

Jasmine's Travail from Widowhood to Selfhood in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*.

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Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee happens to be a prominent Asian American writer who has in her works vividly represented the experiences of Asian immigrants and the evolution of their migrant selves in America. Her works reflect both, her pride in her Indian heritage and also her earnestness for embracing the new world, America.

Mukherjee's much acclaimed novel *Jasmine* depicts the story of a young Punjabi woman who dares to rebel against the norms of patriarchy since her childhood. Her stifling experiences of leading the life of a widow in a small Indian village of Hasnapur doesn't dent her spirit as she dares to sail on her own as an illegal immigrant to the United States on a mission to perform ritual Sati on the campus where her dead husband had enrolled to study. The problems of acculturation drags immigrants like her into an identity crisis. But it does not deter her, as she continuously strives to refashion herself to fit into the mainstream American culture. In this context, the paper attempts to explore how the feminist protagonist, Jasmine, through her shifting identities rediscovers her own independent self by assimilating into the land of opportunity, i.e., America.

Bharati Mukherjee explores in her third novel, *Jasmine*, the promise of American style individualism and female emancipation alongside the burden of the Old World responsibilities and cultural ties perpetuating female oppression.

The narrator- protagonist of *Jasmine* hails from the village Hasnapur- Punjab- a state in the north-western part of India. She grows up in a semi-feudal, patriarchal society until she marries the progressive minded Prakash Vihh, who aided by his benefactor, Professor Devinder Vadhera , gets admitted to a Florida Institution in the United States for a degree in electronics. When Prakash is killed by a bomb planted by Sukhwinder, a Sikh terrorist, Jasmine travels to Florida on a forged passport to commit 'Sati' at the premises of the institute where Prakash had intended to pursue his study, and thus begins her fresh struggle in an alien land. Mukherjee specifies six stages in her protagonist's character formation by the name she is given or not given by others: her parents name her Jyoti, her husband calls her Jasmine, Lillian Gordon's appellation for her is Jazzy, the Vadheras have no name for her at all, Taylor names her Jase, and Bud renames her Jane. Delving into these stages in her growth would enable us to trace her development through various crisis, into maturity and her self-identity.

Looking back at her life as Jyoti Vihh, Jasmine in her Jane Ripplemeyer reincarnation discloses her audacity as a child when as a seven-year-old girl, she rejects what the village astrologer predicts in her stars –widowhood and exile – and wounds her forehead in a gesture of defiance. Very early in life she realizes that she was a “fighter and adapter” (Jasmine, 40), as her mother's attempt at strangling her as an infant had failed. Societal pressure makes her mother behave in such a manner, as she was apprehensive that as the fifth daughter of their impoverished family, Jyoti was doomed to be a dowryless bride and hence she wanted to spare her the ignominy. But later on, when Jasmine grows up and wants to pursue her education, her mother backs her and convinces her father that a girl should have more than a

primary education. Two other attributes – her beauty and her flair for picking up foreign languages – make her feel that she can cheat fate.

Jasmine's proficiency in English enables her to read novels in that language. At the tender age of seven she attempts reading books like *Shane*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Great Expectations*, and *Jane Eyre*, but has to give up as they prove to be too tough for her. Nevertheless, these texts seem to have influenced her growing up through unpleasant experiences and crises into maturity, and realizing her self-identity and place in the world. Growing up in a society that constricted women through all sorts of patriarchal strictures, Jasmine learns early in her life to make use of every opportunity that came her way, and all about "permissible rebellion". (*Jasmine*, 47)

Feminists often argue that women are not just victims of patriarchal system but are in some cases, partial collaborators too. As the custodian of patriarchal culture, Joyti's grandmother too resents her inclination to study and not marry when she is a teenager, and tells her, "Individual effort counts for nothing" (*Jasmine*, 57) but Jyoti does not relent as she dreams of getting a better life through education. If the astrologer and her grandmother epitomize the fatalistic aspect of Hindu philosophy, the young Jyoti has immense faith in the Hindu belief: "to treat every second of your existence as a possible assignment from God" (*Jasmine*, 61). She resolves to rise above her surroundings and believes that "she can move on and make a life for herself" (Interview, 1990), because God has assigned her to do that. At her own initiative, Jyoti continues gaining knowledge not just from books but also from hearing men talk about politics, from newspapers, radio and her brother's friend Prakash whom she adores, because of his intelligence, sensitivity, fluency in English, and above all because he had applied for job overseas. She entices Prakash into marrying her in a very calculative manner by decorating her hair with a jasmine wreath in order to impress him. They get married and two weeks later Prakash decides to rename her Jasmine because he felt

she was destined to “quicken the world” with her perfume (*Jasmine*,77). Jasmine later realizes that Prakash does exert a pygmalion effect on her since he wanted to remake her in the light of his own obsessions about progressive behavior and female education and of “doing better, making something more of ... life than fate intended” (*Jasmine*, 85). She prepares herself for life in America as a student’s wife --since Prakash had got admitted to a Florida Institution in the United States for a degree in Electronics through his benefactor, Professor Devinder Vadhera -- content in believing that “if we could just get away from India, then all fates would be canceled. 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 (*Jasmine*, 85).

The state of Punjab was then hit by the Khalistan Movement for an independent Sikh nation, Khalistan. One-half of the astrologer’s prediction- widowhood- comes true for Jasmine when Prakash is killed by a terrorist’s bomb wired into a radio, on the eve of their departure for America. The assassin yells “Prostitutes! Whores !”(*Jasmine* 93). Jyoti realizes that the bomb is meant for her. She becomes a political target because her aspirations are a threat to the social order built on women’s subjection. She laments, “I am a widow in the war of feudalism” (*Jasmine*-88). Prakash’s exhortation from beyond life makes her decide not to join other widows in her village and she resolves to go to America to commit ritual suicide- *sati* -in the Florida campus of his dreams.

Sati is a practice of widows burning along with their husbands on the funeral pyre. It was banned by law in 1829. The image of the Sati retained in most discursive constructions, the mark of a gender-specific mythic ordering principle – the self-immolation of a wife on her husband’s funeral pyre -- signified her fortitude and heroism and extolled her as the best follower of “Stridharma” or female devotion. Having grown up in a society which eulogized ‘Stridharma’, Jyoti decides to proceed on her own to America to commit sati.

At this point in the novel, India simply serves as a repressive background to further Mukherjee's thematic aims. She argues that that "I had to give her (Jasmine) a society that was so regressive, traditional, so caste-bound, genderist, that she could discard it" much easier than "a fluid American society" could be discarded (Interview,1990).

Jasmine's journey takes her from Hasnapur to America aboard unregistered aircraft and ships. As an illegal immigrant travelling on a forged passport, she has to undertake her pilgrimage to Tampa aboard *The Gulf Shuttle*. She ends up in a motel room with the captain of the trawler, Half-Face, whose name derives from the loss of an eye, a ear, and half his face in Vietnam, where he served as a demolition expert. Half-Face, a character "from the underworld of evil" (*Jasmine*,103) reacts to Jasmine's entrance with the remark that "I know whose power when I see it" (*Jasmine*, 179).

Half-Face tells her with a sense of banal conviction, "You know what's coming, and there ain't nobody here to help you" (*Jasmine*, 115). Almost with mechanical obliviousness, he first drinks, then rapes her and falls asleep. Consequently, Jasmine contemplates killing herself as Half-Face snores in the next room. But a sudden sense of mission stops her. She feels she could not "let my personal dishonor disrupt my mission" (*Jasmine*,118) This incident, is a climactic moment in the text when Jasmine is reminded of her mother's inspiring words regarding the positive aspects of Hinduism which taught her that "we are all put on this earth for a purpose ... All acts are connected. For every monster there is a hero. For every hero, a monster"(*Jasmine*, 126). Instead of attempting suicide, and meekly conforming to an identity politics that would define her solely as a victim, she decides instead to kill her attacker. Refusing to "balance [her] defilement with [her] death (*Jasmine*117) -- a traditional eventuality for rape victims, in orthodox Indian society -- Jasmine is infused with the destructive energy of goddess Kali. With ritualistic sincerity, she first thoroughly cleanses her defiled body, and then purifies her soul through prayer. She has a small knife,

given to her by Kingsland, a savvy fellow passenger travelling aboard The Gulf Shuttle. She first uses it on herself, cutting a strip across her tongue. As Mukherjee explains, “Kali is what Jasmine was mythologizing herself into when she killed her rapist, Half-Face.” (Interview,1990). This gesture of marking and naming signifies reclaiming of her body. Mukherjee observes that Kali is “the Goddess of destruction, but not in a haphazard, random way. She is the destroyer of evil so that the world can be renewed” (Interview, 21). Fancying herself as the goddess incarnate, Jasmine says, “I wanted the moment when he saw me above him as he had last seen me, naked, but now with my mouth open, pouring blood, my red tongue out”(Jasmine,118).

Jasmine’s killing of Half-Face presupposes a re-appropriation – a violent splitting and subsequent adapting of the controlling strategies of violence and desire – and the re-inscription of active resistance into the patriarchal narrative of vulnerability and availability. She seizes the knife and penetrates his body. Since her body had been defiled, instead of committing sati-- burning the suit of her dead husband Prakash and then lying on the fire, the mission that regulated her journey to the United States-- Jasmine burns Prakash’s suit and her Indian clothes in a trash can next to the motel. Her mother’s preaching remind her that the body is a mere covering which can be discarded when corrupted, as she says, ”My body was merely the shell, soon to be discarded. Then I could be reborn, debts and sins all paid for” (Jasmine,121). Relinquishing the past like a baggage, she feels light and reborn. Moving on, she says “With the first streaks of dawn, my first full American day, I walked out the front drive of the motel to the highway and began my journey, traveling light” (Jasmine, 121).

Jasmine is now prepared for her next reincarnation as Jazzy and allows herself to be refashioned by Lillian Gordon, the Samaritan who helps undocumented aliens survive in America. The second of the astrologer’s prediction – exile-- comes true. Lillian does not simply make her shed her past but also helps her to literally, “walk and talk America”

(*Jasmine*, 134). She enables her to get back her lost confidence and finances her trip to New York, so that she can live with Professor Vadhera. But the five months she spends with the Vadheras suffocate her and she becomes desperate to leave their “apartment of artificially maintained Indianness” (*Jasmine*,145).As soon as Jasmine gets a green card, she leaves the Vadheras and manages a job with Taylor and Wylie Hayeses, through Lillian’s daughter, Kate Gordon-Feldstein. Kate-- a girl from “a swampy backwater”-- who has succeeded as a photographer in America, inspires Jasmine and tells her that she is reborn and that there is no going back to her native land. At the Hayeses household, she feels that she had “landed and was getting rooted (*Jasmine*, 179).

Taylor and his wife Wylie carry on the process of grooming Jasmine to “walk and talk American” that Lillian Gordon had begun. As Jasmine observes, the conversation of guests, television, the language she heard outdoors, “all became my language, which I learned like a child from the first words up. The squatting fields of Hasnapur receded fast”(*Jasmine*,174).When the Hayses separate, she realizes that in this country “nothing lasts”(*Jasmine*,181). With Wylie gone, Jasmine gets closer to Taylor who attempts to Americanize her, by teaching her about baseball or about certain basic things like returning unsolicited mail, etc. Jasmine however insists that it was not at Taylor’s behest that she changed, but she “changed because she wanted to,” having learned from her stay with the Vadheras that “to bunker oneself inside nostalgia, to sheath the heart in a bulletproof vest, was to be coward”’.(*Jasmine*185)

She hardly realized that fate had something different in store for her. One day as she accompanies Taylor to a park where he professes his love for her, she is alarmed to see the Sikh terrorist - her husband’s killer-- who has now become a hot-dog vendor in New York. Jasmine becomes apprehensive and flees again. She leaves for Baden County, Iowa, and becomes the common-law wife of the rich but middle-aged banker, Bud Ripplemeyer. She

had met him through his mother Ma Ripplemeyer, a social worker, whose mission in life is to help unhoused people restart their lives in new surroundings. Bud develops an instant fascination for Jasmine--an exotic woman-- and is ready to leave Karin, his wife of many years. Jasmine finds adjusting to life at Iowa tough. In some ways she is reminded of the strife-torn Punjab she had left behind, with a lot of hate around. Not only is Bud shot by a bankrupt client gone berserk, but Jasmine too faces racist taunts from drunks in a bar. When Karin, Bud's ex-wife compares her to a tornado that leaves a path of destruction behind it she feels stung. The company of Du – the Vietnamese teenager Bud has adopted to atone for deserting Karin – in the house helps, for she feels an instinctive bond with another Asian immigrant learning to be American. Du Ripplemeyer is in certain ways similar to Jasmine. He is tough, resilient, and a fast learner like her. As his high school teacher observes before Jasmine, he is “in a hurry to become all American” and is a “quick study” (*Jasmine*, 28-29). This makes Jasmine reflect on the secret of the immigrant achiever: “We're all quick studies..... Once we start letting go – let go just one thing, like not wearing our normal clothes, or a turban or not wearing a tika on the forehead- the rest goes on its way down a sinkhole” (*Jasmine*-29).

Meanwhile unlike Taylor, Bud has no interest in Jasmine's past: he is simply attracted to her for her foreignness. It is only when he is in close proximity with Jasmine that he realizes that Asia was more than “a soy bean market”. (*Jasmine*-14)

Out of compassion for the crippled Bud, she decides to have his baby, but she finds his dependency quite stifling. She begins losing her confidence and asks herself “How many more shapes are in me, how many more selves, how many more husbands ?” (*Jasmine*, 215). Jasmine's fortune dangles between one of “pain and hope, hope and pain” (*Jasmine*, 225) and just when she is passing through an unhappy phase of her life, in Iowa, she gets a feeler of hope from Taylor. He sends a card to her telling her that he and Duff are heading

for Iowa and warns her not to flee again. Although she is duty bound to maintain her relationship with Bud, she considers Taylor to be her savior who would enable her to relive “the headiness, dizziness, *porousness*” she had experienced twice before in her life – once with Prakash and then with Taylor in New York (*Jasmine*, 211).

Jasmine finally sheds the mask she had put on to be Jane:

It isn't the guilt that I feel, its relief. I realize I have already stopped thinking of myself as Jane. Adventure, risk, transformation: the frontier is pushing indoor through uncaulked windows. Watch me reposition the stars, I whisper to the astrologer who floats cross-legged above my kitchen stove (*Jasmine*, 240).

Jasmine's travail does not turn out to be the saga of a battered immigrant woman but the narrative of an emancipated woman who does not ponder over her past, rather undauntedly sets to “reposition the stars”. The transformation of her self through the different phases of her life from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jane to Jase is indicative of the death of one personality and a simultaneous birth of a new one, and the recurrent image of the broken earthen pot reaffirms Jasmine's faith in the Hindu philosophy of rebirth, though with a different implication. She embraces the frontier values of “adventure, risk, transformation” (*Jasmine*, 240), and like Huckleberry Finn at the end of his classic tale, wanting to be adopted by none, ventures out “greedy with wants and reckless from hope” (*Jasmine*, 241). Through the character of Jasmine, Mukherjee thus attempts to portray her faith in the necessity of inventing one's self by traversing beyond what is given and by transcending one's origin.

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