal recognition and identity. Bharti Mukherjee is not only the most commercially successful among women writers of the Indian diaspora, but also the most controversial narrator of Indian cultural identity in a multicultural context. The twentieth century is essentially an age of unrest, doubts, and cradle of a number of complex 'isms' the sociological, psychological, and intellectual climate of the present times have undergone a thorough transformation. Like their western counterparts, the Indian women novelists are also minutely examining the institution of marriage. The concern is higher with women writers, since marriage demands their total transformation on socio-cultural terms. The twentieth century woman is in a state of moral dilemma. Education has

made her aware of her rights as an individual. The current Indian women writers like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Bharti Mukherjee and Gita Hariharan produce an interesting array of female protagonists who suffer within the framework of marriage.

Since 1981 who have shown the might of their pen and won laurels there include leading light like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry, Vikram Seth, Kiran Desai etc. As also the not so prominent ones like Indra Singha, Ruchir Joshi, Manil Suri and others. This has, quite naturally, enriched the genre of Indian English novel.

Jhumpa Lahiri has carved out a niche for herself among the contemporary popular novelist. Along with Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy, she is looked upon as the harbinger of the new wave in Indian fiction. Her first novel *The Namesake* forms the basis of the present study. Lahiri has the first hand experience to authentically portray the diasporic experience of the second generation of immigrants in America. At the same time, she has taken pains to imagine the experience of loss and nostalgia of the first generation immigrants also. She can very well comprehend the plight of young generation that feels sandwiched between the aspirations of parents cast in the traditional Indian mould and the influence of the western peer groups.

Bharti Mukherjee's *Wife* is the story of a middle-class Bengali girl Dimple, who is married to Amit an Engineer, after their wedding they go to America, once abroad, she understands that life is not as glamorous as she had imagined it to be, cultural shock, Alienation, inability to form friendship with her neighbours, continual viewing of violent soap operas and her husband's long stays at office further complicate the basically morbid mind of Dimple. It makes her neurotic to the extent of imaginatively killing her husband in a grotesque manner. Basically Dimple fails to envisage marriage as a life-long bond which needs love as an adhesive to both strong them and ensure a life-long commitment to each other. Bharti Mukherjee's *Wife* and *Jasmine* chronicle the Journeys of two young women to the U.S.A. for different reasons, under dissimilar circumstances, both of them pass through torturous physical, mental and emotional agony affecting their whole being to such an extent that they are driven to violence.

She had expected pain when she had come to America, had told herself that pain was part of any new beginning and in the sweet structures of that new life had allotted pain a special place. But she had not expected her mind to be strained like this, beyond endurance. She had not anticipated inertia exhaustion, endless indecisiveness<sup>4</sup> (WF. P. 115)

Jyoti Vidh-Jasmine-Jase-Jane and even Kali are the various names adopted by the protagonist of Bharti Mukherjee's third novel *Jasmine*. Bharti Mukherjee's *Jasmine* is an enactment of encounter of two cultures, one ancient and the other modern, each illuminating and enriching the other. *Jasmine* on the contrary has broken away from the shackles of caste, gender and family. *Jasmine* has learnt to live not for her husband or for her children but for herself. But

she has achieved a new identity only through and with the help of her cultural past. Thus for Dimple the loss of old culture is neither an exciting nor an exhilarating experience. She is also torn between the traditional role model of a submissive self effacing Indian wife and the new role model of an assertive Indian wife offered by the west. But at a particular stage she establishes contact with the host culture. She builds bridges between the Indian expatriates and the host culture. A woman immigrant experience is bound to be different from that of men, a women journey is in the search of love, happiness and independence. A women is better suited for adapting herself to the another culture, because she marginalisation and discrimination right from her birth. A simple peasant girl from Hasnapur in rural Punjab, Jyoti becomes Jasmine when she marries Prakash, modern city man. Who believes in crashing tradition. A women migrating to the United States means freedom and liberation to the clutches of a patriarchal society. Jasmine's acculturation and assimilation into American culture is certainly better than bunkering in nostalgia of remaining torn between two worlds, two cultures, two ways of life and two faiths for a lifetime. In fact, Jasmine in her fact chooses the best from Indian culture like the family values. Jasmine's Indian sensibility is quick to catch the contrast between two cultures. As "In Apartment of artificially maintained Indianness, I wanted to distance myself from everything Indian, everything Jyoti-like."5 (J. P.145) Jasmine has ceased to be an Indian and has become an American in terms of culture. Rather, she has become a nodal point at which the Indian and the American cultures meet. Jasmine is a feminist novel. The protagonist rebels against the age old superstitions and traditions. Despite the odds against her, she gets assimilated successfully into the American culture/society. She changes herself in order to change the world around . As products of the diaspora, Mukherjee's novels deal with nostalgia for a lost home, disillusionment of 'expatriation', fragmentation of the self, exuberance of 'immigration', assimilation, culture translation and negotiation. Jasmine is Mukherjee's model of an 'assimilated immigrant'. Mukherjee herself has experienced the exuberance of immigrant existence. An immigrant's ideal is to get assimilated into the mainstream culture. Women characters of Bharti Mukherjee hailing from different cultures are marginalised in the new culture. The same conditions are faced by three of her characters. Jasmine, Dimple in the initial stages of expatriation in the new world. Who made efforts to carve a niche for themselves. This scenario is enacted in the new culture where adaptation and assimilation is not so very easy, wearies them down into violence and aggressiveness, the corrosive new norms deducing different reactions. This upbringing gives a very strong base to build a future for herself in a foreign land. Another factor that arises is that the women of Indian origin detain themselves from expression of their sexuality, suddenly faced by the liberal self expression in new culture leaves them undecided, not knowing how to react.

While we discussing man women relationship in contemporary Indian fiction we found that Literature is indeed the most explicit record of human spirit. Literature reflects not only the social reality but also shapes the complex ways in which men and women organise themselves, their interpersonal relationships and their perception of the socio-cultural reality.

The attitude of the author towards men and women portrayed by him in his works and the attitudes of the characters, male and female, to one another highlight the gender relationships as well as the author's attitude towards these relationships.

Indian novelists have dealt with family relationships with high seriousness because the traditional heritage of India gives great importance to the family unit. They have extensively dealt with the theme of man-woman relationship which has a great historical, sociological and cultural significance. Man-woman relationship in Bharti Mukherjee's novel is the outcome of the cultural alienation that is a world phenomenon now. The tremendous difference between two cultures, two ways of life, leads a person to feeling of shock. When a person leaves his own culture and enters another, his old values come in conflict with the new ones he finds. Bharti Mukherjee's novel 'Wife' stands out as a unique fictional work by virtue of its insightful probing into the heroines psyche. At the surface level, wife is the simple story of Amit and his wife Dimple, newly married immigrant to the USA. Amit and Dimple leave their country in search of their dream. This migration or "cultural transplant" leads not only to a crisis of identity but greatly affects their personal relationship as husband wife. Dimple's ill-conceived compulsions are precipitated by the violence-ridden and individualistic American life and culminate in her killing of her husband. This psychic development in Dimple has been variously but uncritically viewed as her desperate effort to forget her Indian roots necessitated by the demands of American life and her assertion of independence from overbearing husband. Her fictional world is hovering between two cultures. The two cultures are particularly discussed in the canvas of the novels i.e. Bengali culture, American culture. While she has shaping her creative sensibility there is certain psyche behind the novel. While we are thinking on the issues of man-woman relationship the patriarchal norms are suppressing the woman characters through their male counterparts at the time of offering them freedom. This world of freedom appears them as imaginary world of freedom. Women's position are marginalised and immigrant sensibility and the phases of expatriations are taken into cognizance. Bharti Mukherjee's Jasmine ,Wife , these novels are set in America. As a product of diaspora novels deals with nostalgia for lost home, feministic perspective again shows that the place of Indian foreign based women are marginalized and oppressed through their counterparts according to the surrounding afford them a freedom, this upbringing gives a strong base to carve a nitch for themselves in a foreign land and thus identity crisis with a cultural encounter happens. The psyche of an immigrant always tragic, as a result tension created in the mind between the two socio-cultural environment between the feelings of rootlessness and nostalgia when he visits the unknown land and there he has to struggle a lot for his survival.

Diasporas are always in dilemma of two cultures. They have always an affinity with a native culture for the first generation diasporas, But deviation from the native root occurs for the second generation. All characters almost in all the novels of Bharti Mukherjee found that in a quest of search for identity when lived in alien land but in adaptation with foreign culture to

them was not so easy process, out of fear of losing their identity refuses to intermingle with the foreign culture marriage is the easiest way to assimilate into a new culture. When the cultural assimilation occurs they make themselves comfortable. In this process of cultural encounter she is a successful woman writer of diaspora as well as most controversial narrator of Indian cultural identity in multicultural context.

In the Novel *The Namesake*, however, the name of the protagonist is meant to signify the identity problem that he faces, exposed as he is to twin cultures-American and Indian. In the case of the immigrants in any society, their identity is threatened by the culture of the host country. In a flashback, it is revealed that there is more to this name because it is connected to a near-fatal train accident in which Ashoke was involved before he got married actually, on his way to visit his grandfather in Jamshedpur Ashoke was reading his favourite story, famous Russian writer Nikolai Gogol's overcoat, contained in the collection the short stories of Nikolai Gogol. When his train got derailed, Ashoke Was almost taken for dead, but he managed to wave the torn pages of book meekly. This movement was noticed and he was rescued. It was like a second span of life for him, for whom he felt obliged to Nikolai Gogol or so the writers name got etched on Ashoke's mind as his saviour. In fact the letter got lost in transit between India and the USA. and in order to meet the requirement of the hospital where the child was born before Ashima could be discharged Ashoke could think only of his favourite Russian writer Nikolai Gogol at that crucial moment. The child had to be named then and there and the name Gogol came in handy. Lahiri is a painstaking writer which is reflected in her laboured prose that tries to create a balance between the internal and external details, between the landscape and the mindscape.

*The Namesake* can be primarily viewed as a diasporic text to which the sub-themes of family ties, clash of values, cross-cultural relationships, love and loneliness. It is deeply moving and finely, wrought family drama that takes up Jhumpa Lahiri's favourite subject of immigrant experience. Here is the Ganguli couple, the first generation Indian immigrants. Whose experience in the U.S. are pitted against those of their son, all or which leads to the clash of cultures and tangled ties between generations. Before delving deep into the thematic aspects research endeavours ponder over the meaning and origin of the term 'diaspora'. 'Large-scale movement of people,' renamed diaspora . Moving away from one's homeland and setting elsewhere on long-term basis does mean dislocation that brings in a sense of loss and nostalgia. Diaspora and diasporic experiences have attracted attention all over the world. The word diaspora refer to the displace community of the people who have been approved from their natural place to other worlds. All such Indians who have been living outside India constitute the Indian diaspora Jhumpa Lahiri, herself a second generation child of Indian immigrants in the USA., her work has primarily focused on first and second generation Bengali immigrants, exploring themes of exile, isolation and assimilation.

Jhumpa Lahiri as an Indian living in the U.S. she has experience of growing up simultaneously in two worlds-culturally displaced and growing up in two cultures, she has a divided identity and constantly attempting to reconcile cross-cultural identities. The confluence of the East with the west produces complications for Indians as well as the Britishers. Diaspora is one of the most discussed phenomena of present time which inevitably associates itself with the issues of nation, migration, culture, and identity and deals with the human experiences such as dislocation marginalisation, leads her attempt to bridge the gap between two generation as well as the two totally different cultures they are place in are pole apart and never twain can meet. Even then, adjustment is very necessary for survival in a foreign society and therefore they adjust not only with the manners and mores of the new society but also with the food requirement, crimation, homelessness, memory and longing. Diasporic people, therefore, adopt various strategies to cope up and survive in the host land and food becomes an infallible mode to cement the fragile bridge between their past and present. The implication is that one can easily remain rooted in one's home culture and be a part of the host culture at the same time without affecting one's individuality and distinctness of identity. As a meaningful literary output, the novels reflect upon a Bengali cultural traditions of India in an intimate family garb closely related to social, cultural and psychological norms with respect to food. The Bengali ethnicity has been visited and revisited again and again to emphasize how the immigrants keep their home culture alive in the dominant and incompatible culture of the foreign country.

The Namesake successfully deals not only with issues of different culture and sufferings of the new immigrants, but also with the identity crisis of second generation immigrants, who have no intention to be linked with India in any way, but fails to become hundred percent Americans in their approaches to life. Although the immigrants try their best to preserve their heritage and culture, in the foreign land they cannot help but imbibe the social and cultural traditions of the host country, for that first generation immigrants train their children in the Bengali language, literature and history and expose them to their religious customs, traditions, beliefs, food habit, and social mannerism. This shows that the first generation migrants overcome their cultural dilemmas and the sense of displacement by combining the sensibilities of both the cultures. This is evident of the fact that over a period of time, the two cultures do intertwine and a new "hybrid" cultural identity is formed. Lahiri shows that in this novel that the migrants and their children might adopt and assimilate the culture of the new country but they are not considered to be a part of the 'host' country. Lahiri's focus is on the hidden layers of the psyche and the inner turned of the characters who find themselves entrapped in the midst of two cultures. Thus The Namesake grapples with characters that are caught drifting between two worlds, two identities. They want to keep the memories or their homelands and to preserve its values, customs and belief. Majority of her protagonist who are second generation immigrants have in some way or other adjusted and assimilated themselves into the folds of the new culture. All these situations is the common feeling of loss, alienation, marginalisation. To conclude, one can say that Lahiri wears the different hats of

culture - The Indian, the British and the American. , she presents a wonderful multicultural world with the force of universal theme. Women have always played a significant role in every society and culture, their contribution being as important as that of men. In presenting these images women writers clearly indicate the status of women in society and their subjectivity and agency. How women see women is thus most crystalline indication of women's place in community and culture. Jhumpa Lahiri's first and only novel *The Namesake* (2003) explores the themes of immigrant experience, the clash of cultures and the trauma faced by the culturally displaced Indian settled in foreign countries. Some of the women of Lahiri's fiction fit into the traditional roles assigned to women. Her women do bear the burden of relationships and responsibilities to some extent, even in America, where women are supposed to be much more liberal and independent. But they do not hesitate to shed the burdens and compromise on carrying with their relationships only up to the extent of their convenience. They walk out if it does not suit them or their lifestyle. They have the freedom of choice, Lahiri's women are survivors, because with all its faults America is known as the land of conclusion opportunity, to which the migrant goes in hope. That means we have found traditional, modern, and postmodern amalgamation in *The Namesake*. They are able to get acculturated in the new country, embracing its socio-cultural values, of the same time experience a sense of nostalgia for the Indian culture and sensibilities. They grow up in America, marry non-Indians but cannot escape the burden of family traditions. These marriages between Indian Bengali man/woman and American woman/man create a "hybrid culture" a new form of culture where both of them negotiate at various fronts of life. During this process of adjustment and accommodation the migrants are transplanted and relocated. Culture plays an important role in the growth and behaviour of an individual. It not only gives a sense of belonging but also provides set of norms. Passing the cultural aspects of life from one generation to other is done by a mother, wife, daughter and sister. The displaced people try to preserve their native culture in the adopted country. Longing for the homeland, the near and dear ones, culture, tradition helps the displaced to form small social circles. The encounter between two cultures i.e. eastern and western constructs a hybrid culture where both the parties negotiates and interacts to reframe and restructure ethnic essentialism, nationalism and fundamentalism.

In the novels *The Namesake* the protagonist is meant to signify the identity problem that he faces, exposed as he is to twin cultures - American and Indian .Her characters are the children of postmodern times so they do not recognize boundaries of any type political, social or cultural. Over a period of time intermixing of culture is inevitable in her debut novel. Lahiri tries to capture the experience and cultural dilemmas of so year struggle for integration and assimilation into alien culture. Loss and nostalgia are key point of diasporic writings and autobiographic note also obtained. There are again amalgamation of three cultures - Indian culture, American culture and British culture. A second generation Diaspora found in nostalgia and cope up with a new culture there is clash of culture and the trauma faced. So the assimilation of culture is must the need for them. In this process there is formation of 'hybrid culture'. But though they are deviated from the native root yet always certain point there

found a orientation towards the native culture. While we are discussing man-woman relationship, women place is marginalized. . She adjusts herself in and alien country and tries to live happily. . Her primary concern has,

Americans, in spite of their public declarations

of affection, in spite of their miniskirts and

bikinis in spite of their hand - holding on the

street and lying on top of each other on the

Cambridge common, prefer their privacy.<sup>6</sup>(NS, P.3)

Thus The Namesake illuminates the theme of cross-culturalism and sandwich world where Indians are living in host country and refused to give up their cultural roots, they still hope for assimilation and acculturation in new land yet they do not deviate from relationships with their homeland. Hence when cultural encounter happens there is beautiful amalgamation of traditional, modern, post modern culture.

Bharti Mukherjee depicts dilemma faced by expatriates the clash of culture and associates with alienation and identity crisis. Jhumpa Lahiri's novels delineates with assimilation and acculturation with new land and repulsion to deviate from native roots.

Nature of Cultural Encounter, in the selected novels of Bharti Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri has two faces, one pointing towards cultural root and other to deviation from cultural root, but one thread is common that cultural assimilation rather than resistance. Prominently American, British, Indian, (in India particularly Bengali) cultures are studied. They are again oriented or have affinity towards the native culture. Thus possibilities exist for occurrence of fusion, deviation, orientation and tolerance of culture. Even though they offer them a freedom to make a comfortable survival the assimilation of culture takes place. Within the nation also the assimilation or fusion of culture takes place because return to native root is impossible to them. Cultural clash takes place in search of identity though deviation from 'native root culture' exists assimilation occur in host culture which is genuine need for comfortable survival. Hence the cultural encounter between two culture – eastern and western constructs a hybrid culture.

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