

# Women in the Land of “Melting Pot”: A Comparative Study between Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* and Sandra Cisneros’ *Esperanza*

Masuma Akhter Tamanna

Lecturer, North East University Bangladesh, Sylhet  
tamananthouhid@gmail.com

**Abstract**— Women writers have made remarkable strides in the arena of literature and generously put across their aggravations, struggles, afflictions, and also their successful experiences in their writings. Of these, the immigrant women have reshaped and redefined the literature in a significant way because they suffered from the ‘twin burden’ of being immigrant and female. Among the immigrant writers Bharati Mukherjee an Indian born American and Sandra Cisneros a Mexican-American have achieved a high water mark in the literary canvass. They

tell the tales of those immigrants whose stories go untold. Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* and Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street* picture the struggle of women in an alien land, relate the cost they pay to create a perceptible existence in a strange land. The protagonists of these two novels, *Jasmine* and *Esperanza* constantly reinvents themselves, modifying their identities as their American experience goes on and as they acquire consciousness of what it means to start a new life in a new country. These two characters make me feel the strength of women, open a new horizon for me, which is why I have decided to work on this title. In my paper I am going to explore the idea of “melting pot”, identity crisis, sense of belonging, sexual abuse, *Jasmine* and *Esperanza*’s immigrant experience, their attitude towards their own community, and their determination to create a new identity and new sense of belonging to the “land of opportunity”.

**Keywords**— melting pot, sense of belonging, immigrant crisis.

Immigrant experience serves as a fertile literary ground for the writers. They grip the reader’s psyche with heartrending accounts of the aspiring outsiders. Over the course of her thirty-year creative and critical career, Bharati Mukherjee has energetically been engaged in redefining American national identity from the perspective of immigration. To discover, create, and retrieve America’s multicultural myths and histories,

Mukherjee rejects the expatriate’s nostalgia. She represents immigration through the logic of transformation. *Jasmine* in Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*, for instance, begins her journey travelling through the underbelly of the immigrant trade route on forged papers, through the tiered bunks on the trawlers out of Europe, and ends up metamorphosing into a creature who is infatuated by the promise of America.

Throughout Cisneros’ life, her Mexican-American mother, her Mexican father, her six brothers, and she would move between Mexico City and Chicago, never allowing her much time to get settled in any one place. Cisneros’ writing has been shaped by her experiences. A sense of shifting she has experienced in the earlier stage of her life and which is also reflected in her matchless character *Esperanza*. Cisneros by herself felt the life of an immigrant and voices her suppressed and agonized experience through the character *Esperanza Cordero*. She writes in her introduction to *The House on Mango Street*: “Because I was unsure of my own adult voice and often censored myself, I made up another voice, *Esperanza*’s...” (Cisneros xxiv). *The House on Mango Street* was awarded the Before Columbus American Book Award in 1985. Like *Jasmine*, *Esperanza* cherishes the wish to construct a meaningful identity in America through assimilation.

According to Sonya Dutta Choudhury: “Immigrant literature may seem to occupy a curious midway world, weaving a tapestry that is at once familiar and far away. Yet, it is a validation of the American way of life, with assimilation being seen as coming of age”. Phillip Lopate in his article “Immigrant Fiction: Exploring an American Identity” says, “in these novels, the immigrant experience often begins in a spirit of wild, open-ended adventure, as their protagonists fling themselves halfway around the world, breaking dramatically with past lives to settle in a big country full of promise, though soon enough the sphere contracts to an urban ghetto or small town, where they are thrown into an introverted,

claustrophobic self-protectiveness amidst their own kind. The immigrating family distills the tensions from within and without: On the one hand, it shields its members against a hostile or indifferent environment; on the other hand, it entraps them in a prison where sibling rivalries, oedipal struggles, and marital discords have little opportunity for diffusion. The sensitive child (often the author-surrogate) can escape through education, and, indeed, immigrant novels are filled with the romance of schooling, but once freed from the familial coils of emotional blackmail through learning and assimilation, the individual is faced with a new loneliness, and guilt for leaving his or her people behind." Since 1965, when the late Robert Kennedy, who was Attorney General at that time, changed the immigration laws, making it easier for people from non-European countries to come into the United States, there has been a steady and visible growth in the population of non-European Americans. In Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

We find the protagonist Jasmine experiences a death-defying journey as an illegal immigrant and make her way to America to realize the "real life". She does not hold fast to nostalgia and adopt herself to the patterns of dominant American Culture-"I changed because I wanted to. To bunker oneself inside nostalgia, to sheathe the heart in a bulletproof vest, was to be a coward" ( Mukherjee 185). Sandra Cisneros *The House on Mango Street* illustrates the claustrophobic ghetto life. Esperanza, protagonist of this novel, find herself immure in her barrio and longs to be integrated with the prevailing American society- "One day I will say good bye to mango. I am too strong for her to keep me here forever. One day I will go away" (Cisneros 110).

The term "melting pot" came into general usage in 1908, after the premiere of the play *The Melting Pot* by Israel Zangwill. It is a metaphor for a heterogeneous society becoming more homogeneous, the different elements "melting together" into a harmonious whole with a common culture (wiki). It is particularly used to describe the assimilation of immigrants to the United States. It indicates the blending of diverse nationalities, ethnicities and cultures. In terms of immigrants to the United States, the "melting pot" process has been equated with Americanization. In the novel *Jasmine* we find, Jasmine is always upbeat to establish a new cultural identity through constant incorporation of new skills, desires, and habits. she is constantly replacing saris with T-shirts and cords, learning the names of local baseball teams, buying Dairy Queen at the mall and even learning how to walk like an American-"I checked myself in the mirror, shocked at the transformation, jazzy in T-shirt, tight cords and running shoes. I could not tell if with the Hasanpuri side I'd also abandoned my Hasanpuri modesty" (Mukherjee 133). Besides, merging into the dominant

culture Jasmine incorporates some eastern habits among her western neighborhoods: "people are getting used to some of my concoctions, even if they make a show of fanning their mouths. They get disappointed if there is not something Indian on the table" (Mukherjee 9).

*Jasmine* and *The house on Mango Street* relate the tale of two immigrants from two different continents. Jasmine from India and Esperanza a Mexican, their diverse origins play no role in their world of longing. Both of them repudiate the imposed norms, roles; yearn to locate a place of their own in an alien land. Their much desired metamorphosis was not rosy. To realize their dream they face many hurdles, for being women and immigrant.

Esperanza and Jasmine sound similar in their audacity, in craving a new world with buoyancy.

Esperanza Cordero lives in an impoverished Chicano ghetto, defies living a life of isolation and confinement. She fights against the socialization process imposed on Chicanas, rejects the model presented to her-"but I have decided not to grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on threshold waiting for the ball and chain" (Cisneros 88). She in a self-affirming way declares herself as a rebel-" I have begun my own quiet war"( Cisneros 89).

Again, in *Jasmine* we see the same dissenter spirit-"my grandmother may have named me Joyoti, Light, but in surviving I was already Jane, a fighter and adapter" ( Mukherjee 40).

Esperanza and Jasmine shuttle between identities. Esperanza's name, in "My Name" represents her most basic struggle with her Spanish-American identity. Esperanza states, "In English my name means hope, in Spanish it means too many letters" (Cisneros 10). She also reveals that she is named after her grandmother, who like Esperanza was born in the "Chinese year of the horse which is supposed to be bad luck if you're born female because Chinese like Mexicans don't like their women strong" (Cisneros 10). After this realization, Esperanza longs for a new name and identity. She states, "I would like to baptize myself under a new name more like the real me" (Cisneros 11). This preference ultimately forces Esperanza to leave Mango Street, in search of a more promising future. Esperanza also struggles to find her identity by overcoming the stereotypes which other women in the community exemplify. Sally, an older girl on Mango Street, introduces Esperanza to sexuality and the supposed glamorous myth associated with femininity. However, after her own rape, Esperanza sees Sally, who falls into the same trap as most of the other women on Mango Street, as someone who "got married too young and not ready, but married just the same" (Cisneros 101). Esperanza does not want to become trapped in the same situation in which Sally finds herself and uses Sally's situation as a learning experience and a negative model of

relationships. These realizations also add to Esperanza's drive and need to leave Mango Street. Jasmine in the novel *Jasmine* experiences the same identity crisis. To touch her dream she sheds so many personas like so many skins –“ Joyoti of Hasnpur was not Jasmine, Duff's day mummy and Taylor and Wylies *au pair* in Manhattan; that Jasmine is not this Jane Ripplemeyer having lunch with Marry Webb at the university club today” ( Mukherjee127).

Esperanza and Jasmine both face the trauma of an immigrant. Jasmine embarks on a perilous journey to a new world of fulfill her husband's dream. With a forged passport she sets off the journey, she sleeps in tiered bunks, under the tarp, faces the death itself. She states the sufferings of illegal immigrant-“ we are the outcasts and deportees, strange pilgrim visiting the outlandish shrines, landing at the end of tarmacs, ferried in old army trucks where we are roughly handled and taken to ropped-off corners of waiting rooms where surly, barely wakened custom guards await their bribe” ( Mukherjee 103). Esperanza reveals the feeling of the native people towards the immigrant- “those who don't know any better came into our neighborhood scared. They think we're dangerous. They think we will attack them with shiny knives” (cisneros28).

Women are always victim of male oppression. In men defined world there is no sanctuary for women. We find Esperanza who is determined not to live the lives of other ghetto women, who does not cross the street like other girls, straight ahead, straight eyes, she also faces the sexual abuse-“ the one who grabbed me by the arm, he wouldn't me let me go...only his dirty fingers nail against my skin...” (Cisneros100). Jasmine sets off an uncertain journey to accomplish her husband dream. At the very outset her dream gets demolished by the monstrous Half-face. While Jasmine and Esperanza try to explore a new horizon, their feminine identities impede them to bloom.

“The land of opportunity” fascinates people with its charming American dream: life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Jasmine and Esperanza both nourish and aspire to grasp this dream. Esperanza never feels at home within her barrio. For her it was confinement, a source of anguish, alienation. The “sad red house” on Mango Street makes her feel like nothing. The house on Mango Street is a heavy burden that Esperanza must carry. She is ashamed of it “no, this isn't my house and shake my head as if shaking could undo the year I've lived here. I don't belong. I don't ever want to come from here” ( Cisneros 106). She does not like Mexican traditions and culture brought to the united states and settled in Mango Street together with the small red Mexican houses. She rejects her house in Mango Street longing for a house of her own. A dwelling she does not associate with the world of Mango Street. The barrio metaphorically represents a

mooring Esperanza is tied to: “... I am a red balloon, a balloon tied to an anchor” (Cisneros 9). Esperanza's dream house is outside the barrio. She dreams of a “white house with trees around it, a great big yard and grass growing without a fence” ( Cisneros 5). She craves for a “white house” like the house owned by the American people “ people who live on hills sleep so close to the stars they forget those of us who live too much on earth” ( Cisneros 86). She wishes a house far away from Mango Street, a nice house with flowers and big windows. There would be no nosy neighbor watching, no sheets and towels and laundry- a perfect and clean house. But these are not found in a Latino neighborhood. Going out of Mango street means going to a world of freedom, where she can act freely as a woman and have a “... house of my own..., a place that will allow Esperanza to accomplish her American dream of possessing a house. Choosing to have a house outside Mango Street means Esperanza's assimilation into the American mainstream. Hailing from an oppressive and rural family in India, Jasmine comes to America in search of a more fruitful life. She thus begins her journey westward and her quest for a new self. She tries to establish a new cultural identity by incorporating new desires, skills and habits. From the very outset we find Jasmine strives to integrate herself with the American culture. Lillian Gordon transforms her from jasmine to Jazzy. Jasmine tries to “walk and talk American” (mukherjee134). Within one week she loses her shy side. While an Indian taxi driver talks against American people jasmine thinks: “I would not immure myself as he had” (Mukherjee140). She feels uncomfortable in professorji's house which they have converted into Punjab ghetto. She wants to get away from the claustrophobic traditional Indianans, “ I wanted to distance myself from everything Indian” ( Mukherjee 145). In Flushing she feels immured. She is spiraling into depression behind the fortress of Punjabianness. She sobs from unnamed, unfulfilled wants. Flushing is not the downtown of dreams she has conjured. She leaves Flushing because “I did not want to live legally if it also meant living like a refugee” ( Mukherjee 171). She wishes to be a part of American society, “I wanted to know the way such a man lives in this country. I wanted to watch, be a part of it” (Mukherjee 167). Jasmine does her best to belong to this new world and during this self-assertion she undergoes several transformations, from Jasmine to Jazzy to Jase and finally, Jane Ripplemeyer who is pregnant with the child of a white man- Bud. Jasmine touches her dream and becomes part of her dream land by conceiving a white man's child. At the end of the novel we find a Jasmine who talks and thinks like American. Now she is ready to leave the “old-world of dutifulness”, ready to fight fete and “reposition the stars”.

Both Jasmine and Esperanza foster the dream of assimilation but with a different attitude towards their origin. Jasmine wishes to cut off her Indian self. She wants to forget her Indian past. Her genuine foreignness frightens Bud. She wants to distance herself from Indian people, attitudes. She is different from her adopted son Du who has kept in contact with his community of origin, "My transformation has been genetic: Du was hyphenated" (Mukherjee222). On the contrary, Esperanza desires to be assimilated to serve her community, "They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind" (Cisneros 110).

*The House on Mango Street* and *Jasmine* relate the histories of economic and physical violences that fuel immigration and those immigrants face upon reaching the New World. Protagonists of these novels illuminate the making of American mind. Overlooking their vulnerable feminine identity Jasmine and Esperanza carve out their way to their dreamland. They listen to the voice of their heart and tread the untrodden path. They make us feel the vigour of women and encourage us to touch our long cherished dream.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Belur, Roopa Malavally.( 30 Apr. 2001). Rev.of *Jasmine*, Bharati Mukherjee. South Asian Women's Forum.  
<<http://file:///i:/bookreview.asp.htm>>.
- [2] Cisneros, Sandra. (1984). *The House on Mango Street*. New York: Vintage.
- [3] Drake, Jennifer. (22 March 1999). Looting American Culture: Bharati Mukherjee's Immigrant Narratives. JSTOR. < [http:// www. Jstor. Org/search](http://www.Jstor.Org/search)>.
- [4] Gabriel, Sharmani Patricia.( 1 October 2003). Interview with Bharati Mukherjee: Routes of identity. ARIEL.  
<<http://ariel.synergiesprairies.ca/ariel/index>>.
- [5] Lopate, Phillip. (5 April 2008). "Immigrant Fiction: Exploring an American Identity." Gilder Lehrman.  
<<http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/literature-Andlanguage-arts/essays/immigrant-fiction-exploring-american-identity>>.
- [6] Mukherjee, Bharati. (1989). *Jasmine*. New York: Grove Widenfeld.
- [7] Sharma, Laxmi.( 03 Nov. 2008). Women in the Novels of Bharati Mukherjee.. Literary India.
- [8] Wikipedia. Melting Pot.Web.  
<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Melting\\_pot](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Melting_pot)>.