

The assimilated immigrant: A study on Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine*

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Abstract

People move from one place to another across the globe for various purpose. It might be for a tour, an exploration, profession, trade, business, etc. In this technologically transforming world young minds today wanted to satisfy their intellectual thirst exploring different lands in order to bag an identity of their own. More than homeland, an alien land seems to be an exotic experiment to most of the youths today. It is pitiable that after venturing into new land as immigrants people realize that pretence of exotics is just a mirage. In fact, the immigrants do relish the glamour of the land earning currency which paves way to lead a life of sophistication. But the burning question is: does the life of sophistication had given them peace of mind and mental healthiness they received in their homeland? Being exposed to new culture, new people, new tradition, the exotic experience the immigrants dreamt ends up in a nightmare. But still people accept their new land and they do start a normal life overcoming the turmoil they faced in the past. This paper is an attempt to light how Bharathi Mukherjee's *Jasmine* pictures it's protagonist as an assimilated immigrant.

Keywords: identity, displacement, transformation, assimilate, Americanization

Introduction

People move from one place to another across the globe for various purpose. It might be for a tour, an exploration, profession, trade, business, etc. In this technologically transforming world young minds today wanted to satisfy their intellectual thirst exploring different lands in order to bag an identity of their own. More than homeland, an alien land seems to be an exotic experiment to most of the youths today. It is pitiable that after venturing into new land as immigrants people realize that pretence of exotics is just a mirage. In fact, the immigrants do relish the glamour of the land earning currency which paves way to lead a life of sophistication. But the burning question is: does the life of sophistication had given them peace of mind and mental healthiness they received in their homeland? Being exposed to new culture, new people, new tradition, the exotic experience the immigrants dreamt ends up in a nightmare. This exotic as well as nightmare experience of the immigrants has tiled the writers' world with an ingredient which gave birth to a new form of writing called 'Diaspora'.

For decades together Indian writers have set their mind and soul exploring or bringing to light the problems faced by immigrants in various land. Diaspora has become a major theme in the works of the writers today. Bharathi Mukherjee is one among those writers whose experiences in the form of fiction gives a clear picture of what the immigrants face in the alien land. A threat that runs through all Mukherjee's works of fiction is difference – cultural, racial, sexual and economic class difference.

Bharathi Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* explores female identity through the story of an Indian peasant woman whose path takes her from the Punjab, to Florida, to New York, to Iowa, and as the novel draws a close she is about to set off for California. With each new move the protagonist reinvents herself with new name – Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase, Jane – and with

each new name she moves closer to her dream of being an American, of being to the New World. Jasmine's ongoing journey is an effective device which highlights her rootless position and her search for identity. The move to California, which resonates with hope and invests her with the aspirations of America's early pioneers, suggests that Jasmine has finally found her identity in America, which, perhaps more than any other country, can contain her many identities without contradiction.

Quest for identity is a post-colonial civilisational crisis in its centrality and an obsession. Physical dislocation has emphasized an identity in its historical and existential conjecture which is dealt with in the profane, immoral and impure multi-religious and multi-cultural context. In her search for her roots and authenticity of her migrant characters Bharathi Mukherjee in her novel *Jasmine* creates the space of in-betweenness of different cultures, societies and homeland.

The intense desire to seek and to accomplish the native (Desi) values as propounded by the socio-moral psyche becomes the prime motif for solving the question of culture. Thus, Bharathi Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* becomes symbolic of the duality of cultures – the East and the West. (Agarwal 27).

Jyoti, the protagonist, experiments life for human feeling, intuition, sensation and the dilemma of an expatriate who voluntarily leaves India and comes to America. *Jasmine* reveals socio-psychological traumas, relating to the life of an exile or expatriate. *Jasmine* works out the transoceanic, transmutative, and transnational and transcultural issues as alien native in America. The protagonist Jyoti who calls herself Jasmine leaves India for America in search of her dreams. This migration or "a cultural transplant" leads to a crisis of identity and a final reconciliation to the choice.

In the novel *Jasmine*, the protagonist appears as an innocent village girl, unaware of the traditional ways of the world but is

sufficiently conscious of her own desires and choices. Her life begins in a small village in Hasnapur, Punjab, and ends in Iowa and in this odyssey, she passes through various geographical locations and the flux of cultural identities. In this process of transition, she justifies herself in each and every role and sustains her basic identity of being an Indian woman. But, she goes further to form a new composite identity for herself which embraces the various facets of her personality.

Jasmine in spite of her traditional upbringing nourishes her own dreams of life. She expresses her first independent thinking, "I want to be a doctor and set up my own clinic in a big town" (51). But her high ambitions were treated only as her madness. "The girl is mad. Her mother is mad. The whole country is mad. Kali-yuga has already come." (51).

Jasmine enters new dimensions of relationships and cultural diversities with a specific set of mind inherited from her conventional family. She comes in contact with Prakash, a confident professional who had a dynamic vision of life. She marries him. In the company of Prakash, all the time she was in the grip of 'exile' and 'widowhood'. The cultural constraints that constitute her psyche do not let her dissolve her identity in the unconventional progressive ways of Prakash.

Prakash also insists on calling Jyoti, Jasmine. Prakash plays an important role in Jasmine's life because he is the first person who helped Jasmine become more conscious of the modern world and the opportunities it holds. Prakash is a modern man as it is revealed, "My husband, Prakash Vih, was a modern man, a city man" (76). He is determined to live in a modern way that is the reason why he does "trash some traditions" (76). He expects Jyoti to change her ways, "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...Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttled between identities" (77).

Prakash's ultimate decision to change her name from 'Jyoti' to 'Jasmine' was the first challenge to her self-respect and self-identity. Prakash appreciates her by saying, "You are small and sweet and heady" (77), but remains ignorant of the terrible flow of emotions going on within her inner self. The anguish is well expressed in the confession. "He wanted to break down the Jyoti, I'd been in Hasnapur and make me a kind of city woman. To break off the past, he gave a new name: Jasmine" (77).

As Jyoti's attitude towards life and her personality changes, she becomes less reliant on Prakash and imagines a better life for herself, Prakash, and their future family. As Prakash plans for his trip to the United States, many of Jyoti's insecurities start to appear when she starts to question Prakash's commitment to her. In response to her insecurities, Prakash says, "You're Jasmine now. You can't jump into wells" (92). Prakash believes that the new Jasmine he has helped emerge is capable of living on her own and being independent. After Prakash dies by a radio bomb meant for Jyoti, she emerges as Jasmine. As Jasmine, she decides to go to the United States to fulfill Prakash's mission of studying in a university. Her journey is full of transformations and her search of identity.

Jasmine's passage to America is characterized by a traumatic experience, the first and the worst, in a long series of adaptation, which requires her to improvise morality in order to survive. The transformation of identity from dutiful submissive widow into assertive, criminal and individualistic American woman is

in full swing. To realize her ambitions and to experience a sense of liberation from her old, social, traditional mores Jasmine undergoes deep emotional, mental and physical sufferings. Yet she braves it with determination, with a result that immigration is achieved at a heavy price.

Jasmine sets off on an agonizing trip as an illegal immigrant to Florida, and thus begins her symbolic trip of transformations, displacement, and a search for identity. Jasmine undergoes her next transformation from a dutiful traditional Indian wife to Jane when she meets the intellectual Taylor and then moves on to become Bud's Jane. It seems likely that as Jasmine leaves for California with Taylor and Duff, her identity continues to transform. The author depicts this transformation and transition as a positive and an optimistic journey. Jasmine creates a new world consisting of new ideas and values, constantly unmasking her past to establish a new cultural identity by incorporating new desires, skills, and habits. This transition is defined not only in the changes in her attitude, but more significantly in her relationship with men.

With the help of Taylor, Jasmine got a job for herself at Columbia in Mathematics Department. Jasmine enjoys her new financial independence as well as the affectionate treatment she is shown by her employers, Taylor in particular. Wylie's falling out of love with Taylor and her decision to live with another man shocks Jasmine at first. But soon, a bond of intimacy develops between her and Taylor. Jasmine's calm acceptance of both - the change in her own scale of values and the largesse of Taylor in remaining above racial and cultural barriers - is worth noting:

Taylor didn't want to change me. He didn't want to scour and sanitize the foreignness... I changed because I wanted to. To bunker oneself inside nostalgia to stealth the heart in a bulletproof vest, was to be a coward. On Claremont Avenue, in the Hayeses' big, clean, brightly lit apartment I bloomed from a different alien with forged documents into adventurous Jane. (185)

Another eventful chapter begins in Jasmine's chequered life when she leaves Taylor and Duff fearing their safety because of the hovering presence of death in the form of Sukhawinder, the Khalsa Lion who killed Prakash in India. A chance meeting with another saving angel, mother Ripplemeyer, a job in Iowa's bank and a place in the banker Bud Ripplemeyer's heart and home are more than anything Jasmine has bargained for.

Jasmine's foreignness fascinates the fifty-year-old Bud who looks upon her as an inscrutable mystery and feels rejuvenated by her Eastern vitality and wisdom. Jasmine endeavours to absorb in the American life but she can never detach herself from her cultural roots. Subsequently, Taylor comes close to Jasmine and wants to have sexual relations with her. Jasmine has no guilt in this relationship because she comes to the realization that each male possesses an inherent desire to rule the body of women - may it be out of love, contempt or revenge. The comment of Jasmine reflects her pain, anguish and contempt for the identical male obsession: "I have had a husband for each of the women, I have been. Prakash for Jasmine, Taylor for Jane, Bud for Jane, Half-Face for Kali" (197). Like in Jane's other relationships, Bud also changes Jane's name to Jane,

Bud calls me Jane. Me Bud, you Jane. I didn't get it at first. He kids. Calamity Jane. Jane as in Jane Russell, not Jane as in Plain Jane. But Plain Jane is all I want to

be. Plain Jane is a role, like any other. My genuine foreignness frightens him. I don't hold that against him (26).

Jane settles down to a peaceful life in Bud's house, happy in her new financial security and her stepmother status with regard to Du, a sixteen-year old Vietnam war victim adopted by Bud, after his grown-up sons left the house and he is separated from his wife Karin. Violence mars the even tenor of her life yet again, this time in Bud's becoming cripple waist down by a disgruntled farmer's shooting at him from point blank range. It is not just Bud, but the entire countryside, the very serenity of rural life that is the victim here as it was in Punjab at the hands of terrorist violence.

Assuming a new identity to fit her role as Bud's wife (though she has not actually married him) Jasmine becomes "Jane". For all America gave her, Jasmine paid back with gratitude and love. Her patience mollifies Karin who was till then infuriated by the news of Jasmine's pregnancy by Bud. She serves Bud patiently and fondly after he was crippled. With her kind composure, she makes Karin understand that she is not enemy and it's Bud's happiness that matters of both of them. She finds herself thoroughly welcome in the home and society of mother Ripplemeyer and longs to belong to that tribe which represented the best in America.

The valuable lesson Jasmine has already learned, that in "America nothing lasts- Nothing is forever, nothing is so terrible or wonderful that it won't disintegrate," (181) fortifies her in warding off guilt feelings about usurping Karin's place in Bud's heart. She has learned to adjust to a new set of values but she has definitely not shed all values altogether. Her analysis of her relationship with Bud shows that there is a clear distinction in her mind between living with someone separated from his wife and deliberately breaking up a home.

While Jasmine is triumphant that her transformation has been genetic, Du, her adopted son remains a defiant immigrant who refuses to assimilate. Unlike her, he has tried to develop contact with the other Vietnamese in Baden and maintain his hyphenated identity, Vietnamese-American. In spite of his brilliant performance at school and his genius for adaptation and appropriation of technology, Du can never be a total American as he would always be attached to an experience, and American father like Bud could not fathom. But the Americaness in Jasmine makes her accept Taylor's offer to go to West towards an unknown future, yet another adventure leaving the security of Bud's home. As an Indian girl, she would not have dreamt of deserting Bud, denying him even his child. Having seen death and the worst of life closely many a time, having suffered and survived several times, Jasmine seems to regard her relationship with Bud as just another phase in her journey of self.

An unexpected letter from Taylor informing Jasmine that he and Duff would be calling on her shortly comes as a pleasant surprise. Du's cool announcement of his decision to go to California and stay with his sister and her family makes her worry about its probable impact on Bud. An exile herself, she fully understands Du's need to 'belong' and silently watches him leave and breaks the news to Bud as gently as she can.

Jasmine's walking out of Bud's life is not a wanton act of frivolity. Her two remarks, "The moment I have dreamed a thousand times finally arrives" (237) and "I am not choosing between two men. I am caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness" (240), clarify for the

reader that it was not a rash abandonment of responsibilities. In a way this decision of Jasmine is a resonant response to the courage she admired in Du in trying to take charge of his life, and the cowardice of Darrel in trying to run away from the problems of life by the extreme step of death.

Jasmine voices her desire for self-actualization thus: "I want to do the right thing. I don't want to be a terrible person" (239) and this conviction has nothing to do with guilt associated with 'sin'. Jasmine's lack of guilt proves not her 'callousness' but her conscious striving; to do only to do what she is doing is right. Karin is aware of this, hence her statement earlier in the novel: "This is Puritan country. We are born with guilt or quickly learn it. Guilt twists a person" (288).

Jasmine's sense of 'relief' at leaving Bud rather than guilt underscores that she was happy to be doing what she had been wishing to do from a long time back, a wish strengthened by her sincere concern that the astrologer's prediction should not take a toll of Bud's life. Jasmine's linking her life to that of Taylor is to be seen as a validation of her avowed belief, "Treat every second of your existence as possible assignment from God" (61).

Jane realizes that she can still have dreams and maintain her own identity. She does not have to follow the limits that her relationships seem to put on her. Jane runs away with Taylor because he is an opportunity for a new future, in which she forges her own identity and still remains true to her roots.

Jasmine moves to California with Taylor, uncertain of what the future will bring but nevertheless confident in her decision to leave. This sense of movement further reinforces the notion that her identity is forever evolving. She cannot remain in a stable life because disruption and change are the means of her survival. The surrounding environments influence her formation of her identities and she navigates between temporal and spatial locations, thereby resulting in a multiplicity of consciousness. These create a tension within her and she feels the need to reconcile these conflicting perceptions so that they do not wage a psychological war inside her.

Jasmine's does not become a pathetic story of an immigrant but explores the 'state-of-the-art expatriation' where the woman aggressively waits for the future without regretting the past. The novel seeks to highlight the human needs which are essential for life and which can be realized only by rising above the cultural conditioning. The compelling urge to live, breaks Jasmine emotionally, physically and culturally like an earthen pot. The lesson is that the things we fight to guard-body, feeling and culture-are as fragile as the pitcher. The shifting of her identity from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jane to Jase is also suggestive of the death of one personality and an emergence of a new one but it does not have negative-implications. The protagonist does not see her Indianness as a fragile identity to be preserved against obliteration. Now it is seen as a set of fluid identities to be celebrated. The recurring reference to the broken pitcher indicates the death of Jasmine's different selves.

Jasmine may or may not appear as a 'rabble-maker' by everyone stepping into the orbit of her life, but at every stage in her trouble-torn life, in all her identities as Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase and Jane, she seems to act boldly and unhesitatingly, thrilled at the prospect of "adventure, risk, transformation" (241)

The word 'transformation' together with her words of farewell to mental image of the astrologer which has been haunting her

all these years, Watch me reposition the stars, suggest that Jasmine has indeed achieved self-actualization in America – the only land on earth that gives one ample opportunity on earth to work at making a dream a reality.

Mukherjee has explored her theme with its many nuances. The transformation of Jasmine from a semi-educated Punjabi rustic to an American is not psychologically convincing. Perhaps Bharati Mukherjee's purpose of bringing to the contemporary American fiction the reality of the experiences of the floating elements in American society, the immigrant who are trying to establish themselves, is fulfilled. It is not easy to overcome the "aloofness of expatriation" or disunite oneself from the roots and tradition of the culture that one comes from. No doubt the liberated Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase and Jane, who make a life time for every name, look like a possibility for every enthusiastic immigrant. Thus, caught between the two cultures of the east and west, past and present, old and new, Jasmine constantly "shuttles" in search of a concrete identity. Bharati Mukherjee ends the book on a novel note, and re-emphasizes the complex and alternating nature of identity of a woman in exile.

Thus synchronous with her self-actualization Jasmine becomes truly Americanized, not just in peripheral social or cultural mores but in a primal 'intensity of spirit,' and finds peace neither in India, nor America, but in the 'American dream.'

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