

IMPACT FACTOR: 5.47

ISSN 2278 - 9529



GALAXY

INTERNATIONAL MULTIDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH JOURNAL

Refereed and Peer-Reviewed
Open Access e-Journal

Vol. X, Issue-2 (March 2021)

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Reconsidering the Novel *Jasmine* by Bharathi Mukherjee

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Article History: Submitted-26/03/2021, Revised-08/04/2021, Accepted-09/04/2021, Published-10/04/2021.

Abstract:

Bharathi Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* has received critical responses ever since it was first published in 1989. The protagonist of this novel, who migrates to the USA, experiences innumerable hurdles such as sexual exploitation, alienation, displacement and identity crisis before she tries to settle down comfortably in the foreign land, not looking back to her life in India. The novel traces her quest for identity at various levels. In the process of acculturation and inventing newer identities, she adopts various strategies to establish herself in the Anglo-American society. Looking into this novel, after three decades of its first publication, it becomes clear that Jasmine, the protagonist of the novel in pursuit of her self-identity, finally adopts 'modernity' as a strategy as identified by the Post-Colonial thinkers. The paper explores the novel from the Post-Colonial perspectives and tries to trace the elements of alienation, displacement, acculturation and identity crisis at various points of the text. It is observed that Jasmine's immigrant experiences teach her to adopt 'modernity' as a strategy to settle finally in the foreign land.

Keywords: alienation, displacement, acculturation, identity crisis, modernity.

Among the diaspora writers, Bharati Mukherjee has a prominent place. She was born in a Bengali family in India in the year 1940 and she died in the year 2017 at age of 76. She had the privilege of doing her education in Europe. She married Clark Blaise and she lived with her family in Canada for some years. She felt that her works were not well received in Canada and she attributed this to racism. Later, when she migrated permanently to the USA, she established herself as a renowned writer and she liked to be recognised as an Indian American writer with no hyphenation. She has authored many novels and short stories and her *Jasmine*, a bildungsroman novel, is her third novel. The protagonist of this novel is a mirror image of herself.

The works of Indian diasporic writers have explored the immigrant experiences in various dimensions and Bharathi Mukherjee's *Jasmine* stands different as the protagonist of the novel develops multiple identities as an outcome of her immigrant experiences. Any migrant to a foreign land naturally undergoes experiences such as alienation, displacement and acculturation. 'Integration', one of the four acculturation categories postulated by Berry is adopting receiving culture and retaining the heritage culture. An immigrant who adopts 'Integration' is "a member of an ethno group, to participate as an integral part of the larger society" (Berry,2.5). The protagonist of the novel *Jasmine* adapts American culture overtly and undermines her Indian culture. Ultimately, she adapts 'modernity' as a strategy to attain her goal and live comfortably in the host land. The reason behind adapting 'Modernity' is 'Othering'. 'Othering', a Postcolonial concept is "a dialectical process because the colonizing 'Other' is established at the same time as its colonized others are produced as subjects" (Ashcroft,156).

Migrant literature currently focuses on the impacts and consequences of the social and cultural displacements which the migrants experience. Stereotyping fixes the colonial masters' views and experiences of their subjects and presents them as being factual and consistent with the entire population. Stereotyping and "othering" are processes by which individuals or groups are given identities and social positions, values and so on through certain specific qualities. Colonial discourse is a productive process of 'othering' and 'otherness'. "Otherness, which is at once an object of desire and derision, an articulation of difference contained within the fantasy of origin and identity" (Bhaba,96). In this respect we can argue that 'othering' or identifying an individual as an immigrant from the third world, is the stereotype which *Jasmine* wants to completely change and establish herself as an American.

Post-Colonial theories propagate that 'modernity' has come from the West to the rest of the world and it has come with the colonial conquest. It also reiterates that the colonisers are civilised and the colonised are backward. 'Modernity' is manifested in the form of appropriation of Western culture or adaptation of Western culture. The constant propagandising of this idea has given a thought to the colonised mind that Westernisation is Modernisation. Post-Colonial thinkers largely believed that the people in a diasporic situation adopted 'modernity' as a strategy to establish one's identity in the process of acculturation. *Jasmine*, who experiences sexual assault and discrimination in Anglo-American society to live at par with the Anglo-Americans, considers Americanisation is the way out to attain her goal. The study, under this hypothesis tries to explore how *Jasmine*, the protagonist of the novel, adapts this strategy in pursuit of her identity in Anglo American Society.



For the purpose of this study, analytical method is used. The primary source of study is the novel *Jasmine* written by Bharathi Mukherjee and published by Virago Press in 1991. The novel is analysed from the Post-Colonial perspective using the primary and the secondary sources.

Bharathi Mukherjee's *Jasmine* presents the journey of the protagonist Jasmine from Jyoti to Jane in the process of her evolution of her self-identity. The course of the novel witnesses two major phases of action. The first phase of the novel depicts Jyoti's life engulfed in a small village Hasanpur in Punjab. It narrates her years till she marries Prakash Vijn, living in an atmosphere, where women were given less freedom and their aspirations are controlled in the name of customs and traditions. Jasmine is called Jyothi by her parents when the novel begins. She breaks the patriarchal norms and orthodoxy by taking a decision to pursue her studies even after attaining puberty. Her marriage with Prakash focuses on the breaking of patriarchal norms of her family and society. Her marriage is depicted as an important turning point in her life where she undergoes transformation. Prakash Vijn not only changes her name to Jasmine but also instils modern thinking in her. The second phase of the novel is her life after the death of Prakash and her migration from India to the USA. The novel depicts the transformative journey of Jyoti: from Jyoti to Jasmine, Jasmine to Jazzy, Jazzy to Jase, Jase to Jane and finally from Jane to Jase. These transformations are not mere change of names but transformation from one identity to another identity.

The novel *Jasmine* presents how the protagonist of the novel uproots herself from her motherland and re-roots herself in the USA by adapting the American culture to the fullest extent. "Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (Hall,393). Jasmine's move from one role to another at different junctures demonstrates clearly the dislocation and relocation of the protagonist continually in the foreign land. The revelation in Jasmine begins from her days in India. She has a strong conviction that she would not live like cattle as many women in her village did. She asserts her individuality by refusing to marry a widower who was suggested by her grandmother. By marrying Prakash Vijn, she establishes her individuality. After moving to the USA, Jasmine was constantly aware of her geographical displacement. In order to adjust with the dominant Anglo-American culture, she relocates her native-subjectivity to the new socio-political environment. In this acculturation process, even though she remains a hybrid of her native culture and her host culture, she appears as a typical American in the public space of America. Jasmine's contact with the American culture results in the constant change of her identity which was in the state of flux.

The Diasporic consciousness which Bharathi Mukherjee has showcased in the novel *Jasmine* is extremely different from the same sentiment expressed in her first two novels which projects the theme of nostalgia, as *Jasmine*'s prime theme is to highlight the multiple identities of the protagonist. The first two novels of Bharathi Mukherjee are a reflection of the nostalgic memories which the author had before she shifted to the USA and adapted American culture.

When Bharathi Mukherjee migrated to the USA, her perspectives regarding immigrants changed retrospectively. She did not want to label herself as an Indian-American writer. The protagonist of her first novel *The Tiger's Daughter* Tara reflects Bharathi Mukherjee's personal experience of being caught in-between the American culture and Indian culture. Tara represents the immigrants who get disappointed when they realise that returning to their motherland is not as pleasant as they had imagined. Her second novel *Wife* presents the immigrant experiences of the protagonist Dimple which is different from the experiences of Tara. Dimple represents women immigrants who do not find their dreamland in the USA, as enterprising as they had imagined. The novel *Jasmine* presents a different kind of immigrant experience of the protagonist named Jasmine who completely adapts herself to the American culture. For Jasmine, becoming an American was partly a question of her survival. In an interview with Ameena Meera, she admits: "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." (Ameena,26). By mimicking American culture, she wants herself to be accepted as an American.

Many instances in the novel *Jasmine* project Jasmine as a rebel from her childhood. Jasmine's views were liberal from her childhood and the urge to empower herself was from her early years. The uniqueness of Jasmine is that she could decide her future. She says, "I know what I don't want to become" (Jasmine,5). She believed, "What is to happen will happen" (Jasmine,3). When her sisters enquire about the scar on her forehead she replies, "It's not a scar, it's my third eye" (Jasmine, 5). In the school her master encourages her to read English books which she accepts willingly. When asked whether she wanted to study further, she expresses her willingness to pursue her studies boldly. Her interest in English matches with her husband's wish to make her modern in her views and approaches. Her marriage with Prakash-Vijh is her bold decision. The marriage is a registered marriage which is a cultural shock to her friend Vimla. Her husband changes her name from Jyoti to Jasmine. When she wishes to get pregnant, her husband Prakash convinces her to think about their career and defer pregnancy. The partition of India and Pakistan at the backdrop causes riots in the village where she lives. Kalasa Lion Sukhwinder Singh kills her husband Prakash. Prakash had sought



admission to a University in Florida. This instigates Jasmine to pursue his ambition and leave for the USA after his death. She migrates illegally through agents to the USA. Half Face, the captain of the ship in which she voyages to America rapes her. Lillian Gordon saves her from humiliation and discrimination. She encourages her to change her Indian attire and wear Western attire. Lillian Gordon changes her name from Jasmine to Jazzy. Jazzy moves to New York. She meets Taylor and begins a new life. When she spots Sukhwinder Singh, the man who killed her husband, she decides to leave New York and move to Iowa for her safety. Her living -in relationship with Bud Ripplemayer, bearing the child of Bud in her womb, and deciding to leave Bud and choose Taylor as her life partner portrays her as a typical American woman.

Jasmine faces trouble in the journey to the USA as she was seen as ‘other’, a woman from the Third World. As Jasmine did not want this stigma anymore, she adapts Americanisation as a strategy to survive comfortably in the place where she has migrated. Jasmine in different names is a different person. It is similar to Bharati Mukherjee’s belief in soul being born again and again in another body as she had mentioned in an interview with Carb: “ I was born into a Hindu Bengali Brahmin family which means that I have a different sense of self, of existence, and of mortality than do writers like Malamud. I believe that our soul can be born 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 (Carb,646)”. The manifestation of Bharathi Mukherjee’s belief that a soul has different life is Jasmine taking different roles in different names.

Changing to different selves namely Jasmine/Jazzy/Jase/Jane is the protagonist’s willingness and choice. When Jyoti kills a wild dog while the women were squatting in an open space to attend the nature call, the author indicates that it was a gesture of self -assertion. This is preamble to Jasmine killing Half Face, a person who raped Jasmine during her journey to America. Jasmine killing the wild dog is also an attack on the men like the beedi smokers in her village who had an eye on the young women. Bharathi Mukherjee shows that women are exploited by men and sexually harassed in rural India. Jasmine’s migration to the USA is a shift from East to West, a shift from an orthodox, patriarchal world to a modern society.

Post-Colonial thinkers like Warhol opines that the novel “Orientalizes and stereotypes the experience of rural Indian women, solidifying Western prejudices and glorifying the position of women in North America by contrast” (Warhol-Down,1). Robyn’s perspective is relevant as the first part of the novel focuses on the patriarchal values of Punjab and marginalisation of women. Women’s issues such as denial of pursuing education when a girl

attains puberty, 'Sati' system, accepting proposals from widowers for young females and denial of freedom for females to choose their life partners are highlighted in the beginning of the novel. The later part of the novel depicts the sequence of events which takes place after Jasmine migrates to the USA. Lillian Gordon, a well-wisher in the foreign land, teaches her to wear western attire and makes her appear as an American in every aspect, in order to avoid the American gaze falling on her. She meets Taylor in New York and becomes an *au pair* of his daughter. Jasmine as Taylor's Jase and later Bud Ripplemayer's Jane plays a role of a loyal life partner and to her decision to leave Bud and to live with Taylor for ever she reflects as follows: "I am not choosing between men. I am caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness. A care giver's life is a good life, a worthy life. What am I to do?" (*Jasmine*, 240) Bharathi Mukherjee shows a way out to the troubles of an Indian woman and implicitly glorifies the American culture through the life of Jasmine.

Ali Salami opines, "The novel depicts Jasmine's journey of transformation from a passive, traditional girl at the mercy of fate in a village in India to an active, modern, and most importantly cross-cultural hybrid woman in America. All through the novel, her identity is transformed in line with shifts in her name from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jazzy to Jane. Accordingly, she stands in-between two cultures, shuttles between identities, welds opposing identities, enters the third space and emerges as a hybrid" (Salami,223). This observation regarding Jasmine's transformation of identity, i.e. constant change in her identity for her existence in the foreign land and her living thoroughly as Jazzy, Jase and Jane after migrating to the USA establishes her identity transformation from the native land to the migrated land. Even though she adopts different identities for her prospects, she does not carry any trace from one identity to another identity. Jasmine emerges as a liberated woman in this novel. Her loyalty to each one of her life partners reflects her Indianness. She performs in accordance with the guidance of her husband Prakash Vijn and accepts the freedom he gives her to think liberally. Hence after the death of her husband she moves bravely to the USA. Choosing Bud as her life partner and later taking a decision to leave him and go with Taylor, depicts her as a typical American. Being loyal to Bud as well as Taylor reflects her Indianness.

An immigrant's culture turns out to be a hybrid culture when there is an interaction between the host culture and the immigrant's culture. In this state, it becomes crucial for the immigrants to establish their identity as they will be neither 'here' or 'there'; not belonging to either their native culture or the host culture. Another factor which raises the question of identity is 'othering'. The immigrants adopt various strategies to adapt themselves to the land to which they have migrated. Most of the immigrants adopt the host culture as a symbol of



‘modernity’. Jasmine in order to liberate herself from the traditional images of an Indian woman, begins to take life as it comes and live as a liberated American woman. ‘Americanization, in that sense, is ‘modernity’ for Jasmine. By becoming a typical American, she fulfils her husband’s dream of becoming a liberated woman. From this perspective, if we view the acculturation of Jasmine, she becomes a typical American in the manner she adapts herself to different situations but being loyal to her life partners refrains her sentiments of an Indian woman.

‘Indian modernity is not exclusively a product of westernization’ (R.K. Jain,108). Jasmine’s liberal views didn’t begin after migrating to America. Her views were modern and liberal from her childhood. She was self- assertive and decisive of her future. Being born in Hasanpur, a small village in Punjab she was brought up in a society which gave importance to tradition and patriarchal norms. Her liberal views are manifested at several instances even before marrying Prakash. She expresses that she does not want to live as cattle as Vimla and other women in the village do. The seed of modern views and ideas which was implanted in Jasmine by Prakash, flourishes and blooms exorbitantly in a later stage when Westernization becomes essential for Jasmine.

The experiences of an immigrant are indispensable in shaping the identity of the immigrant. The cultural differences, class variations and the racial discrimination they confront play a key role in shaping their identity. Adaptation of the new culture becomes a question of their survival. Even though initially they face the identity crisis they quickly adapt themselves to the culture of the host land. Adaptation for immigrants in the USA comes in the form of learning English language, eating American food, changing their names and finally adapting the lifestyle of the Americans. When we look into Jasmine’s experiences from this point of view, we see that Lillian Gordon brings a phenomenal change in Jasmine. Jasmine learns to wear high heels, speaks English and wears costumes suitable to American culture. Jasmine converting to Jazzy is not only a change in the name but also a drastic change in the personality. Instead of pondering on the past, Jazzy war foots towards her future. Her journey from Jyoti to Jane is not a mere shift in the names but a spiritual transformation from one ‘Self’ to another ‘Self’. There is no trace of Jasmine pondering upon the past when she takes a new role.

By empowering Jasmine, Bharathi Mukherjee glorifies migration to the West and Westernization. The novel projects the immense courage of the protagonist of the novel, tackling her difficulties in a new place in a highly commendable manner without any conflicts. Jasmine migrates to America, learns to survive, metamorphoses her identity, and emerges as a success by carving out a niche for herself in the American society. She wavers between old and

new world; the old to which she once belonged and the new to which she yearns to belong. While journeying from one to the other, she adopts numerous identities. She copes with identity transformations and removes impediments so that she can survive. Further Bharathi Mukherjee while depicting how Jasmine transforms alludes to her own liberating transformation as an immigrant. The culture or ideology of an individual appears separate when it is within the 'self' and the individual appears as 'other'. And when the individual comes out of the self and mingles with the culture of the society which surrounds her, the 'othering' naturally vanishes. As Bharathi Mukherjee in one context explains, when the pitcher breaks the air inside the pitcher and the air outside the pitcher becomes one, here in the novel *Jasmine*, by coming out of her shell, becomes a typical American.

Notes: Sati system: A historical Hindu practice of burning of widow in her dead husband's funeral pyre which existed in India

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