

JASMINE: THE FIGHTER & SURVIVER

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Bharati Mukherjee, an India born American novelist, has made a deep impression on the literary canvass. She is an investigative pioneer--of innovative terrains, practices, and literatures—co-existent with her wide-ranging mission to discover new worlds. Her novels, honestly, depict the issues of impact of cultural differences over a female psyche and her spirit to assimilate and encounter challenges which come on the way. Acculturation is the depressing upshot of post-modern scenario, which Mukherjee had comprehended much early in her life.

That is why, as a postmodern writer, her foremost concern has been the life of South-Asian expatriates and the dilemma of ‘acculturation’ and ‘assimilation.’ She represents in her novels the contemporary woman’s struggle to define herself and attain an autonomous selfhood, especially in cross-cultural crisis, a subject which has assumed a great significance in the present world of globalization. She endeavors to dive deep into the distorted psyche of those immigrant women who have been surviving in the conflict of traditional Indian values; inherent in their personality and their fascination for western mode of living.

She says once; “I believe that our souls can be reborn in another body, so the perspective I have about a single character's life is different from that of an American writer who believes that he only has one life....As a Hindu....I believe in the existence of alternate realities, and this belief makes itself evident in my fiction.” (Carb 651)

Jasmine is an indicator that Mukherjee had moved on to exuberance from expatriation. In an interview with Ameena Meer, she talks of her concerns as a writer: “It was in writing that book that I transformed myself from being an expatriate to realizing I’m an immigrant...my roots are here. There is no going back.” (Meer 26)

Bharati Mukherjee's Magnum Opus, *Jasmine* (1989) is an affirmative novel which explores female identity through the story of an Indian peasant woman who like the proverbial phoenix rises from her ashes. With each new move, she reinvents herself with a new name – Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase, Jane - and with each new name she moves closer to her dream of being an American, of belonging to the New World. Jasmine's on-going journey is an effective device which highlights her rootless

position and her search for identity. Her changing identity and roles are presented by the image of a hurtling stone: “I feel at times like a stone hurtling through diaphanous mist, unable to grab hold, unable to show myself, yet unwilling to abandon the ride I'm on.” (*Jasmine* 138)

The theme of *Jasmine* is an Indian immigrant's encounter with the New World and her gradual transformation as she thoroughly imbibes the new culture. Jasmine never feels exasperated by cultural incongruities. She strives to make a new start in the host country, ignorant of the deterrents from her native past. At seven, Jyoti is doomed to “widowhood and exile” but through the prophecy turns out to be literally true; she cancels out her fate and “repositions the stars” as she had said she would achieve happiness with a man of her choice in her chosen land of adoption (*Jasmine* 240).

The character of Jasmine unveils the reason why Indianess is fluid rather than fragile and calls for celebration. Jasmine's story is really the making of an American mind like her creator, “I think of Jasmine and many of my characters as being people who are pulling themselves out of the very traditional world in which their fate is pre-determined their destiny resigned to the stars. But Jasmine says: I am going to reposition the stars.” (Meer 26)

She is victorious in carving out her own destiny. She is an individual who makes mistakes but has the courage to choose and take risks. Jasmine, Bharati Mukherjee admits, “...became the summary of my own emotions without any of the events or characters being in any way autobiographical. My fiction comes out of my personal obsessions. I listen to the voices in my head; I find metaphors, the appropriate metaphor for getting it across, for embodying an obsession. My Jasmine, or Mukherjee, have lived through hundreds of years within one generation, in the sense of and then coming out a world with fixed destinies, fixed cultures taking on culture which, for us, is without rules. I'm making the rules up as I go along, because, in many ways, I and my characters are pioneers.” (Meer 26)

In *Jasmine*, the immigrants are willing participants in the dominant culture. “The US,” she insists, “offers the opportunity to dream big and to pull it off, actions that are not possible in a traditional society” (*Darkness* 3). The potential of fluidity which Mukherjee attributes to American culture is epitomized in the main character's metamorphosis from Jyoti to Jasmine to Kali to Jazzy to Jase and to Jane. Each of these character transformations is marked by changes in behaviour and personality, such as her successive rebirth seems analogy to Hindu transmigration of the soul. While examining the codes associated with each of the six permutations we discover that while some codes

disappear, certain qualities do in fact transmigrate from one self to the other. The survivor instinct remains constant.

Mukherjee describes her fascination for this character: “The character would not die. I am intrigued by that particular kind of survival” (*Jasmine* 115). Interestingly in the novel, Jasmine's survival is linked with her resilience of spirit in adhering to a number of supplemented selves. With the help of a constantly evolving imagination, like her fictional characters, she looks forward not to the present reality, for she feels that reinvention of self, not nostalgia, is her strength.

Being a novel of emigration and assimilation, she fictionalizes the process of Americanization by tracing a young Indian woman's experience of trauma and triumph in her attempt to forge a new identity for herself. She not only rebels against age old superstitious and traditions, but also effects a proper balance between tradition and modernity by embracing a home away from home. Once the home - country has been relegated to the recess of rejected memory, and the new life is looked forward to with hope, the process of defining a new identity begins. The novel is a celebration of the strength of woman, not her weakness. The novelist has articulated the many sided pathos and rebellion of contemporary Indian woman, not only in India but also in the modern world.

Jasmine's journey of self-discovery taking her from a feudal condition to her migrancy and exile in the west is marked by violence. She is both a victim and an agent of violence. Violence is the other face of power; gaining an understanding of it involves grasping the play and the staging of power structures, particularly in the post-colonial diasporic context. Moreover, violence manifests itself not only in social and political but also in psychosexual and psychological realms. Thus, Jasmine comes out as a woman, killing in order to live.

Jasmine sets out for America to fulfil her husband's mission in a rather strange and unique way to commit Sati in the university where Prakash was to become a student. Bearing illegal migration, hunger, cold and even rape, she sounds philosophical, typically in the Hindu way when she realizes: “My body was merely the shell, soon to be discarded. Then I could be reborn, debts and sins all paid for” (*Jasmine* 121).

She is aware of the fate of immigrants like her. She muses, “We are the outcastes and deportees, strange pilgrims visiting outlandish shrines, landing at the end of tarmacs, ferried in old army trucks where we are roughly handled and taken to roped off corners of waiting rooms where

surly, barely wakened customs guards await then bribe, we are dressed in shreds of national costumes, out of reason, the wilted plumage of intercontinental vagabondage. We ask only one thing to be allowed to land; to pass through; to continue.” (*Jasmine* 101)

The apocalyptic moment of Jasmine's real self - assertion occurs on the occasion of her actual violent rape by Half-Face, on the threshold of the New-world. In killing Half-Face, she experiences an epistemic violence that is also a life-affirming transformation: “For the first time in my life I understood what evil was about. It was about not being human. Half-face was from an underworld of evil. It was a very simple, very clear perception, a moment of truth, the kind of understanding that I have heard comes at the moment of death (*Jasmine* 116). In this act of being demonized into Kali, she becomes “death incarnate” (*Jasmine* 119).

She thinks that Yama has deserted her and this new lease of life is like a rebirth. Samir Dayal says, “but the culmination of her emancipatory journey towards self-assertion will involve either demonization, requiring an accession to a ghostliness and a disillusionment with reified selfhood” (71). Murdering to create, Jasmine learns she must also be something, always already different- a necessity. Gloria Anzaldua describes: “For centuries now ... it has always been a world of the intellect, reasoning the machine. Here women were struck with having tremendous powers of intuition experiencing other levels of reality and other realities yet they had to sit on it because men would say, well, you're crazy. All of sudden there's a re-emergence of the intuitive energies - and they are very powerful. And if you apply them in your life on the personal and political plane then that give you a tremendous amount of energy - it's almost like a volcano erupting.” (205).

It is the eagerness of Jasmine to kill her past self that permits her to dynamically proceed into an alien but reassuring future. Her duties as a wife to Prakash are over when she burns her suitcase and walks out of the motel. Her intense desire to build a home away from her native land and to rebuild her identity helps her to survive. The future into which she propels herself are not guaranteed to be successful, but do have the potential for personal material and spiritual success.

There is an inevitable psychological violence in her life which is of positive character and hardens her will to survive. The transformation is not smooth but jerky and violent.

But inspite of imbibing the American culture, Jasmine exhibits certain basic traits of Indian culture. This may be bowing to the values and traditions instilled in her consciousness by the native society. When she comes to know that Duff is not a natural child but an adopted one, her reactions

are culturally revealing: “I could not imagine a non-genetic child. A child that was not my own, nor my husband's struck me as a monstrous idea. Adoption was as foreign to me as the idea of widow remarriage” (*Jasmine* 170).

Her Indian sense of shame cannot tolerate the sight of “naked bodies combing their hair in front of dresser mirrors” (*Jasmine* 171). Her traditional roots break through again and again. She cannot imagine sleeping alone. So she asks naively:

“...Where will Duff sleep?”

“Her room of course....”

“Who will I sleep with?” I asked.”(*J* 175) And the reply that Taylor's wife gives is embedded in the American way of life but rather foreign to Jasmine, brought up in a Punjabi village. “What you do on your own time is your business,” said Wylie (*J* 175). Jasmine is still shackled to the Indian ethos and the stories that she tells Duff are about Gods and demons and mortals. She tells Duff the story of Nachiketa (Nachos in American) and Yama. Not being prepared to imbibe pseudo modernity, she is shocked when Wylie walks out on Taylor and comments:

She realises the “liquidity” and “transitoriness” of human relationships in America. And the way Taylor behaves after Wylie decides to leave him for Stuart Eschelman is a part of growing up for “American” Jasmine who cannot help comparing Taylor’s behaviour with that of an Indian husband.

Though Mukherjee sketches her protagonist’s gradual transformation with infinite care, but sometimes there is a conflict between her two selves, one still holding fast to traditional Indian values of life and the other an adventures in a capitalistic culture. As she so succinctly puts it: “For every Jasmine, the reliable caregiver, there is a Jase - the profligate adventurer. I thrilled to the tug of opposing forces” (*Jasmine* 176-77).

Yet, she is not oblivious to the positive side of American ethos. Her admiration for Taylor's democratic values and easy friendship, which she says, had nothing to do with sex, ends up in her yielding to him. Taylor also starts loving her and she wishes that her role as a “day-mummy” should never end. She is engrossed in the American world and conceives the idea that she is rooted and has got an established home: “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” (*Jasmine* 176).

She has fully assimilated herself to the American family life with adopted children and pregnancy. But once again she acts as a free American Individual when she discards the “old-world dutifulness” and embarks with Taylor on a Californian adventure, the ultimate location for freedom. From her duties towards others, she now thinks of her duty to herself. She changes because she wants to change and thinks of her happiness, her love, herself: “I am not choosing between men. I am caught between the promise of American and old world dutifulness. A caregiver’s life is a good life, a worthy life” but not a full life (*Jasmine* 240). She does not feel any guilt. She no longer thinks of herself as Jane. She has survived the worst in American life and now is free to choose her place in Taylor's life. Her attempt is to “reposition her stars”. She ventures out, “greedy with wants and reckless from hope” (*Jasmine* 240). The doors have opened and risk must be taken to become part of the American life.

Jasmine is antithetical to the protagonists of Mukherjee's earlier fiction. Where Tara and Dimple fail to strike roots because of their innate weaknesses, Jasmine emerges as a survivor. The transformation of her consciousness is by the positive use of will which finds meaningful culmination in action. This process begins with her decision to travel to America and countries through the numerous encounters in the new place. Her experiences are as varied as the vast American continent which she traverses. It is clear that for Jasmine it is willingness to accept the new culture that makes the process of acculturation easy. She avoids even talking about Hasnapur as even “memories are a sign of disloyalty” (*Jasmine* 231). Of course, she experiences the culture shock and feeling of novelty that all immigrants have to face. On seeing a revolving door for the first time, she wonders: “How could something be always open and at the same time closed?” (*Jasmine* 133). Life in America seems like a whirlpool to her yet, Jasmine does not face the dilemmas that, trouble Tara and Dimple because she is willing to face the fact that life in the U.S. is radically different from that in India. She exhibits a resilience that is capable of adapting to every changed situation. Jasmine exemplifies the joy of immigration and makes no special effort to keep in touch with Indians. Mukherjee suggests that the only way to survive in the new land is to be like Jasmine and not “attempt to preserve the fragile identity as an Indian” (*Darkness* 3). Though Tara and Dimple do not mix much with the local Americans, in the case of Jasmine there is a constant give and take. This helps her break free of many age-old prejudices and achieve a total integration within herself. I changed because I wanted to. To bunker oneself inside nostalgia, to sheathe the heart in a bulletproof vest, was to be a coward” (*Jasmine* 185). It is to Jasmine's credit that she is able to not

merely strike roots easily, but also uproot herself with equal ease and move on without any remorse.

While undergoing the process of process of fighting and surviving the identity of Jasmine is transformed. Mukherjee elucidates her concept of fluid and changing identity to survive through jasmine. She agrees with the lines of Stuart Hall, “The Diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference.” (401-402)

Hence, in summary, through the life of Jasmine, author Bharati Mukherjee competently portrays the themes of changing identity, western feminism versus Indian tradition and self-discovery. In a way these three themes are interrelated. For example, as Jasmine attempts to resolve for herself her true identity and set out to apply newly adopted values in her life, she progresses as individual and end up discovering more about herself. By depicting in detail the complex difficulties confronting her but she never gives up because of her fighting spirit. Mukherjee also illustrates the underlying vulnerabilities.

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