



RESEARCH ARTICLE



EXISTENTIAL EXPERIENCE IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S NOVEL *JASMINE*: A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT



Bharati Mukherjee was a Calcutta born an Indian American Canadian writer and professor emeriti at the University of California, Berkely. She is one of the prominent and leading Indian women writers in English. Like Kamala Markandaya, Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai, she is well recognised as a diasporic novelist in the literary arena. She is a representative novelist of Asian immigrants. Her experience as an expatriate in America and Canada forms the main source of her creative writing and literary talents. Her oeuvre comprises novels, short stories, nonfiction prose, socio-political commentaries, journal articles and interviews. The present novel's title, the character, Jasmine, continually sheds lives to move into other roles. She gets uprooted and re-routed thrice in a new world and establishes a new identity. Jasmine dislocates from Indian traditional conventional life and relocates with modern liberal American life. She is an innocent, diffident woman who has become a fighter, adapter and adventurous in America. Through her novel, Bharati Mukherjee presents Jasmine as a Phoenix who rises from her ashes again and again in the form of different names and characters. She clearly exhibits the life of an Immigrant Indian as well as woman and the obstacles. She needs to break for the transformation of her life in an alien land. The major theme is about Jasmine's love story and the minor one is about her struggle in life. This paper analyses the existential experience of Jasmine in the foreign culture.

Keywords: *Displacement, Immigrant, Existential Experience, Transformation, Identity.*



Jasmine is a novel by Bharati Mukherjee set in the 1980s. This is about a young Indian woman in the United States who tries to adapt to the American way of life. In order to be able to survive, she changes her identities several times. Mukherjee's own experiences of dislocation and displacement in her life helps her in recording the immigrant experience of the protagonist in this novel.

Traditionally, the root of one's identity is derived from one's past education and socio-cultural environment in which one matures and born and brought up. This clearly reflects where we have come from and who are our ancestors and the foundation upon which we are nurtured. But now the question arises what does one do when society and the culture of one's grandparents and great grandparents disappear under the pressure of a disparaging and disrespectful colonizing force? What does one learn when the available education system is dominated by a foreign culture? How does one conceptualize one's identity? How do politics, history and the influences of foreign culture define that identity? There has been a distinct change in the psychological architecture of traditional man and modern man. It is a transition from a familiar frame of reference to relationship and it needs a reorientation of the entire social being. The reason attributed to such dramatic withdrawals and sensational callings are manifold such as the freedom from political repression, angst, loneliness, existential rootlessness, dissatisfaction and search for identity.

The present era is the age of rapid technological advancements and has made travelling easier and distances shorter. In this process, 'diaspora' has lost its original connotation. It has also emerged in

another form. At first, it was concerned with migrant people emotionally attached to their homelands. Their sense of yearning for the homeland, a curious attachment to its traditions, religions, and languages give birth to diasporic literature which is primarily concerned with the individual's or community's attachment to the homeland. In this context, it is pertinent to note that Salman Rushdie's incisive remarks, the migrant arrives "unshaken from more than land"; he runs from pillar to post crossing the boundaries of time, memory and history and fostering dreams of returning to homeland. Although it is an axiomatic truth that his dreams are sometimes futile and it wouldn't be possible to return to the homeland. The longing for the homeland is countered by the desire to belong to the new home, so the migrant remains a creature of the edge, "the peripheral man".

The world has changed rapidly in the past decades. People have been brought closer by the technological advancements. As the world economies are rapidly growing an understanding of cultural diversity is almost inevitable. At present, cross-cultural communication is becoming a global issue. Thus, individual ability to adjust with the new culture is also being paid a great attention. In fact, a whole new literature, called the immigrant literature has emerged to record their experience in the foreign land.

Bharati Mukherjee is a diasporic writer, who chronicles immigrant's life. Though she was born in a prominent Bengali family, she went to study in Switzerland and England. After this, she returned to India, only to fly to America to study creative writing. However, Mukherjee did not return, instead she



married a Canadian writer, Clarke Blaise. Such travels gave her the firsthand experience of immigrant's life. This has led her to chronicle the experiences of all the immigrants in her novels.

Bharati Mukherjee is one of the major novelists of Indian diaspora who have achieved enviable positions within a comparatively short creative span. As an expatriate in The United States, she has captured evocatively the predicament of Indian immigrants. She is a notable novelist of these novels: *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971), *Wife* (1975), *Jasmine* (1989), *The Holder of the World* (1993), *Leave it to Me* (1997), *Desirable Daughters* (2002), *The Tree Bride* (2004), and *Miss New India* (2011).

Bharati Mukherjee won the National Book Critics Circle Award for her collection of short stories, *The Middlemen and Other Stories* in 1988. She is the first naturalised American citizen to do so. The stories are all about the immigrants' experience. The stories are glimpses of the lives of illegal immigrants, students, motel clerks and maids, a strange mixture of Orient and Occident. *Jasmine*, in fact, was a short story in this collection, but Mukherjee liked it very much that she wanted to write about it more.

Jasmine, a novel, is a story of a woman from Punjab who takes her life into her own hands. She makes herself an American, very much like Bharati Mukherjee herself. "I think of Jasmine and many of my characters, as being people who are pulling themselves out of the very traditional world in which their fate is predetermined, their destiny resigned to the stars. But Jasmine says: I'm going to reposition the stars."

The book begins with the twenty-four-year-old narrator, Jane Ripplemeyer (Jasmine), living as the common-law wife of Bud Ripplemeyer, a fifty-four-year-old banker in Baden, Elsa County, Iowa. Through flashbacks, she recalled her story from childhood in Hasnapur, a village in Jullundhar District, Punjab, India, where she was born as Jyoti, and the unwanted fifth daughter in a poor, displaced Hindu family. Jasmine was a seven-year-old girl. An astrologist informed her that she will be widowed and exiled one day. The astrologer told the girl that one day she could not challenge the destiny. As Jasmine ran away from the astrologer, she fell and a twig cut her forehead. This made it appear as if she had what the Oracle called a third eye, a way of seeing things that others could not.

In the story, she marries Prakash Vijh at the age of fourteen, an engineering student and a modern city man who did not believe in the subservient role of the Indian wife. Prakash renamed her "Jasmine" and gradually moulds her to become a new woman. Jasmine and Prakash lived in a small apartment in the city of Hasnapur, India. At home, Prakash studied for his new career in electronics. He and Jasmine had dreams for their life as co-owners of an electronics store one day. Prakash revealed that he had been accepted in a trade school in Tampa, Florida, and he showed Jasmine the brochures of the Indian students standing in front of palm trees. Jasmine was not old enough to get a visa yet, so Prakash planned to work for a few years to save some money. Unfortunately, before both of them went to America together, her husband died of the bomb explosion. Rising up from the death of her husband, Jasmine decided aboard to America by herself, pursuing her husband dream.



In the last part of the story, Jasmine had to choose between two men. One is the man whom she decided to spend the rest of her life with, and the other one is the one she truly loved. Finally, she decided to be with the one she loved (Bud Ripplemeyer) and moved to California. She then changed her name as Jane Ripplemeyer and lived happily with her new husband, Bud Ripplemeyer.

Bharati Mukherjee's two novels: *Jasmine* and *Wife* deal with gender portrayals in diasporic situation. Jasmine a young Punjabi girl migrates illegally to America in order to fulfil her deceased husband's dreams. Being a victim of gender and race she transforms herself totally and changes her identity from a docile Indian girl Jasmine into Jane Ripple Mayer, an adventurer in the American world. Her portrayal is one of self assertion and transformation in an alien world. Dimple is another transformed woman who changes her identity from the dutiful Indian housewife to a killer of her husband - a negative transformation. As her motherland does not promise these things, she hopes that migration to America, the land of opportunities will bring her prosperity and happiness but her expectations fail, because American life demands hard work and patience which Dimple does not find in her nature. Besides, racist views towards the third world aggravate her pitiable condition when she tries to ape the American culture.

Looking at the past ('origins') and at the future involves a process that Bharati Mukherjee in *Jasmine* described as 'adventure, risk, transformation' ('A Four Hundred-Year-Old Woman', 1991:240). Looking backward at 'home', such writers also look forward to 'transformation' of identity,

which accompanies a change of place. You might lose a home but never gain one. Or you might set up a new home in a space which will continue to treat you as a foreigner. In Atwood's *First Neighbours*, the early migrant, Susanna Moodie, says: "The people I live among, unforgivingly previous to me, grudging, the way I breathe their prosperity, the air."

Bharati Mukherjee described her stories as reflecting the 'hurly-burly of the unsettled magma between two worlds'. The violent imagery in both the above examples centres round re-territorialisation. Suddenly cultural absolutes-such as language or the mother-tongue are no more absolutes. There is one way of negotiating their histories, traditions, and customs (such as festivals and culinary practices). M. G. Vassanji argues, for instance: "This reclamation of the past is the first serious act of writing. Having reclaimed it, having himself a history, he liberates himself to write about the present" (63). Occasionally, the history that is retrieved reveals aspects of their life, ancestry and culture that had been blotted out of main stream histories.

Prakash Vijh is a good husband for Jasmine. He does not consider Jasmine the same as other Indian girls. He wants Jasmine to develop herself and be a smart woman. Prakash Vijh is an obsessive guy. He has a dream to move and have a good life in America. Prakash Vijh's obsession to live in America is shown in the quotation below:

Jasmine, what do you think of America? I didn't know what to think of America. I'd read only Shane book and seen only one movie. It was too big country, too complicated a question. I said, "If you're there, I'll



manage, when you're at work in America, I'll stay inside. Listen to me Jasmine. I want for us to go away and have a real life. I've had it up to here with backward. Corrupt, mediocre fools. (Mukherjee, 1989:73)

Jasmine is an individual who makes many mistakes, but she also has the courage to take risks in her life. However, Jasmine, making herself an American also brings in cultural shock. In *Jasmine* the immigrants are 'wily participants' in the dominant culture and understand that code is crucial for appreciating the novel. Jasmine is fluid to the American culture. This fluidity is exemplified in the main characters' 'metaphors' from Jyotihi, a Punjabi village girl, to Jasmine, a loving and devoted Hindu wife, to Kali, incarnation of a destroying goddess, to Jazzy, a remade, a loving and devoted Hindu wife, to Kali, incarnation of a destroying goddess, to Jazzy, a remade non-immigrant, to Jase, a nanry in the home of a New York college professor, and to Jane, live-in partner of a bank official in Iowa.

Each of this character-transformation is marked by changes in behaviour and personality, such as her successive 'rebirths' seems analogy to Hindu transmigration of the soul. While examining the codes associated with each of the six permutations, we discover that while some codes disappear, certain qualities do in fact 'transmigrate' from one young woman to the next. Jyothi, born in Punjab, is a survivor. The quality remains constant. She escapes infanticide and kills a rabid dog in self-defence. Intelligent, beautiful self-willed she finds her way to America after being widowed. Prakash her husband died in a bomb blast.

There are three approaches to reduce psychological stress: self confidence and optimism, accepting new culture and seeking social support. People with high self-efficacy usually believe that they have abilities to perform tasks well. They work harder and less anxiety when getting into trouble, because they are confident that they will succeed. This is also true in Jasmine, only because of her positive attitude she was able to survive in US. Another way to reduce psychological stress is to accept new culture. Therefore, she is not very much affected by cultural shock. She also feels that it is her destiny to be an American.

I knew from the moment I got here and I wanted to stay ... mine is a clear eyed but definite love of America. I am aware of the brutalities, the violence here, but in the long run my characters are survivors. Like Jasmine, I feel there are people born top the American. By American I mean an intensity of spirit and a quality of desire. I feel American in a fundamental way, whether Americans see me that way or not. (Jasmine 102)

Throughout the novel, the protagonist Jasmine seems to dislocate and again relocates during her journey. Dislocation and relocation are related to transformation. All happens in Jasmine's life. When she dislocates or uproots, she tries to relocate or re-roots with a new identity, and for that she changes herself with changing situation. Her journey developed in the different stages like-Jyoti, Jasmine, Kali, Jase and Jane. Each stage provides new



experiences to her. She is transformed in various images or stages. Her transformation is full of risk, violence, fear and terror. Each stage of her life ends in fear and terror. Jasmine undergoes several transformations during her journey of life in America, from Jyoti to Jasmine, Jasmine to Jase, Jase 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 culture as an immigrant. Throughout her life, Jasmine has created many selves, and she is aware of the fact that she has now the power to continue and create more new identity. It also indicates the idea of the humanitarian approach. Her journey from Hasnapur to the USA is not geographical only but it is from Indian feudalism to modern liberalism. Means, Jasmine dislocates from Indian traditional conventional life and relocates with modern liberal American life. Jasmine, and innocent, diffident woman becomes fighter, adapter and adventurous in America. In fact, this indicates the existential experience of Jasmine in the occidental world.

Thus, Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* replicates with spontaneity of diasporic elements that focuses on identity and transformation throughout the novel. The quest for the identities from time to time denote the struggle of Jasmine in representing alienation which pre-occupies the hearts of people culturally as well as geographically and cut off from their homeland. This novel gives a tremendous path of success for the woman character Jasmine.

CONCLUSION

At first glance, the list of Mukherjee's works looks like the haphazard offerings of an energetic and prolific writer. But, on closer scrutiny, it becomes apparent that all of Mukherjee's creativity is focussed with razor-sharp precision on a diasporic imagination and the politico-cultural implications of this very imagination. The trope of diaspora of dislocation transcends the rhetorical dimension of the text and becomes the material core of Mukherjee's narrativity. From the point of initial, critical evaluation, Mukherjee's works have been recognised as recounting the nuances of her diasporic experiences. There is a marked similarity between the ways in which Mukherjee's characters balance interiority/exteriority, self/society, and most importantly, anarchy/culture. Her narratives function as ironic commentaries of contemporary culture and society. Critics not focussing on literary technique per se question Mukherjee's complete rejection of Canada for its "overt" racist politics and think her exuberance in embracing the American dream rather native. It is at this point they argue that her irony seems artificial. But, with her experiences in the two countries, she admits that she finds it easier to function in America and manifests this sentiment with a certain understated gentleness while situating her characters in the United States.

The moral message conveyed in *Jasmine* is that someone should never give up on life. This novel tells the story of Jasmine with all the twists and turns of her life. Main characters Jyoti/Jasmine/Jane/Jase – the protagonist of the novel. She is called different names throughout her journey from India to Iowa, each name signifying pivotal moments in her life.



Thus, in the end, her powerful feminist convictions win and the synthesis between the traditional India and contemporary America, very perfectly brings out the feminism. The novel supports Bharati Mukherjee's assertion. In totality the novel projects the strength of a woman to fight and adapt to a brave New World and not the damaging effects of immigration. The tale from Jyoti to Jasmine, Kali to Jazzy-Jase and Jane is a long and arduous, eventful and uneven odyssey. Thus, through the analysis of Bharti Mukherjee's present novel in particular and the novels of feminist writers, it is observed that the women seek to be emancipated even though poor and independent though bound by age customs and traditions. This is truly an evocative and significant novel.

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