
Survival, Self-Identity and Self Empowerment in Bharati Mukherjee's Jasmine

¹I. Mathavi, ²Dr. M. Muruganantham

¹M. A, M.Phil, M.Ed., Assistant Professor in English, A. K. D. Dharmaraja Women's College and Part Time Research Scholar, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai.

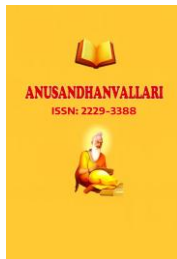
²Associate Professor of English, Rajapalayam Rajus' College, Rajapalayam.

Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee is one of the most prominent South Asian women writers. Her works focus on the status of immigrant women and their sense of alienation in the United States. According to her, the immigrant experience is qualitatively different for women and men. Bharati Mukherjee discusses immigrant experience, social oppression, East-West encounter, culture and human psyche in her novels. *Jasmine* deals with the experience of Jyoti Vih, a girl from rural India. She is a young widow who immigrates illegally to the United States to fulfill her late husband's immigrant dream in search of new life in America. She encounters many people and many incidents. At last she absorbs the alien culture and succeeds in rooting herself in the culture optimistically. *Jasmine* reveals more positive approach to the problems of immigration. She successfully comes out of the problems in the alien land and merges with the new culture. In this novel, *Jasmine* takes new names and identity as she travels. Born as Jyoti in India, her husband names her *Jasmine*. She becomes *Jazzy* or *Jase*, while working as a care giver in New York and she was called *Jane* while living with Budin Iowa in the Mid-West and finally she becomes *Jasmine*.

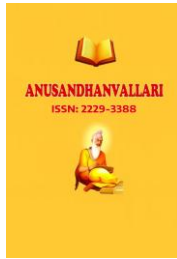
Keywords: Immigrant experience, Social oppression, East-West encounter, Human psyche, Cultural clash.

Bharati Mukherjee is one of the well known Indian women writers living in America. Born in 1940, in a Bengali Brahmin family of Calcutta she married a fellow Canadian Clark Blaise in 1963. She migrated to the USA in 1980 with her family and became a USA citizen. Her academic and professional career won her many laurels. Her creative oeuvre comprises eight novels, *Tiger's The Daughter* (1972), *Wife* (1975), *Jasmine* (1989), *The Holder of the World* (1993), *Leave It to Me* (1997), *Desirable Daughters* (2002), *The Tree Bride* (2004) *Miss New India* (2011) and two collections of short stories *Darkness* (1985) and *Stories* (1989). Her works are abound with the diasporic consciousness of isolation, mental trauma, dispersion, quest for identity, unresolved dilemmas, unsettled conflicts and unanswered questions. Her novels pinpoint the cultural clashes encountered by her female protagonists. Her writings have an autobiographical touch. She paints her difficulties that she has experienced in adapting the alien culture, customs and traditions in Canada and America through her women characters. Mukherjee introduced a confronting perspective to the Indian Immigrants predicament and empowering the immigrants to emerge out of the cocoons of defense in to the openness of assertion through her novels. Jennifer Drake rightly points out that, "Bharati Mukherjee's immigrant characters are settlers, Americans – not sojourners, tourists, guest workers or foreigners." (61) Bharati Mukherjee's women characters are immigrants who endure cultural shock but they are capable women and they are eager to establish their identity through their heroic journeys. They experience a great deal of agony while accepting psychological transformations, but many of their distress appears from their rebellion to accept the hybrid identities. This paper focuses on how Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* attempts to tackle the dilemma of cultural loss, and aspires to assume a new identity in the United States.



The story of the novel *Jasmine* begins with the village astrologer predicting Jasmine's widowhood and exile. The astrologer also affirms that she will take up the roles such as a survivor, fighter and adapter. The life journey of Jasmine moves through several modifications – Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase and Jane through various geographical locations like Punjab, Florida, New York, Iowa and at last at California. Jasmine rocks between the past and present and also between the two cultures. She steadily strives in search of concrete identity. She was born as Jyoti in the village of Hasnapur in Jullandhar district of Punjab. She was an unwanted child to the family as she was the fifth daughter and the seventh of nine children. Jasmine told, "I survived the sniping. My grandmother may have named Jyoti, light but in surviving I was already Jane, a fighter and adapter." (J 40) The memories of her childhood acted as a device in her to rise against fate and her search for self-identity. She confronts numerous threats and blockades in her quest for identity. The society in which she born shaped her to veil her true identity most of the time and live according to the standards imposed by others. She marries Prakash Vijh, a very young and ambitious engineer. He likes to form her a new kind of woman. She told: "He wanted to break down the Jyoti 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." (J 77).

The new hope and the new identity that she has got from her young husband encourages her to fight against the prediction of the village astrologer which follows her from her childhood. She reports: "If we could just get away from India, then all fates would be cancelled. We'd start with new fates, new stars. We could say or be anything we wanted. We'd be on the other side of the earth, out of God's sight." (J 85) She decides to support her husband's ambition to pursue his studies in America and she looks forward going to America, a land of opportunities. Drake reports, "Mukherjee's settler characters leave behind the 'anachronistic', 'backward' and 'stagnant' past to take on the challenges and opportunities that America, the new 'home', offers them." (61) But as an ill-luck to their dream Prakash is killed by Khalsa Lions on the eve of their departure. The sudden death of her husband makes her disappointed. She emerges as a new woman and resolves to reach America and to complete her husband's unfulfilled mission. John K.Hoppe observes: "It is the willingness of Jasmine and others of Mukherjee's ethnic characters to murder their past selves that enable them to actively advance into unknown but promising futures." (138) Jasmine reaches America with fake certificates. She is raped by Half-face, the captain of the ship in which she travelled to America. Being raped, she tries to kill herself. But on remembering her mission to fulfill the dreams of her husband, she takes up the avenging image of Goddess Kali, to kill the devil, Half-face. Thus she begins her journey to America. Later she meets Lillian Gordon, a merciful and motherly lady who helps illegal immigrants. Mrs. Gordon relieves Jasmine from her miseries of the past and strengthens her will to survive. She helps Jasmine to meet Devinder Vadhera who helped Prakash to get his admission in America. Jasmine's freedom loving spirit makes it difficult for her to stay with Vadhera for a long time. Vadheras are extremely conscious of their Indianness. They often try to protect and preserve their culture in the promising land. She asserts her intention to be Americanized as fast as she can. Aneja remarks, "Escaping an oppressive environment in rural India, the immigrant arrives in the land of opportunity, hoping to make a better life. Finding herself at the margins of American society, due to her immigrant status, Mukherjee's Jasmine does her best to insert herself into the flesh and blood of America, to the point where her body is literally impregnated by that of the white man." (73) Jasmine becomes a caretaker of Duff, the adopted daughter of Taylor and Wylie Hayes. There her name is changed from Jasmine to Jase. The new economic independence and the affection shown by her new masters encourage her to achieve her moral responsibility. Wylie's decision to desert Taylor shocks Jasmine. But soon a bond of love and intimacy develops between Jasmine and Taylor. This episode takes a halt when Sukhawinder, the Khalsa terrorist who murdered her husband in India, arrives there. Jasmine runs away from there and relates herself with Du, an immigrant like her. But Du leaves her and goes to California. At this time Taylor proposes her to accompany him and Duff. Taylor's arrival serves as a relief to her. She agrees to go with Taylor and Duff. Jasmine remarks, "The moment I have dreamed a thousand times finally arrives." (J 237) and "I am not choosing between two men. I am caught between the promise of



America and old world dutifulness.” (J 140) Jasmine has a sense of relief at leaving Bud rather than feeling guilty. Finally, she decides to live for herself and she comes out to her bond to gain her true identity. Her final decision gives the indication that Jasmine willingly gives more importance to her ‘self.’

Jasmine travels to different continents through hunger, ill-treatment, violence, rape and murder. But she is not frightened at any time. She strongly believes that her mission and her death wish will be fulfilled only in this alien new land. She is ready to make all compromises and adjustments. The defiance that the seven year old Jyoti shows to the curse of widowhood and exile foretold by the future – teller turns into her acceptance of the new name Jasmine given by her husband Prakash. Jasmine hops from place to place and person to person trying to find her real place in life. From Jyoti to Jasmine, Jasmine to Jase and Jase to Jane may appear to be real transformation of the personality of the protagonist. Her shifting from Hasnapur to Jullundhur, Jullundhur to Florida, Manhattan and Iowa may appear to be moving from old value to the brave new world. As Yadav points: Jyoti, jasmine, Jane, Jase, each of her different identities, took place in a different space, i.e. India, Floorida and New York, Iowa. Such a character who embraces wanderings is attempting to destroy traditional ways of conceiving female identity. She is marginalized by both gender and race and changes herself according to her surroundings which are characterized by an ever-changing uncertainty just as Jasmine herself is. Her continuous movement and vagueness in which nothing was rooted anymore and everything was in motion, makes her a diasporic individual. (4) Thus Bharati Mukherjee’s Jasmine outlines the life of a woman engaged in a series of quest for a concrete identity in the complicated layers of cross cultural reality. Through Jasmine Mukherjee shows how the lives of immigrants do not have straight lines and smooth plains. They have painful lives and several roles. For instants Jasmine has several births corresponding to the will and wish of her male counter parts. She attains power from her renaming by others and gives energy back to her surroundings while moving through protean changes of name. In this way Mukherjee establishes a strong female subjectivity and the assertion of self.

Works Cited

- [1] Aneja, A.1993. Jasmine, the Sweet Scent of Exile, Pacific coast Philology, 28/1, 72 – 80.
- [2] Drake, Jennifer. 1999. “Looting American Culture: Bharati Mukherjee’s Immigrant Narrative.” Contemporary Literature 40.1 (spring 1999): 60 – 84 print.
- [3] Hoppe, John K. 1999. “The Technological Hybrid as post – American: Cross – cultural genetics in Jasmine.” MELUS 244: 137 – 156. print.
- [4] Mukherjee, Bharati. 1991. Jasmine, Virago Press, USA.
- [5] Yadav, M, and Yadav, S.2011. “Un-hyphenating Identity and The Assimilatory Strategies: Bharati Mukerjee’s Jasmine,” Golden Research Thoughts, 1/1, 1.