

“How many more shapes are in me, how many more selves...” : An Examination of Identity and Immigrant Sensibility in Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*

Srishti Madaan

M.A. English

University of Delhi

Abstract

In the paper, the politics of identity in Bharati Mukherjee’s 1989 novel *Jasmine* has been taken up for examination. The novel chronicles the life incidents of the protagonist Jasmine who migrates to America after she resolves not to be bound by the conventions of widowhood that her native society tries to impose on her. In each succeeding phase of her life, she is given a new name and is cast in a different mould of identity. The challenge for the character is to alter her self and identity in order to survive in the situations that she finds herself in at a foreign land. The paper tries to chart these shifting identities; the way Jasmine embraces these shifts, smooth or otherwise, and the role that her immigrant sensibility and gender play in the state of identity flux. The paper also tries to critique some motifs of Diaspora literature through the study of *Jasmine*.

The writings of who have been called Indian Diasporic Writers seem to be centered around their experiences of being an expatriate or an immigrant in a foreign land. This experience is further mediated through gender identity, nationality, personal or shared history, and memory to name a few. Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*¹(1989) charts the struggle of the female protagonist Jasmine who uproots herself from life in India and re-roots in the search of a new life in foreign land. *Jasmine* is a novel of emigration and assimilation, both on physical and psychological levels. Mukherjee fictionalizes the process of assimilation by tracing a young Indian woman's experience of trauma and triumph in her attempt to forge a new identity for herself.

Bharati Mukherjee's own life has been one of varied experiences as a foreigner². Her personal experiences appear to mediate clearly in her writings. The literary phase of Mukherjee's life in which *Jasmine* is written is believed to coincide with the phase in her personal life of being an immigrant³. She seems to have gotten over the former expatriate life and entered in a rather harmonious relationship with the country she then inhabits. Stanley M. Stephen opines that there is a decisive shift from the "dark phase of expatriate writing to the bright phase of immigrant writing". Jasmine in the novel, undergoes pain and suffering to settle in the new land but unlike heroines of Mukherjee's earlier novels and short stories, Jasmine possesses immense strength and indomitable spirit to accept the challenges that come her way and make a place for herself in the society she inhabits. Stanley also says that Jasmine, the character, becomes Mukherjee's 'objective correlative' for her assimilationist ideology.

Jasmine's Quest for Identity

The third person narratorial tradition of the earlier two novels of Mukherjee- *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Wife*- is abandoned here. *Jasmine* has a first person narrator. Born in peasant family in Hasanpur village in Punjab to a family of partition migrants, Jyoti's (the original name of the protagonist) birth is never celebrated because the society curses the birth of girl-child. The novel opens with the astrologer's prediction of widowhood and exile for her. This is unacceptable for the seven-year old girl who calls the astrologer "a crazy old man". She says, "You don't know what my future holds"⁴. The tendency of resistance and rebellion surfaces at an early age.

¹ *Jasmine*, the novel is preceded by short-story *Jasmine* which appeared in her collection *The Middleman and Other Stories* published in 1988.

² Mukherjee initially migrated to Canada and stayed there for fourteen years but became a prey to cross-cultural violence, physical and mental. This she says has been the worst period of her life. She then shifted to America where she continues to stay and claims to have assimilated completely in the culture.

³ *Jasmine* was the third novel she wrote and this was when she had settled in America.

⁴ Mukherjee Bharati *Jasmine* Grove Press 1989. (All following quotations from this edition.)

Jasmine falls in love with Prakash whom she marries at the registrar's office in the city. The 'feudal Jyoti' is changed into the 'city woman Jasmine' here. This change serves as the launch pad for the many such mutations to follow. Prakash's insistence on settling into a much better lifestyle in America and his overall unorthodox attitude in life enthralls Jasmine⁵. His untimely death at the hands of fundamentalists leaves her grief-stricken and frustrated. Against the wishes of her Hasanpur family who obviously want her to spend her life as a destitute widow in the village itself, she decides to go to America and perform 'sati' at the University Campus where Prakash had wished to study in the first place.

Mukherjee charts the course of an illegal migration and shows the heroine as possessing exceptional courage to have faced the challenges and resolved them to a certain extent as well. At her very entry into an alien land, Jasmine is raped by the ship captain Half-face which enrages her and she is told to have become the incarnation of Goddess Kali and murders him. Her anguish leads her to burn Prakash's suit and her own white saree in the motel trash before initiating the new life that awaits her.

Mrs. Lillian Gordon enters into Jasmine's life like a *dues ex machina*. Lillian teaches her "*Let the past make you wary, by all means. But do not let it deform you*". It is here in the Gordon household that she is transformed from Jasmine to 'Jazzy'. Lillian helps Jasmine recoup mentally and physically and also helps her meet Professor Vadhera, the one who had helped Prakash secure admission. A startling revelation awaits her when she comes to know that the man in question is no Professor but is an exporter and sorter of human hair⁶. The Vadhera household appears to Jazzy like a 'ghettoized Punjab' and she is irked by the diligently-guarded 'ethnicity' in that household including the austerities of widowhood that she is expected to observe there. These prompt her to leave the house.

With the help of Gordon's daughter, Jasmine enters Taylor's household as the day-mummy of Duff, Taylor and Wylie's adopted daughter. In this household, Jazzy becomes 'Jase'. Wylie seems to fall out of love with Taylor and decides to leave him. Jase here gets accommodated in the private life of Taylor but before she can achieve any stability there, she spots her husband Prakash's murderer Sukhvinder in the Central Park. The very sight of him shatters Jasmine's hopes for settling at Taylor's household. She then flees to Iowa.

⁵ It is Prakash who infuses in her the idea of settling abroad. Prakash himself represents the stereotype of people who always look down upon one's own country and wish to explore prospects in foreign lands.

⁶ This is Jasmine's coming face to face with the life that expatriates actually lead. This may be juxtaposed with Prakash's dream lifestyle in America. This may be seen as Mukherjee's attempt to unveil realities of life for the readers. This, we may say, is a recurrent motif in Diasporic literature.

In Iowa, her meeting with Mother Ripplemeyer gives yet another turn to Jasmine's life. She is offered a job at Bud Ripplemeyer's bank. Consequently, Jasmine and Bud fall in love with each other. Here her name is yet again changed and she becomes Jane Ripplemeyer. She becomes a step-mother to the adopted Vietnamese son Du⁷. Life doesn't stop taking sharp turns for her even then. Bud is shot at and is crippled for life. Here also arrives Taylor's letter announcing that he and Duff would call on her soon. Taylor's assurances make her decide to leave Bud and she leaves with him to the West Coast.

It is for the readers to see that not only are the names changing, it is also a new role and a new set of responsibilities and expectations that each name brings for her. It is however noteworthy that Jasmine displays exceptional abilities to adjust to the requirements of a changing environment and to cut the past loose as and when required becomes her survival skill. In Lata Mishra's words, "they allow her to deal with the transience and culture shock of time-space compression." We see the 'diffident alien Jasmine' bloom into an 'adventurous Jase' who lives only for the present. Amidst other immigrants who hang suspended between the two worlds of past and present, Jasmine is proud on getting rooted in the new world.

Identity for Jasmine remains fluid. She gets a new name for every new household that she becomes a part of. *Jasmine* in this light becomes a novel of displacements and relocations. Violence although continues to mar the scene and follows Jasmine almost everywhere she goes. Peace and stability remain absent from her life. But it is in this state of flux that she finds a place for herself. This fluidity is what lends meaning to her life or to Mukherjee's character as one may deduce. When Taylor takes her along in the last scene, all we can expect is that that doesn't still become the final state for her. She keeps altering. In last lines of the novel, she says, "*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 recklessness from hope*". (Mukherjee, *Jasmine* 241).

Images of Indian-ness and Between-ness in the novel

While talking about Post-Modern Indian Women Novelists who write in English, K.T. Sunita⁸ points out:

⁷ Du throughout remains an expatriate and doesn't readily accept Americanization. In this sense, Du serves as a foil to the central character.

⁸ Sunita K.T. Cross Cultural Dilemmas of Indian Women in Bharati Mukherjee's Fiction

“Indian expatriate writers do not write from the position of a distant foreign community. Such as the exiled Black or West Indian Novelists, but their writing reflects the perspective of someone caught between two cultures.”

This may be applied to our reading of Bharati Mukherjee’s works in general or the novel *Jasmine* in particular. Like in any other Diaspora writer, Indian cultural matrix finds significance in Mukherjee’s works. For instance, in the second chapter of the novel itself, Jasmine at once compares Iowa to Punjab and finds them both dull and flat. Then we are told that people in Darrel’s neighborhood come to meet Jasmine and want to eat Indian dishes cooked by her. She on her own may merely present some concoctions of them. Also, Oriental herbs are specially arranged for her. This is to say that she cannot divorce herself from the past all at once. The transition does take place but certainly not all at once.

Such references may be found in almost all Diasporic works. Meenakshi Mukherjee in her essay *The Anxiety of Indianness* talks about the anxiety that prevails in the works of Indian writers in English and especially those who live abroad and write for a wider audience regarding the representation of the India in their works. She talks about the increasing significance being attached to ‘cultural hybridity’ in the West which in her words can offer certain advantages “in negotiating the collisions of language, race and art in the world of disparate people comprising a single, if not a unified world”.

Bharati Mukherjee’s works reflect her pride in the Indian culture but at the same time, these involve a celebration of embracing America. She said in an interview in the *Massachusetts Review*:

“The immigrants in my stories go through extreme transformation in America and at the same time they alter the country’s appearance and psychological make-up.”

This gives us an insight into her understanding of the issue of migration where not only does the alien land alter the individual or the immigrant but also is the former altered to some extent by the latter. Firstly, on being confronted by stereotypical beliefs and viewpoints of foreigners about their home country, the characters go through phases of re-assessing what their homeland means for themselves. The hitherto unquestioned associations comes under the purview of doubt. More than two things then happen at the same time. Not only are the characters discovering people’s assumptions and their own about the native country but at the same time come at terms with their own “psychological make-up” (as Mukherjee herself words it) which they had largely been unaware of perhaps due to the contexts they had till then dwelt in. Secondly, we cannot rule out the impact that coming into touch with a foreigner in a native land for instance, might have on the natives. In the novel in context, we see that it is not only

Jasmine who is undergoing alteration, but she also impacts and affects the lives of people she comes in contact with be it Taylor or Bud.

M. F. Patel and Dinesh B. Chanudhary in their essay *Bharti Mukherjee: A Post-Modern Indian Women Novelist* suggest that “Mukherjee has deliberately avoided the immigrant writer’s temptation to fall in the trap of glorifying his native country and to belittle and degrade the adopted country”. They also opine that she “focuses upon sensitive protagonists” who lack stability and face multicultural society. These multicultural ethos with which they are confronted lead to the struggle for a new life but not a complete break with the past.

The last statement gains significance because as we may see for ourselves, never in Jasmine’s life is she reluctant to break away from the past whenever situations demand it from her. It is in fact her eagerness to kill her pasts that permits her to dynamically proceed into alien but reassuring futures. She feels constant change in her life, “*How many more shapes are in me, how many more selves, how many more husbands*” (Mukherjee *Jasmine* 215). On the other hand, she feels herself being tied through a rather strong bond to the land she now inhabits, “*Taylor, Wylie, and Duff were family. America may be fluid and built on flimsy, invisible lines of weak gravity, but I was a dense object, I had landed and was getting rooted. I had controlled my spending and now sat on an account that was rapidly growing*” (Mukherjee *Jasmine* 179).

Lata Mishra in her essay echoes what Bharati Mukherjee herself says (which has been quoted above). Mishra says that in her self-structuring, Jasmine doesn’t destroy or dispose of the past, but puts it to a process of excision: a simultaneous negation and preservation of the past.

Memory in the novel is put to work quite deftly by the novelist. The task is no more to lament what is gone but it is rather “calculated and manipulative memory that helps the subject in its crusade for identity formation as well as transformation”.

Indianness in Short Stories of Mukherjee

In the short story *Hindus*⁹, Leela Lahiri, the female protagonist of the story is proud of her Bengali Brahmin Past. She settles in the US and Americanizes herself but the Indian traits in her personality persist. She doesn’t deny her Hindu culture despite inhabiting a foreign land and culture. Caste superiority doesn’t leave Lella where she objects being called the ‘niece’ of Maharajah Patwant Singh.

⁹ *Hindus* and *Visitors* appeared in a short stories collection *Darkness* published in 1985.

Like Jasmine however, Leela doesn't see her Indianness as an impediment in her settling in a new culture. Patwant Singh in the story speaks ill about India but Leela's convictions are strong enough and wouldn't be shaken by such incidents.

Visitors is another story by Mukherjee with a female immigrant protagonist who goes to America but her adherence to the behavioral patterns of her native culture are more than reflected in her persona. She at times tries to take advantage of the licentiousness that the American society seems to offer to her but is held back by her ethics. This protagonist appears to be unlike Jasmine who goes with the flow and moulds herself according to the circumstances she is faced with.

Concluding Remarks

Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* charts the journey of the female protagonist who is rebellious and strong-willed from childhood itself and at times feels crippled by the cultural ethos that she constitutes a part of. Through a series of fortunate and unfortunate incidents, she comes into contact with several people with a variety of humors and tendencies. The novel becomes a chronicle of her encounters through usage of the motifs of journey, memory and most importantly the process of naming. Jasmine the protagonist goes through a multi-step process of transformation.

Mukherjee attracts our attention to the tendency of acculturation that Jasmine exhibits wherein she is ready to take on shades and shapes that would aid her survival. Unlike the expatriates who form the protagonists of most of her earlier works, Jasmine doesn't pine for her mother country. She features as an immigrant who is ready to assimilate in the culture that she becomes a part of. The shift from "expatriate" to "immigrant" is noteworthy.

In the same vein, we may see that the idea of India remains important for Mukherjee and her protagonist but doesn't hinder her assimilation in the other culture. Meenakshi Mukherjee thus rightly says this in her essay *The Anxiety of Indianness* about Bharti Mukherjee:

"Indianness remains important for her, but only as a metaphor. India less as a place than a topos, a set of imaginative references."

Bibliography

- 1) Dr. Rooble Verma and Prof. Manoj Verma *Indianness in the Short Stories of Bharati Mukherjee, On the Alien Shore: A Study of Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee* Ed. By Jaydeep Sarangi, Gnosis, Delhi (2010)
- 2) Mishra Lata, *Representing Immigration through the Logic of Transformation: Bharati Mukherjee's Jasmine, On the Alien Shore: A Study of Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee* Ed. By Jaydeep Sarangi, Gnosis, Delhi (2010)
- 3) Mukherjee Bharati *Darkness*, Fawcett Crest (1985)
- 4) Mukherjee Bharati, *Jasmine*, Grove Press, New York (1989)
- 5) Mukherjee Bharati *The Middleman and Other Stories* Grove Press, New York (1988)
- 6) Mukherjee Meenakshi *The Anxiety of Indianness, The Perishable Empire: Essays on Indian Writing in English*, OUP, New Delhi, 2000
- 7) Patel M.F. and Chaudhary Dinesh B. *Bharati Mukherjee: A Post-Modern Indian Woman Novelist*
- 8) Stanley M. Stephen *Jasmine: The Assimilated Immigrant, Bharati Mukherjee: A Study in Immigrant Sensibility*
- 9) Sunita K.T. *Cross Cultural Dilemmas of Indian Women in Bharati Mukherjee's Fiction, The Literature of Indian Diaspora*, Ed. A.L Mcleod, Sterling, New Delhi (2000)