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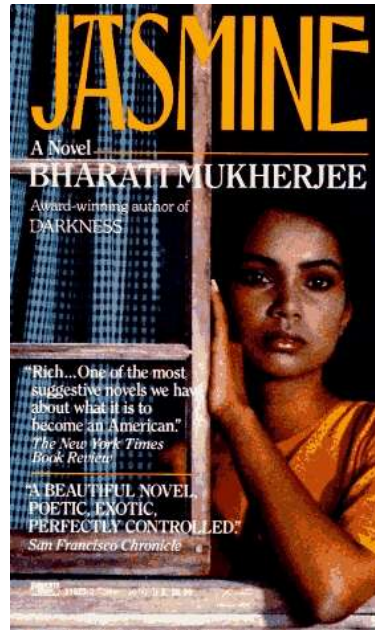
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## Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* - A Study

Ms. A. Umadevi, M.A., M.Phil.



### Some Themes of Diaspora Literature in Indian Writing in English

Diasporic literature has made a significant contribution to Indian Writing in English by its rich exposure to multiculturalism. The spirit of exile and alienation enriches the diasporic writers to seek rehabilitation in their writings and establish a permanent place in the mind of readers. Diasporic literature addresses issues such as identity, culture, hybridity,

nationality, home, homelessness and binary categories like self/other, insider/outsider and margin/center.

The eminent writers of Indian Diaspora are Bharati Mukherjee, Rohinton Mistry, Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Jhumpa Lahiri, Uma Parameswaran and Vikram Seth. They have been discussing several issues concerning their homelands and the land in which they live in their works.

### **Bharati Mukherjee's Works**

As a writer of Diaspora, Mukherjee's novels and short stories express the nomadic impulses of Indians, who in their deliberate search for materially better life migrate to the west and consequently face tensions of adaptations and assimilation. As a novelist, she has clearly stated her aim in her novels as, "My aim is to expose Americans to the energetic voices of new settlers in this country". (qtd. in **Inamdar** 39). Mukherjee is at her best in the depiction of cross-cultural conflicts and shows how her characters take control over their destinies. Many of her stories are "about Psychological transformation, especially among women" (qtd. in **Connell** 1990: 15)

As a writer, Bharati Mukherjee is concerned about depicting her picture of Indian life intelligible and interesting to the American readers through her novels. But she is too good an artist to distort reality just to capture attention. She avoids stereotyped versions and sentimental exaggerations and tries to pack into her novels a rich resonance of meaning by the deft device of combining immigrant, feminist and existentialistic perspectives. She focuses her attention on the growing awareness of the dark spots in the lives of her characters, and their courageous efforts to discover areas of light. This search for light, for happiness and fulfillment is subtly linked in her fiction to her protagonists' struggle for self-actualization.



Bharati Mukherjee

Courtesy: <http://blogs.berkeley.edu/author/bmukherjee/>

### **A Saucy Heroine**

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Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* - A Study

In the novel, *Jasmine*, the protagonist struggles to achieve herself in the society where she belongs. Jasmine, the protagonist is first introduced as a saucy heroine of a short story but later she is made not only a prototypically Indian but is depicted as a woman harbouring a desire for independence and a respect for success that appear incongruous in her Indian setting of poverty, gender-discrimination and rigid social conventions. Jasmine's yearning for independence from her early childhood marks the beginning of her struggle for self-actualization.

### **A Widow's Success – From Jyoti to Jasmine**

The novel *Jasmine* as a whole deals with a young Indian widow's successful attempt to reshape her destiny and her happiness in an alien land. The protagonist Jasmine goes to America and there she meets with many problems and overcomes it. Finally, she settles in America and accepts the American way of life and asserts her identity in a foreign land.

In *Jasmine*, the bold events which have allowed Jasmine's transformation from the ill-fated village girl, Jyoti, to the self-assured emancipated American Woman, Jane are told in a narrative reversion.

Jasmine is not Jasmine yet, she is called Jyoti. Jyoti is presented as an unlucky child, born female and intelligent. At the age of seven, Jyoti is a rebel. When the astrologer under a banyan tree foretells Jyoti a life of "widowhood and exile" (*Jasmine* 3) she cannot accept it. As a fighter, she wants to react to the astrologer's attempt to reduce her to nothingness by falling down and making a star shaped mark on her forehead which she interprets as "my third eye" (*Jasmine* 5). So, she starts the war between her fate and her will by creating her own interspace for individual growth.

Jyoti is also courageous and resourceful; when attacked by a mad dog in the Hasnapur fields, she is able to kill it with a staff she carries. Her action reveals her desire to live and she herself says "I wasn't ready to die" (*Jasmine* 57) shows her longing for life. Her grandmother wants her to marry and settle in life. But against her grandmother's wish, she decides to study and through education she wants to get a better life. So she continues her education, picking up knowledge not only from books but also from hearing men talk about politics, from Newspapers and the radio.

### **Love Marriage and Widowhood**

At the age of fourteen, she falls in love with Prakash, her brother's friend, a twenty-four year old electronic student and marries him. Prakash plays a modern enlightened man in the life of jasmine. He renames her Jasmine to remove from her any trace of traditional dutifulness since as he says to her "only in feudal societies is the woman still a vassal" (*Jasmine* 77). So, he says that she is not Jyoti, the village girl anymore but Jasmine, a modern city woman.

Prakash and Jasmine lead a happy life but their happiness soon comes to an end with the death of Prakash. His untimely death at the hands of terrorists, leaves Jasmine grief stricken and frustrated with ineffectual anger. One half of the astrologer's prediction - widowhood - comes true, leaving Jasmine in a daze. But she rebels against the idea of spending the rest of her life as a destitute widow at Hasnapur. So, she decides to go to America to commit Sati, burning herself along with her husband's suit at the site where he would have gone to University.

### **Smuggled into Florida and Raped**

Fate has a few surprises for Jasmine. In a stunt-film-like manner Jasmine lands in Florida as an illegal alien. In Florida, Half-face, the deformed captain, in whose ship she is smuggled into America, proposes accompanying Jasmine to a motel in order to protect her because she is young, beautiful and Asian and could tempt bad guys. However, Jasmine ends up being the prey of her own assumed saviour. Half-face becomes the villain and rapes her.

### **The Transformation of Identity – From Victim to a Vengeful Goddess**

The transformation of identity starts from this moment. She wants to punish the Half-face. So she slices her own tongue with a blade and with her mouth full of blood, she moves towards her villain. Just one stroke of the blade on his throat and the scene of the murder is perfect:

I wanted that moment when he saw me above him as he had last seen me, naked, but now with my mouth open, pouring blood, my red tongue out (*Jasmine* 118).

Jasmine's full transformation, from the victim into a vengeful goddess, seems to be reinforced by imagining herself as the reincarnation of Kali, the goddess of destruction.

Her Kali-like encounter with Half-face forces her to change her mind and instead of dying she kills him and decides to live and complete Prakash's mission of making good in America. Possessed and transformed by the rage of the Goddess Kali, Jasmine undergoes a quick shift of identity. From dutiful lost widow she is now a free murderess in search of multiple reincarnations.

### **Next Incarnation – From Jasmine to Jazzy**

Jasmine is ready for her next reincarnation as Jazzy and lets herself be refashioned by Lillian Gordon, whose mission in life is to help undocumented aliens survive in America. Lillian also helps her to get back her self-confidence and pays for her trip to New York so that she can live with Professor Vadhera, a gentleman who was instrumental in Prakash's securing admission in an engineering course.

### **Possessor of Forged Green Card**

Jasmine spends five months in Professor Vadhera's house. Dejected by the discovery that the Professor is eking out a living not by teaching but by trading in human hair, she decides to leave that house. So she asks Professor Vadhera to help her to get a "green card, even a forged one" (*Jasmine* 148). As soon as the Professor manages to get her a forged green card, she flees from the Vadhera apartment and takes one more plunge into America. Having determined to live on her own, she leaves the place.

### **Yet Another Identity – Jase: From Caregiver to Beloved**

After a short period of hand-to-mouth existence, Jasmine gets the chance to work as caregiver to Duff, the little daughter of Wylie and Taylor. Jasmine achieves another identity as Jase by Taylor and starts her transformation into a sophisticated American woman. Jasmine is more attached to the name Jase than Jassy, which is given by Wylie. She prefers Jase to Jassy, however, partly because she is attracted to Taylor.

### **Fleeing from the Terrorist**

Jasmine becomes more intimate with Taylor, when Wylie moves out of the family with a wealthy man. The graduation from a caregiver to a beloved of Taylor distinctly shows her uninhibited approach towards life. Her calm and peaceful life with Taylor, comes to a sudden halt when her accidental sighting of the Sikh terrorist who had killed her husband and who has now become a hot dog vendor in New York. The sight of the murderer is a sharp reminder to her that God's plan for her was to be an exile; fate had decreed that she must unhouse herself again and move on. So she flees from that place to Iowa. Her main reason for running away is the fear that her presence in their household may jeopardize the safety of Taylor and Duff. She runs away for life, not escaping from life which is again a positive step.

### **Now Another Identity: Jane**

In Iowa, she achieves a new identity as Jane, a caregiver to Bud Ripplemeyer and 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 a cripple waist downwards by a farmer. So she takes care of him and does everything he wants.

She lives with Bud, the prospect of unwed motherhood does not disturb her in the least. After some days, she receives a letter from Taylor informing her that he and Duff would call on her shortly. It is actually a pleasant surprise to her. She does not like to marry Bud and therefore she decides to leave Bud and live with Taylor.

Jasmine became a vital, life-giving force to Taylor, Bud, Du and Duff - they all love her and

depend on her. She has learnt to live not for her husband or for her children but for herself. She finds a permanent home for herself with Taylor and Duff in California.

At every stage, Jasmine's life ends in terror, violence and fear. But like the proverbial phoenix, Jasmine rises from her ashes, as it were. In an interview, Mukherjee has said,

I believe that our souls can be reborn in another body, so the perspective I have about a single character's life is different from that of an American writer who believes that he has only one life.( qut. in **Carb** 1988-89 651)

Thus, Mukherjee narrates the various lives of Jasmine in **Jasmine**

### **A Rubble-maker**

Jasmine's life shows that America has transformed Jasmine, and she has transformed America too:

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 of the door and in the potholed and rutted driveway, scrambling ahead of Taylor, greedy with wants and reckless from hope (*Jasmine* 241).

These concluding remarks release the tension, which runs like a red thread throughout the novel, between Jasmine's predicated fate and her desire to escape and transform it.

### **Overcoming Astrologer's Prediction**

Jasmine may or may not appear as a rubble - maker to 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" (*Jasmine* 241). The word 'transformation' together with her words of farewell to the mental image of the astrologer and his words which have been haunting her all these years,

Watch me reposition the stars, I whisper to the astrologer who floats cross-legged above my kitchen stove (*Jasmine* 240).

suggests that Jasmine has indeed achieved self-actualization in America.

Thus Mukherjee shows how the American way of life, shapes Jasmine to assert her individuality and identity in an alien land.

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