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## Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*: Cultural Dichotomy and Rootlessness

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### **Abstract:**

*Jasmine* (1989) is one of the most celebrated and acclaimed works of Bharati Mukherjee till today. It speaks for flexibility, fluidity, adaptation and transformation which are main characteristics of American culture. It appears that multiculturalism is the favorite theme of Bharati Mukherjee. She has included the minutest details of the multiculturalism like clashes of cultures, deliberation from one's own culture and acceptance of the culture of foreign lands.

In this way in *Jasmine*, Mukherjee has taken the premise of assimilation of Third World Immigrants into the American Melting Pot. It appears that the journey of uprooted expatriate who has to go through many complexities of Post –colonial era finally reaches to the stage of cultural adaptation and it finds its best expression in *Jasmine*. The protagonist is sandwiched between the ancient culture of her country and the modern outlook of the foreign land. It is difficult to assimilate into a new culture. Mukherjee has also shown the way some immigrants try to change according to the foreign land. She dropped the old traditional role –model of widowhood and prepares herself as an American girl to assimilate with new cultures. She gets rebirth of her life.

**Keywords: Multiculturalism, Assimilate, Transformation, Adaptation, Fluid.**

Bharati Mukherjee is well-known as an American author whose most of works explores the Indian immigrants experience and their struggle in a foreign country. She often writes about her personal experiences. Her own struggle with identity, first from India, then an Indian expatriate in Canada, and ultimately as an immigrant in United States, has led to her current contentment of being an immigrants in a country of immigrants. *Jasmine* (1987) is one of the

most memorable works of Bharati Mukherjee. The theme of *Jasmine* is an Indian immigrant's encounter with new world and her gradual transformation as she internalizes the new culture.

The novel also orchestrates a search for identity; how a woman comes to terms with her own selfless. Bharati Mukherjee has delineated Jyoti from beginning as a rebel against blind beliefs and superstitions. She uses an innovative technique highlighting the changes in her heroine identity Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase and Jane to fill in then different parts of Jasmine's life. Through all the several identities, the protagonist seems to act boldly and unhesitatingly, eager at the prospect of risk and change. The novel ends with synthesis between tradition and modernity and the protagonist's affirmation of a true feminist. *Jasmine* is the story of an immigrant from the Third World to the United States who had been uprooted and re-rooted in an alien soil.

Jyoti is a village girl of Hasanpur in Punjab. The novel opens with the prophecy of an astrologer that after marriage she would be widow and exile. Hearing this prediction the girl protests strongly and says, "you are a crazy man .You don't know what my future holds" (*Jasmine* 3) .The forecast of an astrologer as nothing but a speck in the solar system. There is a permanent scar on the head of Jasmine which called "third eye" by her sister. Born in a feudal village of Punjab, after eighteen years of the partition riots she is the fifth daughter among nine children of her parents. She is undesirable child of her parents. She is poor, dowerless, burden as well as a curse for her family. Her mother reacts in the typical Indian way towards daughters and worries about where to get the dowry from for the fifth daughter.

At seven, Jyoti is classified as a bright student and especially good at languages including English. Having had a good luck to stay in school longer than her sisters, at thirteen her grandmother plans to get her married to a widower, but this is strongly opposed by her mother. Whole family except her mother calls her mad. The wild wish sets off the chorus, "Kal Yuga has already come"(52). Attacked by a bull her father dies, and this cancels the prospects of an arranged marriage. Being a girl of Pragmatic views she refuses to marry a widower, a marriage proposal settled by her grandmother and instead of it she goes for a court marriage of her liking of Prakash Vijn. Like her Prakash too believes in adopting modern ways of life, who wishes her to call him by his first name. (77)

He changes her name from Jyoti to Jasmine and this christening has a deeper meaning for her. She says, "He gave me a new name from Jyoti to Jasmine. He said: "you are small and

sweet and heady, my Jasmine. You'll quicken the whole world with your perfume" (77). Prakash an intelligent and ambitious fellow wants to take admission in American Institute of Technology. Jasmine feels happy and agrees to go there for the sake of their future. But there has written something else in their fortune. On the eve of their departure, Prakash becomes the prey to the Khalsa Lions, leaving alone and heart-broken. But being born fighter and rebel, she does not lose her faith and not going to pass a miserable life like a pathetic widow. Earlier she decides to burn herself as a "Sati" in the campus of that engineering institute where Prakash had to get admitted in. Her decision surprises her family and they wonder "a village girl going alone to America without job, husband or papers!"(97). Jasmine takes the help of his brother, leaves America on forged papers and fake visa. She has not the slightest idea about the future that what it holds in store for her. She muses:

We are the outcastes and deportees, strange Pilgrims visiting outlandish shrines, landing at the end of tarmacs, ferried in old army trucks where we are roughly handled and taken to roped-off corners of waiting rooms Where surly, barely wakened customs guards await their bribe. We are dressed in shreds of national costumes, out of seasons, the witted plumage of intercontinental vagabondage. We ask only one thing: to be allowed to land; to pass through; to continue.(101)

She travels on a shrimper called "The Gulf Shuttle; The Captain of the shrimper, Half-Face, who has lost an eye and ear and most of his cheek in a paddy field in Vietnam" (104), takes her to remote motel in Florida and forcibly dishonors her. She decides" to balance her defilement with (her) death" (117). But soon she realizes: I could not let my personal dishonor disrupt my mission" (118). So, she kills Half-Face and like Goddess Kali, she destroys that devil, who has violated her chastity:

No one to call to: no one to disturb us. Just me and the man who had raped me, the man I had murdered. The room looked like a Slaughter house. Blood has congealed on my hands, My chin, my breasts... I was in a room with a slain man, my body blooded; I was Walking death, Death incarnate. (119)

The way in which Jasmine's first encounter with America takes place, is a sort of "regeneration through violence" (Lal 59). At this crucial juncture of life when she is physically and mentally exhausted, she meets Lillian Gordon, a kin Quacker lady, who gives her refuge, a

new name Jazzy and an American identity. She advises her that “let the past make you wary, by all means. But do not let it deform you” (131). She even provides her help in getting a suitable job through her daughter, who is staying in New York. On reaching New York, Jasmine decides to visit Prof. Devinder Vadehra, her husband’s teacher, who has been instrumental in his decision to make admission in an America Technical Institute. She meets him and lives with them in the Flushing, Queens. But she finds herself imprisoned there in the four walls of the artificially maintained Indianness” (145). Her five months stay there fills her with despair as “Flushing, with all its immigrant services at hand, frightened me.”(145)

One day to her surprise she comes to know that Pof.Vadehra is no more a professor here in America but is a sorter of immigrant life. She tries to visualize it that, “Pof.Vadehra needed to work here, but he did not have to like it. He had sealed his heart when he’d left home. His real life was in an unlivable land across oceans. He was a ghost, hanging on” (153). This reality is further strengthened by a taxi- driver who is a doctor belongs to Kabul, he tells her, “We have to be here living like dogs” (140). After living for five months with Vadehra, she leaves them and is able to find a job of ‘Care Giver’ in an apartment on Claremont Avenues, Manhattan with Taylor and Wylie Hayes and their adopted daughter, Duff. She considers her stays in the states. Taylor, who is a true Professor, impresses her by his nature and conduct and Jasmine,” fell in love with what he represented to me (her) professors who served biscuits to a servant, smiled at her, and admitted her to the broad democracy of his joking.” (167)

She is given a new name ‘Jase’ by Taylor, and is happy and satisfied with her life there. She recalls that “Duff was my (her) child; Taylor and Wylie were my (her) parents, my (her) teachers, my family” (165). Through with a rapid pace, Jasmine seems to adopt American ways of life yet her Indian values are still with her, that is why for her adaption of Duff is a cultural shock. She “could not imagine a non-genetic child. A child that was not my own, or my husband’s, struck me as a monstrous idea. Adoption was as foreign to me as the idea of remarriage” (170). Meanwhile Wylie’s decision of leaving Taylor for Stuart, the economist, again shocks her. She feels:

In America, nothing lasts. I can say that now and it doesn’t shock me but I think it was the hardest lesson of all for me to learn, to adjust, to participate, only to

find the monuments are plastic, agreements are annulled. Nothing is forever, nothing is so terrible or so wonderful, that it won't disintegrate. (181)

She starts developing a soft corner for Taylor, who also shows his inclination for her. So, she wishes that her role as a “day-mummy” should never end. It seems to her that finally she has established a home for herself and the ghost of rootlessness will never haunt her: “I had landed and was getting rooted” (179). But on watching Sukhwinder, the assassin of her husband, Prakash, for Taylor and his daughter's safety she again runs to Iowa where she luckily meets mother Ripplemeyer, who helps her in getting job in her son Bud Ripplemeyer bank. After just six months, Jasmine becomes the live – in – companion of Bud Ripplemeyer. He rechristens her as “Jane” and starts a new life with her after divorcing his wife Karin because “Asia had transformed him, made him reckless and emotional. He wanted to make –up for fifty years of ‘selfishness’, as she calls it” (14). The transformation of Bud Ripplemeyer confirms Bharati Mukherjee's belief that diaspora is a two –way transformation. If the immigrants are under transformation in America, they in turn, too are changing and transforming America.

They adopted a Vietnamese boy Du, who is brought from a refugee camp. But soon Bud falls a victim to one Harlan Kroener, who shoots him and makes him a crippled man. This act of violence also shows that nobody is safe in violence torn America. Jasmine finds Iowa for her liking because of its similarity with Hasanpur, her native village. In Iowa, the peasants are much like the farmers of her own village and like them they lead their life with modesty ‘modest people, never boastful, tactful and courtly in their way’ (111). Bud has never asked her about her past because her “genuine foreignness frightens him” (126). But her exotic adds to her beauty: “But courts me because I am alien. I am darkness, mystery, inscrutability. The east plugs me into instant vitality and wisdom. I rejuvenate him simply being who I am.” (200)

Jasmine compares herself with Du, their adopted Vietnamese son and like him she finds herself adaptor, a survivor. That is why when Du leaves them to join his sister at Los Angeles, she is shattered. She bursts out “How dare you to leave me alone out here. How dare he retreat with my admiration, my pride, my total involvement in everything he did? His education was my education” (223). She knows that “blood is thick” but the very “prospect of losing him (Du) is like a miscarriage” (221). Again her agony is increased with the suicide of her neighbor Darrel, who loves her and wants to escape with exotic queen to some another place. Under such tense

circumstances when Taylor makes a call for, she decides to choose for her a new life and though “Bud’s face, gray, ghostly, boyless floats in narrowing circles” (239), haunts her, she does not want to care for this man “Who is losing his world (239). Taylor and Duff come to take her to California, where the new world full of promise is eagerly waiting for her. In choosing Taylor and deserting Bud, she does not exchange between men but she wants to change her whole world. As she herself confides, “I am not choosing between men. I am caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness.” (240)

Throughout her stay at Iowa, she has been faithful to Bud and served him like a loyal Indian wife. She is even afraid about Bud’s safety as he is willing to marry her and accept himself as the father of her child. The old fear of widowhood scares her and, at last she opts for Taylor “greed with wants and reckless from hope” (24). Her decision reflects herself as an entirely different woman, a woman who is ready to grab the best that future holds in store for her. She is bold enough to challenge the astrologer and her destiny by saying that, “Watch me reposition the satyrs, I whisper to the astrologer who floats cross- legged above my kitchen stove.” (204)

Finally, Jasmine evolves as a good smartian who promptly adapts herself according to the American society yet seems to cling to the Indianness at her heart, Otherwise she should have abandoned Bud at the time of the accident, which resulted in his disability. But like a good nurse and wife, she serves him. She leaves him only when so many events have their cumulative effects on her mind like Bud’s departure, Darrel suicide, Bud’s marriage decision and Taylor’s proposal. That is why Sarah Curtio is one of the views that “by the end of the books she is almost all American, but quintessentially she is still Indian” (436). Like Jasmine, Mukherjee’s works too reflect her deep-rooted faith in Indian Philosophy and Mythology. She has frequently used mythical figures in her works Jasmine. In her childhood while collecting firewood, when Jyoti gets a star shaped wound on her forehead. She treats it as her third eye like the archetypal image of Shiva’s Third Eye. Thus Mukherjee shows that the Third Eye gives her a true, wider and broad perspective of life. In this way she is able to see into invisible world:

She learns to look back at the past not like a coward bunkering herself inside nostalgia, Sheathing her heart in a bullet –proof Vest. For her, even memories are sign of disloyalty. Similarly with her third eye she learns to look into the future



with pain and hope. It is as if like Shiva she has swallowed the cosmos whole.  
(Sengupta 155)

Mukherjee has beautifully used another important aspect of Hindu philosophy that is the perception of changing identities which lies in the fact of Hindu religious belief of reincarnations. It can also be taken as an interesting way of linking ethnicity with the concept celebrating new womanhood, one of the dominant features found in Mukherjee's works. Mukherjee has given Jasmine new dimensions of visualization through immigrant, feminist and existentialistic perspective. But she avoids being stereotyped and instead of writing about dark aspects of life, she enjoys focusing on her character's endeavours for fulfillment and achieving self-actualization. The novel Jasmine is the best illustration of this aspects. T. Padma speaks about this aspects'. Padma speaks about this aspect that Jasmine is not only prototypically Indian but is shown harboring a desire for independence and a respect for success. That appears incongruous in her Indian setting of poverty, gender-discrimination and rigid social conventions. Jasmine's yearning for these from early childhood marks the beginning of her struggle for self – actualization or Concretization of ardently cherished ideals. (162-163)

Jasmine's life is the study of struggle and adaptation that is finally able to overcome all the difficulties falling in her way and thus, is able to create an identity of her own. Jasmine with the realization of self becomes one of the most fascinating heroines of Mukherjee's claims to be occurring in America that is 'fusion' and "the fusion between the East and West pleases her and she rejoices that her journey to America has unfolded her *affirming self*" (Indira171). The fusion is the outcome of the immigrant's efforts for assimilation and to find a place in the mainstream American life.

During this process, transformation of their personality also takes place, which is also a step towards adaptation. And Jasmine very well reflects these traits. She has to struggle for acquiring a new American Identity and has to adopt American values like fluidity, speed and transformation both personal cultural. She comes to know that nothing lasts forever in America, so she decides to seek out a meaningful life in America. Mukherjee does say: "There isn't role model for the Jasmynes' or Dimples." (Connell 23)

Her transformation from Jyoti to Jasmine, to Jase and Jane is Jullundhar to Florida, Manhattan, Iowa. Changes in names and places, is part of a melting process which leads towards



assimilation .Jasmine speaks for this assimilation because the novel deals with Jasmine's act of burning her past, shedding her cultural baggage, change in her life style and acquiring a desirable identity of Jase or Jane. In this way she appears to be moving from Old World values to the New World sensibility and proving this fact that South Asian immigrants are the successful of any immigrant group moving to the USA.

Jasmine and Du belong to the category of those pioneers and survivors who have undergone the worst phase of their lives and have emerged as conquerors –“We've shrunk and we've swollen we've swallowed the Cosmos whole” (Jasmine 240). They “communicate silently in a no-question asked relationship of strong identification :they come from the same .Third World and share a common legacy of suffering and survival”(Knippling 153).These inherent characteristics of the immigrants along with space politics provide a smooth way for their assimilation and mingling in other culture. Jasmine is continuously changing or composing her 'self.' She knows to survive with American dream: “There is no end to ``this process of composing and being composed... We are always “being” (Meese 180). This aspects of Jasmine's personality has been reflected by Bharati Mukherjee through her skilled craftsmanship as a writer and Jasmine in itself presents the excellent craftsmanship of Bharati Mukherjee as a quilt maker\artist, who has superbly woven the threads of different shades and skillfully fused them with the narratives of the novel, that has successfully give a new perspectives to Jasmine.

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