

RESEARCH ARTICLE



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**From Tradition to Transformation: A Journey of Self-identity in
Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine***

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Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* is a convincing narrative that traces the protagonist's odyssey from the rigorous confines of tradition to the liberating quest for transformation and self-identity. The novel reflects the immigrant experience, multiple re-inventions of the main protagonist as she journeys from rural India to urban America. Her story epitomizes immigrant the struggles of displacement, cultural assimilation, and the negotiation between the traditional values and newly cultivated identities. This paper examines how the novelist portrays Jasmine's resilience and adaptability, and her constant refusal to remain bound by a singular cultural or personal definition. Each of Jasmine's transformations—Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase, Jane—signifies a symbolic sluffing of past constraints and an embrace of new possibilities. Through Jasmine's transformation, Mukherjee underscores the complexities of selfhood, where tradition does not vanish but is continually reinterpreted within shifting cultural landscapes. In nutshell, the novel present's identity not as a fixed essence but as a dynamic process of survival, reinvention, and her selfhood.

Key Words: transformation, self-identity, prediction, impediments, negotiation, adaptability, displacement, assimilation, rigorous, immigrant, epitomizes.

Jasmine by Bharati Mukherjee is a novel about a young woman named Jyoti and her story of transformation. The novel *Jasmine* starts with a picturesque description of the village Hasanpur and with a prophecy of an old astrologer, who predicts about the main protagonist Jyoti. The protagonist, born as Jyoti in rural Punjab, and undergoes multiple names- Jane, Jasmine, Jase and each of her identity marks a stage in her search for selfhood even

across the geographical surroundings. The novelist depicts her not only the immigrant experiences but also highlights the stress between the tradition and modernity.

From the very outset, we are introduced with the life of the main protagonist is not going to be an easy one. She has to face a lot of difficulties and life is full of thorns for her. 'Fate is fate' (4). She will face exile and widowhood

in her life. But far away from these predictions, Jyoti discards all the predictions very boldly and does not believe in such predictions and she becomes ready to face all obstacles.

Her childhood name is Jyoti, which aptly means light and given by her grandmother. Jyoti of Hasanpur wants to lead a happy married life. She wants to live her life on her own conditions. Because of her confident personality, she gains a new personality every time. Jyoti is not sentimental one. She used her strength and resolves all difficulties. The continuous process of transformation is the death of one's old self and the birth of a new self.

Jyoti becomes a fighter and her desire for quest leads her toward many transformations like Jasmine, Jase, and Jane. Jyoti marries Prakash because she feels that she can realize her strength and weakness simultaneously. She accepts all the reverse situations boldly. She states:

I'm twenty-four now, I live in Baden, Elsa country, Iowa, but every time I lift a glass of water to my lips, fleetingly I smell it. I know what I don't want to become. (5)

She is not a traditional woman who never calls her husband with their names. She wants to a modern woman and, she selects Prakash for marriage. As Jyoti admits: "I fell in love with that voice. It was low, gravelly, unfooled. I was prepared to marry the man who belonged to that voice" (66). She does not want to play a role of village girl. Prakash proves a good choice and he accompanies her. He encourages her for being modern. As he says: " 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 foods" (81). He changes her name from Jyoti to Jasmine. According to Prakash, with the name of Jasmine, she will be able to spread her fragrance everywhere. She resists the boundaries of traditional womanhood and redefines herself through the continuous transformation which occurs.

After few years of marriage, she becomes widow. Prakash dies in a brawl. He is killed by Sukkhi. Jasmine's love for Prakash is so deep that at once she decides that she will take revenge of Prakash's murder. As a traditional woman she does not go for suicide or never accepts that she will live her life as a widow, rather she decides that she will fulfill all the dreams of Prakash. She decides to go to America and it was her second transformation. She thinks in herself that the ultimate goal of her life is to fulfill the dreams of Prakash. Now she longs for an alien land. She is an opportunist like a new woman. When she finds that her age is becoming a problem in her dreams, she immediately asks Prakash to make a forged passport and goes to America. As we see when Prakash says:

You might be eighteen before this visa comes through. You think going to America is as easy as going to Bombay or Delhi. (91)

What country? What continent? We pass through wars, through plagues. I am hungry for news, but the discarded papers are in characters or languages I cannot read. (101)

I hand over my forged, expensive passport. (103)

Jyoti of Hasanpur becomes Jasmine and when she arrives America, she thinks that now she will live her new life. However, her first day in America was not good. Her all dreams shatters when a Half-Faced man raped her. She thinks about her transformation from Jyoti to Jasmine.

She wants to find her real identity in the name Jasmine, which was given to her by Prakash. Jasmine means Perfume. Therefore, she decides that she will spread the perfume of Prakash desires everywhere. The ultimate goal of her life is to fulfill the ambitions of Prakash.

She attempts to reshape her destiny and very soon realizes that shuttled in two identities

when she states, "I shuttled between identities" (77). Jasmine is an optimistic and sees the things very positively even in the small petty things she looks for happiness.

In America, she faces hunger, violence, rape, and murder and ill- treatment but like a valiant woman, she never gets frightened, no matter the situation or cost. Jasmine is ready to make compromises and adjustments. She moves from one place to another and from one person to another person.

The novel *Jasmine* is an exile of a young and courageous girl from the old- world of India and old traditional cultural values. Jasmine raised her voice against the rotted traditions of society, which tries to inhale her individuality and existence. Jasmine's quest for identity leads her towards modernity. She is not like Vimla, another young widow girl of her village. Vimla is also leading the life of a widow, and believing and following all the rules and traditions made for widow. On the other hand, Jasmine decides that Jyoti is dead and the girl who is alive is Prakash's Jasmine.

We had created life. Prakash had taken Jyoti and created Jasmine, and Jasmine would complete the mission of Prakash. Vijn and Wife. (97)

Her mother tells her that she only is the reason of Prakash's death. In Hindu mythology, a girl is not allowed to call her husband with his name but as Jasmine did not follow the same, that is why her husband is no more. Jasmine feels suffocated in the company of her mother. According to mother, her love- marriage with Prakash is also the reason of her widowhood.

Her school masterji thinks that she is a very brilliant student and fit for getting English education. It is Prakash, who sows the fruitful seeds of freedom, modernity and liberation in Jyoti. He is the only one who transforms her whole personality and starts with her name. He gives a new name Jasmine to Jyoti, who turns now from a village girl to city girl. Prakash tries

to insert and instills the modern values in her, which will be helpful to make her a bold and strong woman. As Jasmine states: He was a modern man. Still, I wasn't sure how he would react to my having my own kitty.(79) and according to Prakash," You are small and sweet and heady, my Jasmine. You'll quicken the whole world with your perfume."(77)

Jasmine is blamed and cursed for her widowhood by the villagers. People cursed her by saying that she did not follow the advice of that astrologer and married with her own choice that is why God is displeased and God send Sukkhi to kill her husband. It was predicted by an astrologer that she would lead a widow life.

Through the character of Jasmine, Mukherjee tries to explore the traditional concept also that women are not allowed to call their husband by his name. However, Jasmine is not like other common girls, she accepts it as her fate and moves to America. Though her first experience in America is not ethical because she faces ill- treatment, hunger and rape. A Half-faced man raped her. Half- face man is too fearful in his appearance as she describes:

Half- Face had lost an eye and ear and most of his cheek in a paddy field in Vietnam. Kingsland, a Jamaican, knew the story, because Half- Face was famous in the west Caribbean. Half- Face was a demolitions expert before he became a sea captain. (105)

As Half- Face raped her man but it does not leave any tragic effect on Jasmine. She decides to take revenge by killing her rapist. Through the character of Jasmine, Bharati Mukherjee intends to express the reality that rapes are being committed everywhere. The surprising thing is in Jasmine's rape is this that she takes an incarnation of Kali to kill the Half-Face man. As in one of her interview Mukherjee comments:

Jasmine as "love goddess"- both destroyer and preserver, powerful with

want and wanting, facing and making violent change, moving through lives with tornado force, in love with the country,... Revitalizing it, if it allows itself to be revitalized. (An Interview : Looking American Culture)

Jasmine is raped first in the boat and after that in hotel. The use of third eye symbolizes the power of a woman. As we see that, she folds her hands, prays before the idol of Ganapati, and transforms herself as mother Kali who takes a fearful incarnation to give a moral lesson to the devils. In the novel, we see that Jasmine also transforms herself to play the role of Kali and kill her rapist. She never thinks on her decision again. She has no time to ponder over the result of murder.

Bharati Mukherjee presented her as a courageous and resourceful woman, who transform her dreams in reality. She is not only a path- finder, full of self- confidence rather she is a leader for all womankind who are desirous to get liberation and freedom from the shackles of traditions.

Now in the search of her identity Jasmine meets Mary Webb at the university club in Dalton and wants to know the language. She meets Ma Leela also for spirituality. For a short while, she shows her faith on old traditions. The novel documents in detail the course of Jasmine's life: the evolution from Jyoti to Jasmine and immediately after Prakash's death her shifting to America and the evolution of 'self- reliance' as a professional and 'individual' with a new form and order. The act of killing her rapist, and the decision of moving towards America is a kind of self- assertion and reflects a self- affirming transformation of Jasmine.

In America Jasmine's quest for a house of her own, with its accompanying economic independence has begun to teach her that desire and its fulfillment require very different efforts. Jasmine emerges not as a tragic and pathetic character rather as a one who is determined to

change her destiny. In reality, it is a novel of adoption not of defeat.

After this incident, Jasmine begins her new life and tries to reinvent her identity and personality by accepting and adapting the American way of life. In America, she gets a helping hand in the form of Lillian Gordon who gives her a new name Jazzy and instructs her about the American way of life. She tells her American experiences."

She hides her identity that she is an Indian so that no one can recognize her. She works in the house of Professor- Ji and finds no happiness in the house of Professor. Vadhera. Punjabi atmosphere of the family reminds the life of Hasanpur. Jasmine feels herself unable to bear all the past. She wants freedom and for her freedom means to live her life on her own conditions. She realizes that this family is becoming an impediment in the path of her self- quest and self- discovery. She decides to leave this house immediately.

She moves to Manhattan and there meets to Taylor. Now this time, Taylor changes her identity and gives a new name 'Jase'. One more time Jasmine faces the new transformation. She becomes Jase, and courageously she accepts this transformation with new name and identity.

In the company of Taylor, she feels a feeling of freedom and becomes self- confident. She is happy to take a role of care- taker as 'day- mummy' to Duff, the adopted child of Taylor and Wylie. Here she feels herself totally Americanized and falls in love with Taylor and fulfills his sexual desires. She accepts her love for Taylor.

For her new name, she says:

Jyoti would have saved. But Jyoti was now a sati- goddess; she had burned herself in a trash- can- funeral pyre behind a boarded- up motel in Florida. Jasmine lived for the future, for Vijn & Wife. Jase went to movies and lived for today. (176)

Jasmine realized that the land of her dream America is totally differ from her dreamland "I had been in America nearly a day and had yet to see an " American" face"(129). But like a new woman she accepts everything which America is offering to her.

The imaginative dream of getting American citizenship plays an important role but it is not easy to get the dream easily. So, people should also learn how to live in midst of brutal violence and how to survive in instant changes. We can see the example of *Jasmine* in which main protagonist argues:

I should never have been Jane Ripplemeyer of Baden, Iowa. I should have lived in that feudal village, perhaps making a monumental leap to modern Julundhar. When Jyoti's future was blocked after the death of Prakash. Lord Yama should have taken her. (*Jasmine* 127)

She believes that America gives a temptation of freedom but Freedom has its price. "Hope and Pain. Pain and Hope (21). Like a brave and courageous girl, Jasmine confesses: I've also killed a man, you know. There's nothing in this world that's too terrible (107). Jasmine becomes a live- in- partner of Bud- a rich banker who gives her a name Jase, again new identity. She accepts this transformation also. She is in love with Bud, but her bad luck chased her here and Bud is shot, fortunately safe, but loses his legs. His wife leaves him at that time Jane nurses him and gives her full love from the very core of her heart. She sees a totally different atmosphere in America. As she states:

What country? What continent? We pass through wars, through plagues. I am hungry for news, but the discarded papers are in characters or languages I cannot read. (*Jasmine* 101)

We can see that how a new woman emerges in the novel *Jasmine*, when the main protagonist rejects to accept the traditional

values and very courageously accepts the entire American values as well as American culture. In the very beginning, she revolts against the forecast of the village astrologer in very harsh words. She is too strong in her actions that she rejects to marry to a widower choosen by her grandmother and against the wishes of all her family members, she selects Prakash Vijn as her husband.

After living in Manhattan, she moves to Iowa, where she meets to Ripplemeyer and gets a job in bank. Here Mr. Bud falls in love with her, and she finds her real happiness in Bud and adopted son Du. Bud gives a new identity to Jasmine as 'Jane'. She happily adopts a new identity. In Iowa, she becomes Jane Ripplemeyer and adapts a new culture. She started living in live-in relationship with Bud and accepts the role of a stepmother of Bud's adopted son Du. Her bad luck follows her. Some Harlan Kroner shoots Bud for having denied a bank loan to her. Jane pays her full attention to Bud, nurses him and tries to give pleasure and comfort to him. She states:

I watched the disintegration of enviable virtues: dutifulness, decency, compassion. Where could I go? (*Jasmine* 204)

She became pregnant and, carries a baby of Bud in her womb. Bud wants to marry with Jane. It is Jane, who feels alienated and stranger in Bud's company now. Jasmine denies accepting the tradition of patriarchal society. In between Taylor comes back to California and want to take her back in his life. For Jasmine, the love for Taylor and duty for Buds becomes the loggerhead with each other. We see her extreme tension in these lines, when she asks about her identity to her own soul:

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.(*Jasmine* 197)

She decides to leave Bud and moves to Taylor, we see Jasmine, with a very different face and decision. She seems greedy woman, who is thinking about her future. She takes a practical decision for her future life. She does not torture herself with moral and traditional values. As we see:

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

With her decision of going America, Jasmine breaks all the shackles of tradition and proves false this prevalent proverb about Indian village girls that, "Village girls are like cattle; whichever way you lead them, that is the way they will go (Jasmine 46). Jasmine transforms herself completely from an Indian village girl, whose grandmother wants to marry her off at 11, into a new and modern American woman who only thinks about herself and her happiness. She transforms in such an American new woman who only cares about her dreams, desires, ambitions and happiness. As Jasmine's decision, in the very end of the novel converts her into a new woman, who never cares about society and the questions that who will say what. We see her firm decision for the sake of her happiness in these words of the protagonist:

I am not choosing between men. I am caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness. A caregiver's life is a good life, a worthy life. What am I to do? (Jasmine 240)

Then there is nothing I can do. Time will tell if I am tornado, rubble-maker, arising from nowhere and disappearing into a cloud. I am out the door and in the potholed and rutted driveway, scrambling ahead of Taylor, greedy wants and reckless from hope. (Jasmine 241)

Mukherjee observes in *Days and Nights in Calcutta*, "To be a woman--- was to be a powerless victim whose only escape was through self-inflicted wounds" (*Days and Nights in Calcutta* 228). Jasmine breaks all the shackles or chains of caste, colour and gender. She tries to be free from the burden of patriarchy. Jasmine has learnt to live for herself. She has achieved a new identity. She is giver and taker both. She gives happiness and care to Bud and Taylor, and takes the life of her rapist, Half-Faced man. The process of transformation from Jyoti to Jasmine, Jase to Jane is the death of one's self and birth of a new self.

Jasmine has adaption qualities. Her all name given by different men have a different symbol of different women and it is Jasmine, who amplify all the meanings in her life, in a true sense. Jyoti symbolizes a silent woman, Jasmine symbolizes feudal and modern woman, Jane and Jase symbolizes dreams and freedom.

Unlike the traditional image of a submissive and domestic woman, Jasmine emerges as a dynamic figure who not only challenges of the patriarchal expectations but also she embraces it happily and change it as a mean of survival. Her journey is a story of her moral courage, a search of self-awareness and self-assertion. The main and major motif of the Jasmine is the recreation of herself. Jasmine represents a departure from traditional femininity to self-determining spirit of a modern woman.

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