

Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*: A Yarn of Resistance and Quest for Identity

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Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee is one of the most prominent writers in America with Asian heritage. With a touch from her personal experience, she longs to speak in her own voice and give her version of what it means to be an emigrant, an Indian-Canadian and an American. Much of the controversy of identity politics swirls around her. On the one hand members of the minorities seek to shed the stereotypes that lump them together with others who share the same origin and struggle to be recognized as individuals. On the other hand they strike to recover their roots and create new group identities that can give a sense of heritage. She longs to speak out her own voice and give her personal view as to what it means to be an emigrant from India but her fellow member of Asian heritage express concern that by doing so she is distorting what they perceive to be the truth and thus reinforcing negative stereotypes. Quest for the definition of self and search for identity are the main features of her women who are seen caught in the flux of tradition and modernity. Neither can they completely detach themselves from their part, nor do they have any certitude in the future. Mukherjee has interceded and reworked the study of feminism in her writings. Central to her vision in *The Holder of the World*, *Wife* and *Jasmine* are issues related to women. Bharati Mukherjee's the third and most accomplished novel *Jasmine* is an account of adaptation and not defeat. *Jasmine's* description of her aptly sums up her belief in an alternate reality: She wasn't a missionary dispensing new visions and stamping out the old; she was a facilitator who made possible the lives of absolute ordinariness that we ached for. Consciously, Mukherjee if not *Jasmine* herself does this by replacing Sita with Kali as a role model. Mukherjee tried to show how the stereotype can be challenged, if not completely repudiated or altered. The paper explores the resistance and the quest for identity *Jasmine* shows throughout the novel.

Key Words: Expatriate, exile, feminism, third world, Americanization, alienation

Displacement, whether forced or self-imposed, is in many ways a calamity. Yet, a peculiar but a potent point to note is that writers in their displaced existence generally tend to excel in their work, as if the changed atmosphere acts as a stimulant for them. These writings in dislocated circumstances are often termed as exile literature. The word "exile" has negative connotations but if the self-exile of a Byron is considered, then the response to that very word becomes ambivalent. If a

holistic view of the word "exile" is taken, the definition would include migrant writers and non-resident writers and even gallivanting writers who roam about for better pastures to graze and fill their oeuvre. World literature has an abundance of writers whose writings have prospered while they were in exile. Although it would be preposterous to assume the vice-versa that exiled writers would not have prospered had they not been in exile, the fact in the former statement cannot be

denied. Cultural theorists and literary critics are all alike in this view.

John Simpson in *The Oxford Book of Exile* writes that exile “is the human condition; and the great upheavals of history have merely added physical expression to an inner fact” (Simpson “Introduction”). Indeed it is so if exile is taken to be identical with self-alienation in the modern, post-Marxist, Brechtian sense of the term. Physical mobility often heightens the spiritual or psychological sense of alienation from the places one continually moves between. The world, in existentialist terms, appears absurd and indifferent towards one’s needs. In such a situation one cannot help but feel like an outsider. Therefore, it is well agreed that exile is a part of the human experience. Many a Shakespearean play has in it exile in the form of banishment and it dates back even before the time of *Pericles of Athens*. As for writers of yore there is Ovid whose hyperbolic lamentation on being exiled from Rome for publishing an obscene poem forms part of his *Tristia I*. There is Virgil whose Aeneas leaves Troy urged by the ghost of his wife thereby displaying the writer’s predicament.

The effect that exile has, not on the writers’ work, but on the writers themselves seems apparently paradoxical at first. Exile appears both as a liberating experience as well as a shocking experience. The paradox is apparent because it is just a manifestation of the tension that keeps the strings attached and taut between the writer’s place of origin and the place of exile. Whatever may be the geographical location of the exiled writer, in the mental landscape the writer is forever enmeshed among the strings attached to poles that pull in opposite

directions. The only way the writer can rescue oneself from the tautness of the enmeshing strings is by writing or by other forms of artistic expression. The relief is only a temporary condition for no writer’s work is so sharp a wedge that can snap the strings that history-makers have woven. Even if a writer consciously tries to justify one end, simultaneously, but unconsciously, there arises a longing for the other. Therein lies the fascination of exile literature.

The Indian-English writers, notably, Raja Rao became an expatriate even before the independence of the country; G. V. Desani was born in Kenya and lived in England, India, and USA; and Kamala Markandaya married an Englishman and lived in Britain (ref. Mehrotra 180, 186, 226). Nirad C. Chaudhuri preferred the English shores because his views were not readily accepted in India. Salman Rushdie’s “imaginary homeland” encompasses the world over. The Iranian “fatwa” phase has added a new dimension to Rushdie’s exilic condition. Colonial and post-colonial India are divisions that are now more relevant to a historian than a *littérateur* because Indian-English literature has transcended the barriers of petty classifications and has become almost become part of mainstream English literature. A major contribution in this regard has been that of the Indian writers, like Rushdie and Naipaul, who live as world citizens - a global manifestation of the exilic condition. Indian-English writers like Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Shashi Tharoor, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Sunetra Gupta, Rohinton Mistry, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Hari Kunzru have all made their names while residing abroad. The non-

resident Indian writers have explored their sense of displacement—a perennial theme in all exile literature. They have given more poignancy to the exploration by dealing not only with a geographical dislocation but also a socio-cultural sense of displacement. Their concerns are global concerns as today's world is afflicted with the problems of immigrants, refugees, and all other exiles. These exilic states give birth to the sense of displacement and rootlessness.

In the history of Indian English women novelists Bharati Mukherjee, an Indian American writer, has occupied a prominent place. Her fiction explores 'the nature of American identity, through the perspective of an illegal immigrant'. Her characters are Third World immigrants who attempt to assimilate into North American life styles. Besides this her novels also represent a quest for identity and fulfilment which is traced through a journey from expatriation to immigration.

Bharati Mukherjee is one of the most prominent writers in America with Asian heritage. With a touch from her personal experience, she longs to speak in her own voice and give her version of what it means to be an emigrant, an Indian-Canadian and an American. She longs to speak out her own voice and give her personal view as to what it means to be an emigrant from India but her fellow member of Asian heritage express concern that by doing so she is distorting what they perceive to be the truth and thus reinforcing negative stereotypes. Her novels are self actualizing. Quest for the definition of self and search for identity are the main features of her women who are seen caught in the flux of tradition and modernity. Neither can they completely

detach themselves from their part, nor do they have any certitude in the future. Mukherjee has interceded and reworked the study of feminism in her writings. Central to her vision in *The Holder of the World*, *Wife* and *Jasmine* are issues related to women. Feminism in her works has something of what Carroll Smith Rosenberg argues is "the emotional segregation of women and man, which brought about, led to the development of a specifically female world." (Rosenberg:137) The network of female world comes to us not only in Mukherjee's novels but also in her collections of Short Stories. She advocates many faces of feminism encompassing agitation for equal opportunity, sexual autonomy and right of self determination.

Mukherjee's depiction of women and their different relationships portray the dominance of patriarchal practices in traditional society, as well as the forms of liberation and empowerment which are available to women in their diasporic situation. Mukherjee's female characters are real, modern life like. They are typical representatives of young woman particularly of The Third World countries who cherish the dream of emigrating to America for higher education and higher wages, and then after arrival there, aspire to settle there permanently. Their situations and the difficulties they face are also realistically portrayed. In nearly, all stories there is a fixed pattern. In the first part of each story, the focus is on narrating the situation of an immigrant who is in the process of immigration or settling down and in the second part who is in the process of immigration or settling down and in the second part the protagonist is invariably given to making love with a

partner of the opposite sex who is rooted in the American soil.

Feminism as an ideology has several theoretical positions. As an ideology, the focus of feminism is empowerment of women, their emancipation, creation of equality, elimination of oppression and discrimination. The way in which man-woman relationships were historically organized in society despite variations in arrangements and expressions reveals that there was an institutional denial for creative and free self-expression and empowerment in public sphere. There were alternative valuational modes of recognition of women's role, work and contribution in different societies. Bharati Mukherjee's the third and most accomplished novel *Jasmine* is an account of adaptation and not defeat. Jasmine's description of her aptly sums up her belief in an alternate reality: She wasn't a missionary dispensing new visions and stamping out the old; she was a facilitator who made possible the lives of absolute ordinariness that we ached for. Consciously, Mukherjee if not Jasmine herself does this by replacing Sita with Kali as a role model. Mukherjee tried to show how the stereotype can be challenged, if not completely repudiated or altered.

The problem of alienation experienced by the immigrant is very well portrayed by Bharati Mukherjee in her powerful novel *Jasmine*. The novel deals with a success story, the story of a survivor. Jasmine, the protagonist of the novel, fights against unfavourable circumstances, comes out a winner and carves out a new life in an alien country. Unlike *Wife*, *Jasmine* tells the success story of its protagonist. The genesis of the novel was a short story in

the collection, *Middleman and other Stories*, and the story was later developed into a full-length novel with a few modifications. *Jasmine* concerns itself with people who leave the country of their origin to settle in USA. It is about an illegal immigrant and it posits a corn of self-development.

Bharati Mukherjee's attempt at integrating the mission of life into her fiction through the portrayal of Jyoti-Jasmine-Jase- Jane is as successful as is her protagonist's attempt to remake an existence which threatens to end even before it has begun.

The major theme of rebirth plays out literally and figuratively in *Jasmine*. In literal language, every word is truthful, whereas figurative language is used for a certain effect. Figurative language might be exaggerated, or embellished, or used to help access otherwise difficult-to-grasp concepts. The opening line, 'Lifetimes ago' hints at all the transformations the title character has undergone. Mukherjee consistently highlights this theme, making authorial connections between the fictional action and its significance as a subject under investigation. In the novel the protagonist narrator's idea on Indian womanhood undergo several transformations as she evolves from the rural background of her Lahori jat peasant family in Jullundur district to heady dizziness of a new, deep relationship with Taylor Hayes with the unexplored horizons California before her, one marriage and in three and half year relationship across three continents in between. It is a story of dislocation and relocation as Jasmine continually sheds lives to move into other roles, moving further westward while constantly shedding pieces of her past.

In *Jasmine*, the woman writer shapes female characters who transgress boundaries fixed on them by their gender, race, caste and economic status. Jasmine is determined by strategies of resistance, including shifting names and corresponding identities, escaping from traditional space, using both violence and sexuality in order to move beyond restrictions imposed on her and thus renegotiating the space in which she actually resides. The gendered space underlines the idea of home which remains problematic. The conflation of home, as both security and prison, evokes therefore one's limited identity. Such a division of geographical space would refer to divisions of psychic space including self against non-self. *Jasmine* can be read as a feminist novel where the protagonist rebels not only against age-old superstitions and traditions, but also affects a proper balance between tradition and modernity. The novel is a celebration of the strength of a woman, not her weakness. In a language of emotion and meticulous metaphor using images provided by the woman protagonist the novelist has articulated the many sided pathos and rebellion of contemporary Indian woman, not only in India but also in New World. In *Jasmine* a woman comes to terms with her own self. As C.L. Chua points out: "Jasmine's search for self-recognition takes her in social and spiritual direction...till she arrives at a time when she can view the future 'greedy with wants and reckless from hope'".(Chua:54)

The novel opens with an astrologer's prediction about Jyoti's widowhood and exile. Jasmine continues beyond the realisation of the prediction indicating repositioning of the stars and the heroine's gaining enough strength for a peripatetic

transformation from a meek submissive Indian wife to a strong independent Indo-American woman who lives mostly in the now and the present and stops worrying about the future and is indifferent to the past. While scavenging firewood Jyoti gets a star shaped wound on her forehead. That scar becomes her third eye and through an archetypal image (Shiva's Third Eye) Mukherjee shows that already Jyoti was peering out into invisible words 'Nozu I am a sage'. The third eye gives her a wide and true perspective on life. She learns to look back to the past not like a coward bunkering herself inside nostalgia, sheathing her heart in a bullet-proof vest. For her, even memories are a sign of disloyalty. Similarly with her third eye she learns to look into the future with pain and hope and when she embarks into her final journey in America she is 'greedy' with wants and reckless with hopes. It is as if like Shiva she was swallowed the cosmos whole. Mukherjee also shows her woman protagonist repudiating centuries - old ugly Indian tradition of checking the boy's horoscope.

Another archetypal image that Bharati Mukherjee uses to bring out the protagonist's feminist trait is that of Kali, the Goddess of Destruction. But since in Hindu mythology Kali is an incarnation of Durga, the Goddess of Strength (Shakti), the image here is more relevant to the strength of a woman like Jasmine who has embarked on a perilous journey to a new world to fulfill her husband's dream. After her husband's death in order to reach USA she stows in a boat captained by half-face. But after landing in America when half-face demands his price (nothing less than the satisfaction of his lustful passions will do) Jasmine in a truly feminist gesture

decides to kill the Devil Incarnate and Mukherjee brilliantly fuses two archetypal images to enact the killing of Kali: The Goddess of Destruction and strength and the broken pitcher. This new identity in reality expresses another aspect of the 'feminist' in the Indian fiction in English for the true feminist, in my eyes, is the one who has achieved a proper balance between tradition and modernity. Predictably, her first change of name and identity occurs with her Hindu marriage, a ceremony which binds the female to the male more certainly than in the west. When she marries, Jasmine adopts her husband's name and becomes Jyoti Vijn. Where she had previously been defined by her relationship to her father, she is now re-defined in relation to her husband; the continuity lies in the line of (male) power. But Jyoti's family name is not all that changes when she marries Prakash Vijn: "My husband Prakash Vijn was a modern man, a city man.... 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. He said, "you are small and sweet and heady, my Jasmine. You'll quicken the world with your perfume." (Mukherjee: 61)

In the beginning in America Jasmine lodges with Prakash's Professor - Mr. Vadhera. But she feels uncomfortable in Professor's house which they have converted into a Punjab ghetto. On the eve of their departure to the states, Jyoti and Prakash go out shopping and the astrologer's pronouncement is fulfilled. Grief stricken after his death, Jyoti hears his voice exhorting her from every corner of her room: "there is no dying, there is only an ascending and descending, a

moving on to other planes. Don't crawl back to Hasnapur and feudalism." (Mukherjee:86) This is when Jyoti, a mere seventeen year old, decides to take control of fate and look for alternate realities. Later at Baden, Iowa, she broods and says: "We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams." (Mukherjee:29) From the beginning, Jasmine has some rebellious spirit in her. She rejected her grandmother's choice in the matter of marriage and married Prakash whom she loved, in a registrar office without checking his horoscope. It is clear that Jasmine does not hesitate to protest against anything which is contradictory to her perception. This attitude continues during her life in America also. Jyoti takes the risk of illegally entering America, goes through a journey worse than that of slaves imported into America, ends up at an untenanted cove, and finds herself dragging Prakash's heavy trunk completely at the mercy of a west Caribbean who is graphically described by her as Half-face. Helpless and vulnerable in a strange land she comes to grips with cruel reality after her rape by Half-Face and his murder by her. A typical Indian wife would have prayed to be annihilated before the violation. The twist lies in the fact that here we have a character who had realized painfully that "fates are so intertwined in the modern world, how can a god keep them straight." (Mukherjee:15) It is in the bath while she is cleaning herself that she decides to transcend 'personal dishonour' and fulfill her mission. Up to this point in the story the Indian identity of Jyoti, who had been named Jasmine by Prakash, is intact. The girl who had planned to throw herself on a pyre, lit to burn her husband's suits, turns

into a veritable Kali and with blood dripping from her tongue stabs Half-Face repeatedly leaving him dead. She is surprised at her own desire for survival; she wipes out the fingerprints, burns the excess and unwanted luggage and walks into the streets of the American dawn. Her Indian identity leaves her at this point; her desire to fulfill her mission which had seen her through the difficult passages to America, is abandoned.

A true feminist Jasmine does not hold fast to nostalgia that is dead but maintains certain basic traits of Indian Culture even after imbibing American Culture. Thus even after Jasmine has become Duff's day Mummy, a caregiver in the Taylor household her traditional roots break through again and again. With infinite care Mukherjee weaves her protagonist's gradual transformation but sometimes there is a conflict between Jasmine's two selves, one still holding past to traditional Indian Values of life and the other an adventure in a Capitalistic Culture. She then moves up to New York, first into an Indian ghetto which saps her individual identity, and then into a live-in job as a day-mummy to Duff, the daughter of Taylor and Wylie Hayes. In Florida and New York Jasmine is known variously as Jazzy, Jassy and Jassie, all derivatives of Jasmine, before Taylor renames her Jase, a third identity which is a more lasting abbreviation of her second one. At this juncture Jasmine pauses to examine her so-far tri-coloured identity: "Jyoti was now a sati goddess; she had burned herself in a trash-can funeral pyre... Jasmine lived for the future, for Vijh and Wife. Jase went to movies and lived for today"(Mukherjee:176) Here Jasmine recognizes that in her first two

incarnations she has not been free from patriarchal control- note the references to Sati and wife in relation to each of those identities. Only as Jase does she feel released from male domination of her identity, and free to define herself without male reference.

When Jasmine continues her journey to Iowa, she changes her name once to Jane Ripplemayer. In doing so she again defines herself through her relationship with a man, this time with Bud Ripplemayer, the man she lives with, though she is not legally married to him. when she sees Sukhi, her husband's murderer in the park and she decides to leave Claremont for Iowa. And here in Iowa Budd Ripplemeyer falls in love with her. Budd courts her because for him she is the very embodiment of Eastern mystery. She says, "Budd courts me because I am alien, I am darkness, mystery inscrutability".(Mukherjee:180)

Mukherjee passes the final judgement through her mouthpiece, Jasmine; we are once won over by her scintillating prose, her cadenced rhythm and above all her powerful feminist convictions. "I am caught between the promise of America and old world dutifulness".(Mukherjee:198) In her new role, Jasmine does not hesitate to yield sexually to the men who are willing to help her or with whom she feels comfortable. Even while carrying Bud's child, she looks forward to meeting Taylor with excitement. At the end she decides to leave Bud in favour of Taylor to continue her journey west, towards assimilation and her fully defined female identity. Mukherjee's female bildungsroman resists closure; unlike Jane Eyre, Jasmine doesn't end in marriage (or death, the other

'rightful end' of women in novels) and thus it refuses to accept that the future will be stasis. It is a fluid closure which, to borrow Du Plessis's phrase, writes beyond the ending. Jasmine's description of her aptly sums up her belief in an alternate reality: "She wasn't a missionary dispensing new visions and stamping out the old; she was a facilitator who made possible the lives of absolute ordinariness that we ached for."(Mukherjee:131) Jasmine transforms herself into Jane and falls in love with Bud. Jasmine speaks about her transformations: "I have had a husband for each of the women I have been, Prakash for Jasmine Taylor for Jassy, Bud for Jane". (Mukherjee:204)

Like Bharati Mukherjee herself, Jasmine, the heroine of the novel transforms herself with increasing rapidity. She is Jyoti, Jasmine and Jane. The novel smacks of the autobiography of Bharati Mukherjee. One of the similarities between Jasmine and the author is their drive to go after what they want and to not stop until they get it. Bharati's drive is to become a writer, and Jasmine's is to go to the United States. Like Jasmine, Mukherjee has changed citizenships and cultures with remarkable ease and rapidity. The sartorial changes we notice in Jasmine are symptoms of her inner change. She gets more Americanized. She blooms from a different alien with forged documents into an adventurous Jase: "I became an American in an apartment on Claremont Avenue" (Mukherjee:165). But these changes are not without pain. "There are not harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself. We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves"(Mukherjee:29).

The Americanisation of Jasmine is not her liberation though it hints at breaking of the rigid behavioural norms of the traditional Indian society. Though bold and assertive, still Jasmine's character delimits the definition of woman as a function. Mukherjee's women characters act American but think Indian. The characters lack intellectual, emotional and psychological depth and remain superficial aping the Western behaviour pattern. This way Mukherjee's creative activity envelopes itself in the mesh of unreality. The portrayal of the transformation of a docile Indian wife into an aggressive Indo-American woman. *Jasmine* reflects a combination of womanism and feminism. The novel supports Bharati Mukherjee's assertion, "I am inventing an American for myself, I am writing an America that hasn't been written about. The 'frontier' is up there, in front of me, I am pushing it back all the time. This is what makes the new stories so different. They are a natural outgrowth of where I am. I feel it's the writer's business to write about his or her environment, whatever that may be."(Nabar:17) *Jasmine* traces the life of Jyoti from a small town in Punjab to Iowa as a journey of the human spirit, its curiosity and will to achieve. Mukherjee's female characters are real, modern life like. They are typical representatives of young woman particularly of The Third World countries who cherish the dream of emigrating to America for higher education and higher wages, and then after arrival there, aspire to settle there permanently. Their situations and the difficulties they face are also realistically portrayed.

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