



## **Journey from Exile to Immigration in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine***

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### **Abstract**

This paper attempts to explore how Bharati Mukherjee's literary creations coincide with the journey from exile to immigration, concentrating mainly on her novel - *Jasmine*. An attempt is being made to determine the extent to which Mukherjee's self-identification as an immigrant resolves her identity crisis. She has titled her third novel after the protagonist, indicating a change in perspective. *Jasmine* emerges as a whole individual capable of sustaining herself in a foreign nation through her own efforts. Nonetheless, *Jasmine*'s obstinacy with her indigenous culture and upbringing serves as a great magnet for all men who understand and adore her Indianness and adaptability. *Jasmine* exemplifies the fusion the author asserts is occurring now: immigration was a two-way street, and both whites and immigrants grew into a third entity as a result of this interaction and experience.

**Keywords:** *Exile, Identity, Immigration, Culture, Expatriate, Roots.*

## **1. Journey from Exile to Immigration in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine***

Bharati Mukherjee has established an outstanding reputation in literary circles as an Indian diaspora writer. Though she was born and raised in India, she likes to identify as an American writer. She is unambiguous about her current allegiances. However, this awareness is not simple to come to. Though she left India for the American continent, familial ties keep her connected to her mother country. As certain as she is of her allegiances, she is also certain of her deep and intense devotion to Calcutta; that city will always be a habit for her. She refers to her identify as a 'fluid identity,' in which she possesses characteristics of both her native Indian and adopted American cultures. This destination is attained only when an exile, an expatriate, has through prolonged and excruciating trials.

Mukherjee's primary goal as an immigrant writer is to carve out one's own territory. She views expatriation as a confining and self-defeating attitude in a writer, because an expatriate nursed his/her grievances and paraded his/her exile anguish, finally damaging his/her sensibility and writing, which became self-imitative and predictable. An assessment of his novels illustrates her transition from expatriation to immigration. Her transition from expatriation to immigration also alters her selection of writers to whom she looks for inspiration.

*Jasmine* portrays immigration positively. There is neither nostalgia nor a sense of loss of a great history in the work. There is no room for sentimentality in the projection of a frail identity that must be

protected from annihilation; nonetheless, the will to make new alliances and develop new identities appears to exist in the friendly and fertile soil of the adopted nation. The United States is Jasmine's fantasy planet. The unusual mission for which she claims to have come to America is quickly forgotten; she drops her Indian name and attire and adjusts effortlessly to any situation. She is referred to as Jyoti, Jasmine, Kali, Jase, and Jane according to the circumstances. The potential of fluidity, which Mukherjee attributes to American culture is epitomized in Jasmine's.

metamorphosis from Jyoti a Punjabi village girl, to Jasmine a loving and devoted Hindu wife to Kali, an incarnation of destroying goddess, to Jazzy, a remade non-immigrant, to Jase, a nanny in the home of a New York College Professor and to Jane, live-in partner of a bank official in Iowa. Each of these character- transformations is marked by changes in behaviour and personality such as her successive 'rebirths' seems analogy to Hindu transmigration of the soul. (Sushma Tondon, *Bharati Mukherjee's Fiction: A Perspective*, 37)

A closer examination reveals that some of the fundamental characteristics of Jasmine's nature do survive her transformations; the survivor in the Jyoti is apparent in the Jane who ultimately decides to leave Bud. Jasmine is such a courageous immigrant that she is never plagued by recollections of her past in India or the clash between traditional Indian values and the American culture in which she finds herself.

Jasmine's life in America is very remarkable. She alters characters' identities, clothing, and even lovers. A little unschooled girl from Hasnapur, Punjab transforms into the adventurous Jase in jeans, a T-shirt, and a sneaker in an instant. Except for fleeting memories of Prakash, her deceased husband, she is adamant about erasing her past. She flees with one man while pregnant with the child of another man. All of this, however, is consistent with the attitude of an immigrant. No wonder she says, "I had been reborn" (163) - a total change from the girl of Punjab. Mukherjee often refers to this concept of rebirth inside a single life in this work. Even after the initial horrific assault, Jasmine immerses herself in the new society with the zeal of a warrior. The work is an attempt by the novelist to blend the essence of two civilizations, Indian and American, in the protagonist. It is the narrative of a Punjabi lady who takes control of her life and transforms herself into an American, very much like her creator. Mukherjee acknowledges that it is through the process of authoring this book that she changed herself from an expatriate to a full immigrant. By publishing this book, she opened up a space for Third World immigrants' absorption into American culture.

The essential point that Mukherjee wishes to convey through Jasmine is the necessity of an immigrant adapting to a new society in order to thrive. Jasmine is a fighter who battles her fate and emerges as a survivor. Even when she is foretold of her fateful destiny she dares to say "Watch me to reposition the stars" (240). Her narrative exemplifies the formation of an American mind. She is a flawed individual who makes numerous errors, but she possesses the fortitude to choose and take risks. Like her author, Jasmine appears to be saying "I left India by choice to settle in the United States. I have adopted this country as my home. I view myself as an American author in the tradition of other American authors whose ancestors arrived at Ellis Island" (Alison B. Carb's "An Interview with Bharati Mukherjee," 650).

The exuberance of immigration that comes with the acquisition of Americanness and immigrant Indianness as celebratable fluid identities does not come easily, for it is not easy to completely divorce oneself from one's own past, nor is it easy to overcome the aloofness of expatriation or to cut oneself off from the roots and tradition of one's own culture. Without a sure, the freed Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase, and Jane, who create a lifetime for each name, appear to be a possibility for every energetic immigrant; this flurry of change and action is the source of the tension and misunderstanding inherent in the entire cross-cultural enterprise. Jasmine's complete erasure of her Indian heritage once she becomes embroiled in the US is intriguing. As she assimilates into the dominant culture, she relinquishes her Indian identity.

Through a series of events, Mukherjee attempts to untangle her heroine's hard road toward complete assimilation into American culture. After her husband's death, the protagonist, a precocious and pertly Hindu girl named Jyoti, makes her way to Florida. Her trip begins in a poverty-stricken farming community in Punjab and continues through the swamps of south Florida, an Indian enclave in Queens, Columbia University in upper Manhattan, an Iowa farming town, and finally to California. The narrative weaves together the events of Jasmine's life through flashbacks and crosscuts, from her early years in Hasnapur to her astonishing exploits in the United States. She gets dizzy herself as a result of the rapidity of her metamorphosis. Her story embodies the restless pursuit of a rootless yet strong individual who is willing to confront any unforeseen circumstance in her life.

Jasmine arrives at the United States on 'The Gulf Shuttle,' a shrimper. Her first meeting with America is a type of violent rejuvenation. She is a young and gorgeous girl who arrives on foreign shores alone and unescorted. The determination to stand up to destiny's blind powers compels her to leave India, but her American adventure begins on an unsettling note - her terrible rape at the hands of the deformed captain Half-Face, aboard whose ship she is smuggled into America.

When Jasmine arrives in America, she is compelled to accompany Half-Face to a desolate Florida motel, where he demands his payment and makes lewd suggestions to her. Jasmine succumbs to America's violence here, when she is brutally raped by Half-Face. This injustice is beyond the comprehension of an Indian widow. She decides to commit herself, but before she can, she realises she wants to live because her purpose is not yet complete.

She becomes Kali personified, the deity of vengeful rage, with her extended bleeding tongue. Death becomes flesh and resolves to assassinate the devil who has broken her chastity. She kills Half-face and enacts a form of death for her as well: the death of her old self through the symbolic burning of her dishonoured clothing, and a new self emerges from the ashes, a la Phoenix. This conclusion is profound for a seventeen-year-old girl who finds herself in a foreign nation without a familiar person or relative, with little money, and only the spirit of an unmatched survivor. She undergoes rebirth as she sheds her previous identity.

Lord Yama who had wanted me, who had courted me, and whom I'd flirted with on the long trip over, had now deserted me - My body was merely the shell, soon to be discarded. Then I could be reborn, debts and sins all paid for ... 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, traveling light. (120-21)

Jasmine's assassination of Half-Face is an act of self-affirmation. Her choice to murder herself first is that of a woman who lives for her late husband; whereas, the woman who kills Half-face is motivated by her will to live, by her want to continue living.

Mukherjee depicts her protagonist's gradual metamorphosis with exquisite care, yet there is occasionally tension between Jasmine's two personalities, one of which adheres to traditional Indian ideals of life and the other of which is an adventurer in a capitalistic world. As she so succinctly puts it "For every Jasmine the reliable caregiver, there is a Jase the profligate adventure. I thrilled to the tug of opposing forces" (176).

Additionally, the work reflects Mukherjee's newly developed sensibility as an American. It is both a celebration of her assimilation and a gesture of thanks to America. The tale is replete with good-natured Americans who, rather than harassing immigrants from Third World nations, assist them in adjusting to life in America. T. Padma, too, thinks similarly,

Bharati Mukherjee's use of friendly souls readily giving advice and assistance has to be understood as a tribute she wants to pay to American generosity rather than as a flawed narrative device. As she says: 'My

characters are survivors. They have been helped as I have, by good strong people of conviction.' ('From Acculturation to Self-Actualization: Diasporic Dream in *Jasmine*,' 166)

Despite her foreign origins, the Americans regard Jasmine with admiration. While in New York, Taylor's acquaintances frequently asked her for assistance with Sanskrit or Arabic, Devanagari or Gurumukhi writing. They wanted her to translate documents and decipher paintings. Jasmine's every action is calculated toward Americanization, and each advancement marks a significant shift in her personality. In *The Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee: A Cultural Perspective*, Nagendra Kumar affirms,

Jasmine's flight to Iowa and her renaming as Jane is indicative of a slow but steady immersion into the mainstream American culture. Here we encounter a changed Jasmine - one who had murdered Half-face for violating her chastity, now not only willingly embraces the company of an American without marriage but also is carrying his child in her womb. We are simply surprised at her act since every idea revolt at this form of an Indian widow. But one should never forget that she is a rebel who revolts at every step against the path drawn for her. She is an adapter, a survivor. (115-16)

The life of an immigrant is, in fact, a succession of reincarnations. He passes through multiple incarnations in a single lifetime. This truth explains both Mukherjee's and Jasmine's circumstances. Mukherjee appears to argue through Jasmine's adventure that if one is to assimilate into the mainstream culture of an adopted region, one should relinquish control over one's own culture.

Earlier in the narrative, *Jasmine* stated that she rarely wrote or received mail because she desired to be free of her past, which implies bearing the burden of history. This is the yearning of immigrants to be born twice. Jasmine's endeavour to change destiny and use it as a springboard for the development of her potential is accomplished through the forces of her indomitable will, which emerges in difficult circumstances and aids her in reconstructing her objective with a single-minded passion that propels her subsequent success. Jasmine believes, "there are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake one self. We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams" (240). Self-assertion is necessary to unlock the tremendous hidden potential, and the goal of all quests should be the proper channelling of energy, not passive acceptance of all circumstances. Jasmine resolves to break free from stereotype roles. She must choose between the promise of America and old-world piety, and it will take a tremendous deal of willpower on her part to resolve the conundrum and make the correct choice.

Mukherjee says in an interview that her characters are a type of pioneers with the courage to abandon a predictable existence in favour of a new one. In *Jasmine*, she honours both the unflinching spirit and passion of a peasant girl who evolves from a tumultuous history into a demanding personality with an adventurer's attitude. This spirit of adventure is seen in Jasmine's frank defiance of the astrologer who foretold her future. This is the story of Jasmine, who cuts her tongue, empties her past, sheds her cultural baggage, changes her clothes, alters her walk, and changes her name and, rather than becoming a nonentity, a husk devoid of self, acquires the sought and desirable identity as Jase or Jane. Rather than self-immolating as a suttee goddess, she puts the suitcase into a garbage can and ignites it. As a result, when a self-immolating woman from the third world comes to America. She is not obligated to maintain her identity, which is a sign of and synonym for oppression.

As with Jasmine, Mukherjee underwent rebirths as she shifted rapidly between citizenships and cultures. Migrating through diverse cultures is a trip she understands better than most people. *Jasmine* is such a journey expertly managed. In "No Place like Home," Douglas Foster avers,

The world is in motion, as never before, with massive migrations altering the trajectory of millions of lives. In *Jasmine*, Bharati Mukherjee has put

a human face on the admixture of fate, change and will, that mark this modern journey. (43)

The message that comes through loud and clear to an immigrant writer like herself is to marry their particular talent to reality - the reality of being an immigrant. As an immigrant writer, Mukherjee must maintain an awareness of her immediate surroundings. She looks forward, not back, with the aid of a continually expanding imagination, much like her fictional characters, since she believes that reinvention of self, not nostalgia, is her power. In "Immigrant Writing: Give Us Your Maximalists," she defiantly announces to her American readers, "I am one of you" (24), and in this assertion she has declared herself as an American in immigrant tradition.

## 2. Conclusion

In *Jasmine*, Mukherjee encompasses numerous facets of the immigrant experience in America, illuminating the manner in which newcomers from the Third World are absorbed by and affect the nation. Her characters have always represented her own circumstances and personal worries, and one can track her gradual development of self-confidence and her gradual development of an American identity through fiction.

Mukherjee, like her protagonist, was aware that her destiny was bound to America. She has insisted on being understood as an immigrant writer, rather than as an Indian or expatriate writer, whose creative mission is to claim America, the country being constructed by newcomers from the Third world. Her insistence on her status as an immigrant reflects her resistance to be side-lined as a writer of alien material, a determination that her topics are vital to contemporary American society, not peripheral. One may enjoy the entirety of her writing more fully if we consider it as charting the shifts from an expatriate to an immigrant mindset. *Jasmine* is the culmination of a literary arc that reflects a postcolonial expatriate sensibility. Additionally, the consciousness depicts her agonising experience of negotiating identities across multiple estrangement limits. When Mukherjee writes *Jasmine*, she is in the mood to rejoice. *Jasmine* is an exuberant tale that offers a spiced-up version of the standard assimilation formula.

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