

# LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 11 : 7 July 2011

ISSN 1930-2940

Managing Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.

Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.

Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.

B. A. Sharada, Ph.D.

A. R. Fatihi, Ph.D.

Lakhan Gusain, Ph.D.

Jennifer Marie Bayer, Ph.D.

S. M. Ravichandran, Ph.D.

G. Baskaran, Ph.D.

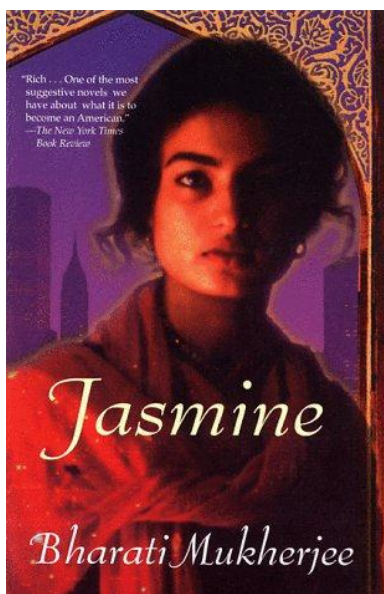
L. Ramamoorthy, Ph.D.

## Perspectives of Transformation in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

V. Vijaya Reka, M.A., M. Phil.

---

Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*



Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 7 June 2011

V. Vijaya Reka, M.A., M. Phil.

Perspectives of Transformation in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

The state of exile, a sense of loss, the pain of separation and disorientation makes Bharati Mukherjee's novel 'Jasmine' a quest for identity in an alien land. Jasmine, the protagonist of the novel, undergoes several transformations during her journey of life in America, from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jane, and often experiences a deep sense of estrangement resulting in a fluid state of identity. This journey becomes a tale of moral courage, a search for self-awareness and self-assertion. Uprooted from her native land India, Jyoti does her best to introduce herself into the new and alien society as an immigrant; the culmination finally indicated in Jasmine's pregnancy with the child of a white man - Bud.

Jasmine changes her self constantly, ferrying between multiple identities in different spaces and at different times. Jasmine shows the most predictable crusade towards Americanization and its obvious uncertainty and without feeling infuriated she survives to make a new start in the host country.

Geographically, the story begins in India and takes off from Europe to America, where it bounces back and forth from Florida through New York to proceed to Iowa, then finally lands in California. The novelist deliberately transports her in time and space again and again so as to bring in a sense of instability into the novel. Born in Hasnapur in India, Jyoti has the distinction of being the most beautiful and clever in the family. She is seen against the backdrop of the rigid and patriarchal Indian society in which her life is controlled and dominated by her father and brothers who record female as follows, "village girls are cattle; whichever way you lead them, that is the way they will go" (Jas- 46)

However, Jyoti seeks a modern and educated husband who keeps no faith in dowries and traditions, and thus finds a US based modern-thinking man, Prakash. Prakash encourages Jyoti to study English, and symbolically gives Jyoti a new name Jasmine, and a new life. "He wanted to break down the Jyoti as 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." (Jas- 77)

Here starts her transformation from a village girl under the shell of her father and brothers to a wife of an American traditional husband who gives her all liberties. Jasmine's happiness is short-lived. She is widowed and returns to India to her family. She has to now choose between the rigid traditions of her family and perform *Sati*, or continue to live the life of Jasmine in America. Jasmine sways between the past and the present attempting to come to terms with the two worlds, one of "nativity" and the other as an "immigrant". Hailing from an oppressive and a rural family in India, Jyoti comes to America in search of a more fruitful life and to realize the dreams of her husband, Prakash. 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 Jasmine 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

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 7 June 2011

V. Vijaya Reka, M.A., M. Phil.

Perspectives of Transformation in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

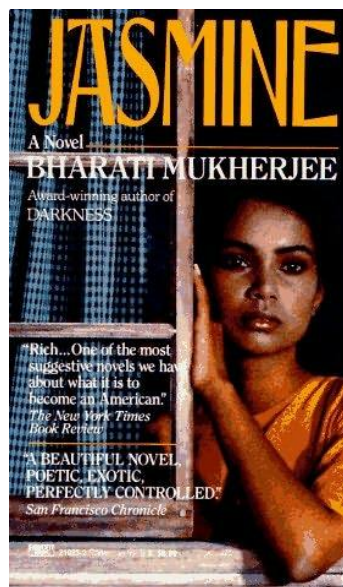
continues to transform. The author depicts this transformation and transition as a positive and an optimistic journey. Jasmine creates a new world consisting of new ideas and values, constantly unmasking her past to establish a new cultural identity by incorporating new desires, skills, and habits. This transition is defined not only in the changes in her attitude, but more significantly in her relationship with men.

### **Jasmine and Nayan Tara**

Chitra Benarjee Divakaruni also deals with this sort of transformation in her *The Mistress of Spices* that portrays the character of a woman who is vibrant, eager for life, hungry with desires but masquerading as an old and bent creature. Like Bharati Mukherjee's Jyoti-Jasmine-Jane in *Jasmine* (1989), the character changes from Nayan Tara to Bhagyavati to Tilottama and finally to Maya and she does so in order to arrive at a final definition of her selfhood.

At every step, Tilo (Tilottama) revolts against her fate and the path drawn for her. Her transformation from Nayan Tara to Bhagyavati has its own pressures and trauma. She is born in an Indian village only to be rejected as a dowry less, undesirable female child, a curse to the family. She describes her birth in the following manner: "The midwife cried out at the veiny cowl over my face, and the fortune teller in the rainy-filled evening shook his head sorrowfully at my father. They named me NayanTara, Star of the Eye, but my parents' faces were heavy with fallen hope at another girl child and this one colored like mud." (*Mistress of Spices*, 122) Not only the renovation from Jyoti – Jasmine- Jane; Nayan Tara- Bhagyavati- Tilottama- Maya is similar but their intension is also to clear the problem of identity crisis that Indians try to cope with in a foreign land.

### **Ability to Adapt**



Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 7 June 2011

V. Vijaya Reka, M.A., M. Phil.

Perspectives of Transformation in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

In New York, Jasmine clearly recognizes her ability to adapt: “I wanted to become a person they thought they saw: humorous, intelligent, refined, and affectionate. Not illegal, not murderer not widowed, raped, destitute, fearful.” (Jas- 171) The abilities to adjust to the requirements of a changing environment and to cut the past loose are Jasmine’s survival skills. They allow her to deal with the ethics and culture of two dissimilar worlds and her occurrence with different identities of Jyoti and Jasmine, where Jasmine feels hanging between the traditional and modern world and controlled and independent love, offered by her Indian husband, Prakash.

Jasmine then meets Lillian Gordon, staying with whom begins her process of assimilation by learning how to become American. Lillian bestows upon her the nickname ‘Jazzy’, a symbol of her entrance into and acceptance of American culture which she welcomes gladly. After that she moves in with a traditional Indian family in Hushing, New York. Jasmine soon finds herself stifled by the inertia of this home for it was completely isolated from everything American. Considering it to be a stasis in her progression towards a new life, she tries to separate herself from all that is Indian and forget her past completely.

### **Yet Another Identity – *Au Pair***

She proceeds with her migratory pattern and moves to New York City, to become the *au pair* for an American family. With Taylor, his wife Wylie and their daughter Duff, she creates yet another identity upon a new perception of herself. But though Jasmine creates a new identity for every new situation, her former identities are never completely erased. They emerge in specific moments in the text and exacerbate the tension, thereby causing Jasmine to create another more dominant identity, different from all those that came before. While living with the Hayes, Jasmine begins to master the English language, empowering herself to further appropriate American culture. Taylor begins to call her ‘Jase’ suggesting that again she does not have an agency in the creation of her new self since Taylor constructs it for her. Also, for the first time in the Hayes household, Jasmine becomes aware of her racial identity because Taylor and his friends understood that she was from South Asia and tried to associate her with that community.

### **Foreignness is Never Lost**

Though Jasmine is attached to Taylor’s family and become his Jase, her foreignness never forgets to peer in her activities. But Taylor doesn’t bother about that and we can know from Jase’s words, “Taylor didn’t want to change me. He didn’t want to scour and sanitize the foreignness. My being different from Wylie or Kate didn’t scare him.” (Jas- 185) Before long Taylor gets romantically involved with Jasmine and embraces her different ethnicity. Jasmine transforms but this time the change is not from a reaction, but rather from her very own yearning for personal change. In becoming Jase, Jasmine gets increasingly comfortable with her sexuality which she always tried to repress earlier, more so, after her traumatic experience. But the relationship between Taylor and Jasmine ends abruptly when the past

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 7 June 2011

V. Vijaya Reka, M.A., M. Phil.

Perspectives of Transformation in Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*

creeps upon her once again manifested in the form of Sukhwinder, the murderer of her husband in the disguise of a Hot dog vendor.

### **Inescapability of Memory**

The inescapability of memory, and the boundless nature of time and space is stressed once again and Jasmine finds her life distorted by the different consciousness through which she now experiences the world. She loses even her sense of self expression. Unable to live with this plethora of conflicting identities she decided to leave New York for the sake of Taylor and Duff and move towards Baden County, Iowa to give her life a new beginning. Taylor, the man of New York commented on Jase's decision, "Iowa? You can't go to Iowa- Iowa's flat" (Jas- 189)

### **Yet Another Name is Given! Jyoti versus Jane**

In Baden she meets Bud Wipplemeyer, an American banker who instantly falls in love with her. They eventually marry and Bud renames Jasmine 'Jane' yet another sign of her evolution. Bud encourages Jasmine to freely change roles from caregiver to temptress whenever she feels the desire to and views her sexuality through the lenses of his own oriental fantasy. This instead of demeaning Jasmine serves to instill her with a sexual confidence and she thrives on it. Her racial identity also morphs in Baden, for here her difference is recognized but not comprehended or openly acknowledged. The community attempts to see her as familiar instead of alien. This new perception of her race is an essential portion of her identity as Jane because now she feels assimilated and in fact becomes the typical American she always wanted to be.

John K Hoppe says:

Jasmine's postcolonial, ethnic characters are post-American, carving out new spaces for themselves from among a constellation of available cultural narratives, never remaining bound by any one, and always fluidly negotiating the boundaries of their past, present, and futures. (Mukherjee, Bharati. Jas, 56)

Jase becomes Jane of Bud Ripplemeyer and they both lived together as husband and wife without an official marriage which is rare in Jyoti's culture but quite common in Jane's culture. Jane and Bud adopted Du, a seventeen year old Vietnamese boy, as an orphan when he was fourteen. In this novel he represents his own condition of dislocation and isolation from his motherland, Vietnam to a new where he comes from an entirely different culture than his sons-of-farmers classmates. Du and his friend Scott enjoy watching Monster Truck Rallies on TV, and Jane remembers that his first question to them was whether or not the family had a television.

### **Escapism from Burden**

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 7 June 2011

V. Vijaya Reka, M.A., M. Phil.

Perspectives of Transformation in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

Escapism from burdens, complications and contradictions of continuity is well depicted by the character of Jane Ripplemeyer who hardly sends out or receives any mail because she wants to disconnect herself from continuity, that is, from her past which implies carrying the burden of history. Jane carries her own inherent, whereas Du, the Vietnamese American is not as she. He has twice born, as Jane says, “my transformation has been genetic; Du’s was hyphenated.”(Jas- 222)

### **Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase and Jane – Caught Between Cultures**

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,

Then there is nothing I can do. Time will tell if I am a tornado, rubble-maker, arising from nowhere and disappearing into a cloud. I am out the door and in the potholed and rutted driveway, scrambling ahead of Taylor, greedy with wants and reckless from hope. (Jas- 241)

Jasmine implies these words and moves to California with Taylor, which symbolically represents the 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, her perception of herself changes, 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. Thereby we see her reinvent her identity completely.

=====

### **References**

Divakaruni, Chitra, *The Mistress of Spices*, Doubleday, 1st Anchor Books, 1997.

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 7 June 2011

V. Vijaya Reka, M.A., M. Phil.

Perspectives of Transformation in Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*

John K Hoppe, *Mukherjee, Bharati. Jasmine*. New York : Grove Weidenfeld, 1989.

Mukherjee, Bharati, *Jasmine*. New York: Grove Press, 1989.

Tandon, Sushma, *Bharati Mukherjee's fiction: a Perspective*, New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2004.

---

V. Vijaya Reka, M.A., M. Phil.  
Department of English  
Mookambigai College of Engineering  
Srinivasa Nagar  
Kalamavur  
Pudukkottai- 622502  
Tamil Nadu  
India  
[rekaramkumar2006@gmail.com](mailto:rekaramkumar2006@gmail.com)

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 7 June 2011

V. Vijaya Reka, M.A., M. Phil.

Perspectives of Transformation in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*