

## Changing Names, Shifting Identities as a Diasporic Pathetic Woman;

### A Discussion of Bharati Mukerjee's *Jasmine*

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#### **Abstract:**

*Jasmine*, Bharati Mukherjee's most popular novel was published in 1989. It is a novel that stems from an earlier short story from *The Middleman and Other Stories* and was expanded to a story of a young widow who uproots herself from her life in India and re-roots herself in search of a new life and the image of America. It is a story of dislocation and relocation as the title character continually sheds lives to move into other roles, moving further westward while constantly fleeing pieces of her past. In it, Mukherjee rejoices in the idea of assimilation and makes it clear that Jasmine needs to travel to America to make something significant of her life, because in the third world she faced only despair and loss. This paper is a diasporic discussion of changing names and shifting identities of the title character in the novel *Jasmine*.

Key words: Diasporic, Dislocation, Identity, Assimilation

The words like “Expatriate” and “Diaspora” need no introduction in postcolonial literary scenario. Indian Diaspora, today, has emerged with the multiplicity of histories, variety of culture, tradition, and a deep instinct for survival. Indian Diaspora, though counting more than 20 million members world-wide, survives in between home of origin and world of adoption. The process of survival of the Diasporic individual/ community in between the home of origin and the world of adoption is the voyage undertaken in the whole process from “Marginalization” or “Alienation” to final “Assimilation”.

The term ‘Alienation’ has its root in the Latin word ‘*Alienus*’ which means ‘Belonging to another’ or ‘An estrangement or separation between parts or the whole of the personality and significant aspects of the world of experience’. Alienation has thus come to mean one who is not a naturalized citizen of the country where one is living. It also means someone is a foreigner and he might be separated from the majority. ‘Accommodation’ has its root in the Latin ‘*Accommodatio*’ which means an adjustment, a convenient arrangement, a settlement or a compromise. This alienation leads to a sense of powerlessness, meaninglessness, homelessness, cultural estrangement, self-estrangement and social isolation. Accommodation leads to assimilation and acculturation.

The study of world literature might be the study of the way in which cultures recognize themselves through their projections of ‘otherness’ where, once the transmission of national traditions was the major theme of a world literature, perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonized or political refugees - these border and frontier conditions - may be the terrains of world literature. The Diasporic production of cultural meanings occurs in many areas, such as contemporary music, film, theatre and dance, but writing is one of the most interesting and strategic ways in which diaspora might disrupt the binary of local and global and problematize national, racial and ethnic formulations of identity

Bharati Mukherjee, an Indian born Canadian/ American novelist, has made a deep impression on the literary canvass. Her novels, honestly, depict the issues of her own cultural location in West Bengal in India, her displacement from her land of origin to Canada where she was simultaneously invisible as a writer and overexposed as a racial minority and her final relocation to USA as a naturalized citizen.

*Jasmine*, one of her best examples of Diasporic novels was published in 1989. It is about a young Indian woman in the United States who is trying to adapt to the American way of life in

order to be able to survive, changes identities several times. While Mukherjee has been received favorably by many critics and academics, she has also faced a good deal of criticism, particularly from East Indian scholars and critics. It has been said that she often represents India in her fiction as a land without hope or a future. She has also been criticized for a tendency to overlook unavoidable barriers of caste, education, gender, race and history in her tales of survivors, particularly within *Jasmine*, giving her characters more opportunities than their social circumstances would realistically allow.

This is paper is going to analyze the title character's changing names and shifting identities. *Jasmine* is a novel of emigration and assimilation, both on physical and psychological levels. In this novel, Bharati Mukherjee fictionalizes the process of Americanization by tracing a young Indian woman's experiences of trauma and triumph in her attempt to forge a new identity for herself. The story is told from the first-person point of view by the female protagonist, who undergoes multiple identity transformations in her quest for self-empowerment and happiness. Mukherjee uses the cinematic techniques of flashback and cross-cutting to fuse Jasmine's past and present. The novel is steeped in violence. Primarily an immigrant narrative, *Jasmine* explores the process of Americanization and brings out the conflict between assimilation and cultural preservation. It is a poignant story of survival, expediency, compromises, losses, and adjustments involved in the process of acculturation to American life.

It is an incredible story about the transformation and life experiences of a Panjabi girl from India. The life of Jyoti (Jasmine) is told from her point of view when she is twenty-four years old, and pregnant with the baby of Bud Ripplemeyer, a crippled banker who is more than twice Jyoti's age. During the span of two months in Iowa, Jyoti narrates her biographical experiences in Punjab and in America as she strives to become independent. Jasmine illustrates that when one's relationships go through changes, it will impact one's identity. Born in Hasnapur in India, Jyoti is said to be the most beautiful and clever person in her family. Unlike her sisters and other girls, Jyoti excels in school and continues her education until the 8th grade despite her father's disapproval. Education represents a way for Jasmine to separate from many girls her age including her sisters and to shape her identity. In other words, this allows her to break from the semi-feudal rural society in which she lives. Her life, like most Indian women in that time period, is controlled and dominated by her father and brothers, "Village girls are like

cattle, whichever way you lead them, that is the way they will go" (46). Jyoti's opinions are often considered unnecessary. The role of women in villages was only to be a mother and to manage household affairs.

The first of many glimpses of Jyoti's varying identities occurs during her marriage to Prakash. The first time Prakash talks to Jyoti, he says, "She is a woman of fine sympathies..." (74). He sees her as a delicate, obedient woman who follows her family's wishes and societies restriction on women. Prakash plays an important role in Jasmine's life because he is the first person who helped Jasmine become more conscious of the modern world and the opportunities it holds. He expects Jyoti to change her ways, "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...Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttled between identities" (77). The narrator's gradual change in how she refers to herself from Jyoti to Jasmine shows how she is viewed by others and how she accepts this new identity.

After Prakash dies by a radio bomb meant for Jyoti, she emerges as Jasmine. As Jasmine, she decides to go to the United States to fulfill Prakash's mission of studying in a university. Her journey is full of transformations and her search of identity. When Jasmine arrives in the United States, she is raped by a man she calls Half Face, who is the Captain of the ship on which she travelled. After this traumatic event, Jasmine feels that she has been defiled and she decides to re-invent her, "My body was merely the shell, soon to be discarded. Then I could be reborn, debts and sins all paid for" (121). Later on, Jasmine kills Half-Face and prepares to die herself, but as she remembers sees half-Face laughing at her and her mission, she decides she cannot die. Her identity once again undergoes a transformation as she is more determined than ever to complete her mission of traveling to Tampa to give her dead husband the peace she felt he deserved.

Like Prakash, Lillian wants Jasmine cut off from her past. With Lillian, Jasmine prepares to forget her past and make a new identity for herself in the United States. Lillian transforms Jasmine into an ordinary American girl when Jasmine exchanges her sari for Lillian's daughters American clothes, "I checked myself in the mirror, shocked at my transformation. After this sudden transformation, she changes her name into Jazzy. She begins to be in a T-shirt, tight cords, and running shoes. With the change in clothes, Jazzy experiences a change in culture

which causes certain aspects of her personality to start disappearing. With this change, Jazzy changes from being a minority to just another immigrant. Lillian changes Jasmine's name to Jazzy to make her appear more American. Jazzy obtains a positive outlook towards America after finding Lillian and through this she obtains a new identity for herself as she lets go of her past.

When Jazzy leaves Lillian Gordon, she is very hopeful that the rest of her life will be pleasant. However when she finally arrives in New York, her hope disintegrates and her new American identity she acquired collapses. Right as she steps into New York, Jazzy witnesses the poverty that people face. She says, "On the streets I saw only more greed, more people like myself. New York was an archipelago of ghettos seething with aliens" (140). For five months, Jazzy stays with Professorji and his family in Flushing, New York. Professorji and his family made Jazzy feel invisible and kind.

Jazzy could not bear the circumstances she was living in and she wanted to distance herself. However the apartment she was living in with Professorji and his family was an apartment of artificially maintained Indianness. About Flushing, Jazzy says, "Flushing frightened me...I felt myself deteriorating" (148). Jazzy comes to find out that Professorji is not a professor in New York. He is just an "Importer and sorter of human hair" from India. Jazzy's experiences in New York allow her to see what she does not want to become, a hopeless Indian widow.

The name Jase is a symbol that she has come a long way in her life and is everything that she has always wanted to be. Later she continues, "I feel in love with his world, its ease, its careless confidence, and graceful self-absorption" (171). Taylor Hayes represents to Jase what she has achieved in America after leaving her poor life in India and the openness of mind. Despite her happiness, Jase knows that everything must come to an end,

In America, nothing last. 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. We arrive so eager 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).

The final part of her identity change is when Jase goes to Iowa. Jase meets Bud, who is thirty years older than her, through Mother Ripplemeyer, Bud's mother. Jase is looking for a job at the University Hospital, when Mother Ripplemeyer tells her, "You need a meal as well as a job, dear. I'm going to take you home for lunch; then I'm going to call Bud and see if he doesn't need a pretty new teller" (196-197). Mother Ripplemeyer reminds Jase of Lillian Gordon, who was very instrumental in the identity change of Jasmine to Jazzy. Jase vows to someday be able to make a change in the world someday like Mother Ripplemeyer and Lillian Gordon. With Mother Ripplemeyer, Jase is not able to talk about the poverty she faced in India, "I thought we could trade some world-class poverty stories, but mine make her uncomfortable...I have to be careful about nearly everything I say" (16).

In Iowa, Jase is forced to not recollect certain aspects of her past in conversations because it scares Mother Ripplemeyer to hear about her past. Through Mother Ripplemeyer, Jase meets Bud and at the time of their meeting, Bud is still married to Karin. Later, Karin decides to divorce from Bud and Jase eventually becomes pregnant with Bud's child. Describing Bud, Jase says, "Bud's not like Taylor—he's never asked me about India; it scares him. He wouldn't be interested in the forecast of an old fakir under a banyan tree. Bud was wounded in the war between my fate and will" (12). Like in Jase's other relationships, Bud also changes Jase's name to Jane, "Bud calls me Jane. Me Bud, you Jane. I didn't get it at first. He kids. Calamity Jane. Jane as in Jane Russell, not Jane as in Plain Jane. But Plain Jane is all I want to be. Plain Jane is a role, like any other. My genuine foreignness frightens him. I don't hold that against him" (26). Jane wants to stay in Iowa forever and forget her past. However, Jane feels conflicted between her past and present, "In the white lamplight, ghosts float toward me. Jane, Jasmine, Jyoti" (21).

Despite her insistence that the past does not matter in her relationship with Bud, Jane cannot forget her previous identities. Jane admits that she has been reborn several times, and some lives she can recall vividly. Jane is reborn several times in her present life, she was forced to live a meaningless life and lost her native identity.

Jane realizes, "I have had a husband for each of the women I have been. Prakash for Jasmine, Taylor for Jase, Bud for Jane. Half-Face for Kali" (197). Jane contemplates going back to Taylor because with him he enjoyed hearing her stories about India, and would encourage her to not forget her past. When leaving with Taylor, Jane feels, "It isn't guilt that I feel, it's relief. I

realized I have already stopped thinking of myself as Jane...I cry into Taylor's shoulder, cry through all the lives I've given birth to, cry for all my dead" (240-241).

Jane realizes that she can still have dreams and maintain her own identity. She does not have to follow the limits that her relationships seem to put on her. Jane runs away with Taylor because he is an opportunity for a new future, in which she forges her own identity and still remains true to her roots.

In this novel *Jasmine*, Jyoti has conflicts with her past and the present as she attempts to combine her life as an immigrant and life in India. Jyoti comes to America in order to fulfill her husband, Prakash's dreams and to lead a more fruitful life. She undergoes her first transformation from an innocent, dutiful daughter to a modern wife when she meets Prakash who calls her Jasmine, and then she becomes more American when she meets Lillian Gordon who calls her Jazzy. Later, with Taylor Hayse, who calls her Jase, she starts to accept her past and present together, however seeing her husband's murderer frightens her. She then moves on to become Bud's Jane. Jyoti tries to establish a new identity as she learns new American customs, skills, and aspirations. These transactions in her identity are apparent in her attitude towards life and her relationships with men and women.

Mukherjee's aim is to enlighten the immigrants through *Jasmine*, an exemplar in the novel. Mukherjee believes in order for them to become a real American, immigrants must disregard their cultural memory and past.

Each time Jasmine changes her names; she treats her past like dealing with different person. The main purpose of this action is to transform Jasmine to become more Americanize with the intention of fitting into the American culture. It is her dream to become a "real" American. Indeed, she cannot "murder" her past because the ghosts of her past identities still revisit her throughout the novel. It presents a contradiction with Jasmine's attempt to desert from her Indian culture. Mukherjee might have taken the idea that immigrants can suppress their original identity through creating different dominant identities. Jasmine has invested in her present but not her past, she ended her "Identity Crisis" and achieves to become American. Mukherjee urges to educate the marginalized immigrants through *Jasmine*.

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