



EXPATRIATE SENSIBILITY IN YASMINE GOONERATNE'S A CHANGE OF SKIES: A STUDY

Dr. V. Madhavi

Assistant Professor of English, Sri Krishnadevaraya University, Anantapur.

Yasmine Gooneratne relates her own immigrant experience to her characters in the novel. The novel adopts the theme of migration and cross-cultural relations. It discusses positive cross-cultural experience of the characters Bharath and Navaranjini. The experiences of these characters resemble the theme of 'acceptance' and 'willingness' which Gooneratne herself seems to have practiced to get accustomed to the foreign place.

Bharat is a young Asian-Professor of English who reluctantly migrates to Australia, with his wife Navaranjini, for a five-year visit. Bharat is clearly aware of the inconveniences that the new country would welcome with. Edward the grandfather of Bharat is the first adventurer in the family of Mudaliyars who chooses Australia for his voyage. Edward comes from a family in Matara, Ceylon. His diaries provide a counterpart to the lives of Bharat and Navaranjini in their new land, Australia.

A Change of Skies is the replica of the novelist's own expatriate experiences in Australia. She has experienced compassion, forbearance and complacency which would make life of man peaceful and meaningful. The protagonist and his wife take no time to get rooted in an unfamiliar land – Australia. The only way for survival on a new land is cultivating the habit of acceptance, breaking away from one's ethnicity and absorbing the new culture. This successful acculturation and assimilation of Barry (Bharat) and Jean (Navaranjani) into a new landscape is beautifully portrayed by the author.

The novel is an elegant voyage through the expatriate experiences of the protagonist. Bharat is an intellectual and he reflects on his experience. He recognizes his alienation, and depends on his wife's clarity of understanding to cope with his daily vicissitudes. Like Edward Jean also has the adaptability and acceptance to another culture.

Edward has a staunch belief on the aristocratic qualities of the British order. British governors considered themselves 'the landowners who value their stock.' They could transplant their hierarchical British order in Srilanka and could win the respect of the natives. They could achieve this through their 'wisdom.'¹ British governors are wise in taking the native men into their service 'who knew the terrain and are already resident on the land.' Edward observed that the Australian governors due to their lack of 'aristocratic qualities' were 'misunderstood and even disliked by the settlers.'

To become an 'insider'² Barry struggles a bit and his strenuous endeavour to achieve this is in contrast to his wife's easy adaptability to change her name from 'Navaranjani' to 'Jean'. Jean successfully retains her native identity. In the beginning Bharat and Navaranjani have been involved in the clash of cultures and are treated as newcomers in the strange land of Australia. But in the course of their five year stay they began to feel that Australians have Asian identity. They confront the consequences of their choice.

Mr. Bruce Trivally the neighbour is a very courteous and helpful to the new emigrants. The clash of cultures begin with the observation of Bruce that the new 'Asian feller' belongs to the 'carpet culture of



Srilanka'(99) and not to the chair culture of Australia. Mr. and Mrs. Bruce offer every minute help they could extend to Bharat and Navaranjani. Both Bruce and Maureen think kindly of Bharat and Navaranjini. Maureen says that it would take five years for them to feel at home in Australia. Bharat learns many things and starts making note of them from the moment he lands on the foreign soil. As they drove from Sydney Airport to the suburbs on their first morning in Australia, Bharat sits beside the taxi driver. In democratic Australia, a person who engages a taxi must seat himself beside the driver, and not in the back seat. The misguided idea of 'self-importance' among the men and 'modesty' among the women of Asia having its long roots make them climb into the back seat of the taxi they hire. In Australia where people follow the dignity of labour Bharat makes a note on his memo pad: "When in a taxi, always sit in front, next to the driver, and talk pleasantly to him as if to an equal, no matter how difficult this might be for you to do." (59)

This is one of the first things he learned in Australia. Navaranjini observes 'everyone, including the taxi driver who was driving as fast as everybody else, knew exactly where they were going.' (65) She feels that probably she would not be very good at living, or driving in Australia. Navaranjini is a flexible character and understands the need for such an easy bend as she feels that it obviously is a social need. She learns swimming as it would be important for them to be in Australia.

She further observes that in Australia though people avoided looking at one another a sort of communication is taking place by way of the stickers on the rear windows of the vehicles. Both Bharat and Navaranjini understand the need to be on their own guard against hostile attacks from the society in which they find themselves. Mr. Koyako guides them to a great extent. Mr. Koyako is regarded as something of a leader of the Srilankan community in Australia. As an engineer working for a government department he is much respected. Despite his stay in Australia for ten years he could retain the moral values and traditions of his homeland. He is very strong minded in protecting and preserving the values which support civilization. He feels that the children of Srilankan families in Australia are put in situations of cultural danger.

Mrs. Koyako is a very good cook. She never serves anything to her guests other than Srilankan savories and sweets. Mr. and Mrs. Koyako are very religious, devoted supporters of three temples and wholehearted participators on alms-givings and other ceremonies. They are kind enough to involve both Bharat and Navaranjini in these ceremonies. Mr. and Mrs. Koyako live by their principles. Mr. Koyako's deep interest in educational matters is part of his conviction that the only way Asians can preserve their national identity from destruction due to their stay in Australia is to conscientiously keep up all their national customs. He considers it his duty to do everything he can to encourage the young people of the community to achieve their potential and to this end he keeps his records of the achievements of the Srilankan children up to date with minute care.

Bharat and Navaranjini get depressed about the image the Asians have in Australia. Australians find it difficult to pronounce the names of the Asians. So, it became customary to the Asians to change their names and keep it short and simple. In this process Bharat becomes Barry, and Navaranjini becomes Jean. But they succeed in retaining at least the sound of the original. Barry and Jean understand that they have to confront with the problem of maintaining their cultural identity in the face of displacement and expatriation, the temptations being 'great to give way and to give in.' As a linguist Barry observes that 'the average Australian is lazy in his speaking habits and finds our long names almost impossible to pronounce.' (96).



At a conscious level Gooneratne does not seem to regret the change because the new land would be more equitable, but an unspoken ‘sense of loss’ pervades the characters as she conveys, ‘Change is impossible, denied by our education, our interests, and the currents of social setting except, through literature, and the power of the written word.’³

Gooneratne’ novel is a comedy in which the displaced characters, by entering into the lives of others, produce a community which is located within their new state but represents a nation that goes beyond any boundaries. ‘This conception of a nation as a place of meeting rather than an enclosure provides the basis for a new conception of nationhood appropriate to contemporary interdependent internationalism.’⁴

The Australian friends of Barry and Jean wonder how both the husband and wife could be considerate and compassionate to each other. In their exploration to find the cause they observe the interesting thing in their bed room. One of their beds is three inches higher than the other. The four posters are a gift from Jean’s parents and intentionally Jean’s parents designed them to be uneven in height. Jean claims to the lower bed as she is comfortable to look up to her husband. Jean’s mother says ‘a wife must look up to her husband since he embodies the principle of creative energy in marriage.’(183)

Margot and Mike, the neighbours of Barry, invite the Asian Couple to their twentieth marriage anniversary. Barry gets surprised to see Mike has his new beds specially ordered and designed the way he has his own beds. Mike takes him to his bedroom to show the two magnificent four-poster beds made of Australian cedar, one of the beds standing three inches higher than the other. Mike says “‘thanks to you.’ It’s made me feel ten years younger, and Margot’s frisky as a minnow’ and nudges ‘you Orientals, don’t like to give away your secrets, do you?’”(196-197) Gooneratne makes a point that human beings, irrespective of their nation, have many things to share, through which they can make their life comfortable. The only thing required is they should think beyond their boundaries.

Jean dares to claim that Professor Blackstone is passing all the comments in ignorance that most of the Asians are pure-vegetarians. And his tendency to generalize the things is something dogmatic related to provinciality. Professor Blackstone acts with decency and decorum when he became aware of his lapse. Jean realizes that in spite of her hostility towards him Professor Blackstone behaved befitting a gentleman: “you mustn’t judge people too hastily...this experience showed that Australians can be civilized.”(128-129).

Gooneratne’s approach to the expatriate experience is more serious and also positive. Everyone who was there in that gathering heard Jean’s loud and clear protest, and they considered it to be a way of ‘deconstruction’ of Blackstone. Jean is recruited to the campus branch of the women’s movement. She accepts the proposal as her family has long-established connections with women’s rights in Srilanka. She propels to be a typical Asian woman, a source of the loving, and nurturing care that stands between Asian women and brutal male exploitation. Jean had got a diploma in librarianship. She sets to work organizing display cabinets, collecting staff publication, writing labels and designing posters and notices.

Encouraged by the successes ‘Jean accepts the role of supporting her husband and recognizes that she is the one who brings into the new land the old stories that can make sense of common experience of people of different origins.’⁵ Jean provides the true meeting point of cultures by establishing a



restaurant and school of cuisine. She starts her project of writing ‘A Cookery Book’. She requests the help of her mother and her sister-in-law. She starts collecting recipes which combine Oriental and Western ingredients and methods of preparation. She follows her mother’s principle of ‘self help’(208) a way she adopts in her social service projects.

As Jean gets along with her project, she enjoys full freedom in giving her tips in her own way, ‘when you don’t find an egg beater to beat the egg don’t hesitate to use your hands.’ The Australians, who otherwise would bark at the suggestion, receive it casually. Jean leads the busy, busy life of a restaurant owner and TV presenter. Her husband Bary works with non-English speaking migrants. He is already the author of several academic books.

An identity change⁶ that began in the lives of Barry and Jean continues till their death. Barry and Jean die in a plane crash while going to see Bruce and Maureen as usual at Christmas. This makes Bruce and Maureen feel that they are responsible for Edwina. They continue to take care of her. Gooneratne presents a perspective understanding of cultural clash. Barry takes it a pride to become a father. Jean believes that though their marriage was an arranged one there relationship is bound on love and faith. It is this love and faith that helps Jean push away the infatuation of Francesa sweet lips the colleague of Barry. Jean thinks that Barry is her property, and she has every right to protect it and to keep it for herself.

Barry has always believed in the power of individuality. With new careers in hand, and a daughter, Edwina growing up, Barry and Jean develop the habit of discussing the things to be carried out in an open and unemotional way. ‘To judge anything properly, a problem or a painting, you need to step back from it, to distance yourself’ (298) as Barry says they try to keep their thought of their homeland in the course of discussions.

We can see the autobiographical note in her novel ‘A Change of Skies’ as the narrative moves backward and forward in time it tends to bridge geographical and emotional space between the two cultures and to flatten time as one continuous flow of duration. The novel is a playful exploration of the mysterious ways in which human mind tries to connect itself to various ideas originated differently but intersecting with one another.

Spanning over two centuries and two continents, this novel tries to build a bridge between reminiscences and experiences, private lives and historical events and establishes a complex web of relationships between disparate ideas and events. Gooneratne uses the post modernist technique of chronological disorder. The episodes of Edward’s experiences in the form of his diaries continue to appear throughout the novel. Though Gooneratne narrates the novel in first person narrative, the ‘I’ in the chapters refers to different characters. Sometimes it represents Edward, sometimes Barry and sometimes Jean. In the last chapters it even represents Edwina. Thus Gooneratne could successfully transform this first person to four consecutive generations.

Though it is not an easy task for the expatriates to mix with the alien set up, Goonetatne shows that traditional cultures have the innate strength to stand the shocks from outside. The characters derive the confidence, to withstand the temptations of the foreign land, from frequent remind and references to their native tradition. Mr. and Mrs. Koyako is the best example for this. The novel may be read as ‘a



negotiation of Sri Lankan migrant identity in Australia and as a negotiation of gender relations within the migrant community.⁷

In her novel ‘A Change of Skies’ Gooneratne succeeds in retaining one’s own culture as well as adapting to the ways of the life on an alien land. Edwina is the daughter of Jean and Barry. Edwina who eventually turns out to be Vina is also connected to the line of cross-cultural iconoclasm. Barry and Jean die in a plane crash, while they were on their way to join Maureen and Bruce’s Christmas celebrations. The sudden death of Barry and Jean does not prevent the progress of the novel. Gooneratne links the setting to Edwina in the epilogue. We come to know that Edwina becomes the responsibility of Maureen and Bruce. They continue their kindness and spontaneous friendship towards Edwina. She is seen visiting Maureen and Bruce’s Christmas celebration as was practiced by her parents. She feels more at home in the company of both of them. Though she appears only in the epilogue we see her ‘expanding the cultural horizons’⁸ started by her great grandfather, Edward.

The sparkling fabrication of the theme of liberation with the theme of cultural assimilation⁹ can be related to the successful understanding of one’s own self in relation to the others. Despite its effervescent comedy and a hilarious description of human existence the novel turns out to be a serious reflection on the deeper levels of change, identity and belonging at the end.

References

- Page nos. in the parentheses refer to the text Gooneratne’s ‘A Change of Skies.’
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 - c. Wikipedia.com, Commonwealth Women Writers/Gooneratne
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