

Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* as a Journey from National to Transnational

Ms. Somojyoti Banerjee

MA, B.Ed, NET, CTET

State Aided College Teacher (SACT)

Department of English

Prabhu Jagatbandhu College

Abstract:

“Nationalism” is one of the most significant forces which is at work in the present day world. Discussion of nationalism inevitably suggests the act of drawing a line of demarcation between the oriental and the occidental. The nation is inscribed within unbending borders which isolate it from the rest of the world. The area which falls within these boundaries is national and the outside is not. In the age of nation building, once the nation state was established, any relationship or contact with foreign people or foreign lands was considered as a kind of contamination. But any contact with the foreign countries was only entertained when it was deemed to be beneficial for the well being of the nation. However some recent evolutions tend to suggest that a de-territorialised logic is increasingly being added to age old territorial logic of the nation. The contemporary term ‘diaspora’ implies the dispersion of people or any national group away from the homeland. Phrases like ‘diasporic nationalism’ and ‘transnationalism’ somehow poses the question: what are the spatial boundaries of the nation? And, no doubt, Bharati Mukherjee’s novel *Jasmine* attempts to offer an answer to this question. She wrote this novel after she migrated to U.S.A..Mukherjee’s novel reveals an optimistic approach to the issue of immigration. It is a poignant story of survival, expediency, violence,

compromises, losses and adjustments involved in the process of acculturation to American life. The primary focus of the novel is an under age Punjabi village girl, Jasmine, who crosses the boundaries of her nation and reaches America as a widow where her fate will be rewritten. The present paper is an attempt to shed light on Mukherjee's attempt to bridge the gulf between the cultures of the home-land and the host-land.

Keywords: Transnationalism, Diaspora, Assimilation, Cross Cultural, Violence, Identity Crisis

Introduction:

The Cambridge encyclopedia defines the concept of 'nationalism' as:

A political doctrine which views the nation as the principal unit of political organization. Underlying this is the assumption that human beings hold the characteristic of nationality, with which they identify culturally, economically and politically... Nationalism is thus associated with the attempts of national groupings to secure independence from dominance by other nation-states. It is often associated with the struggle against colonialism.

On the basis of this definition nationalism can be comprehended as a sentiment that holds a group of people together through some common customs and culture and thus creates a sense of unity among them. Nationalism can be regarded as a very crucial force which is playing a very vital role in the contemporary world. The concept of nationalism always demarcates between the oriental and the occidental. But this demarcation is gradually getting erased with the progress of time. The recent term 'diaspora' implies the dispersion of people or any national group away

from the homeland. In contemporary literature, literary works related to diaspora are giving rise to the concepts of ‘diasporic nationalism’ and ‘transnationalism’ which are inevitably raising the question: what are the spatial boundaries of the nation? Undoubtedly, the Indian born, Bengali origin, American novelist Bharati Mukherjee attempts to give a response to this question with a positivistic approach to the problem of immigration.

In her essay “A Four-Hundred-Year Old Woman” Bharati Mukherjee writes:

[M]y literary agenda begins by acknowledging that America has transformed me. It does not end until I show how I (and the hundreds of thousands like me) have transformed America.

From this view point of Mukherjee it becomes quite clear that for her immigration is a process by which people and nation separate and congregate. Immigration inevitably leads to assimilation of culture. But this is not a one sided phenomenon rather it suggests a cultural exchange. Assimilation can, thus, be regarded as a kind of cultural looting. But Mukherjee’s fictions do not simply celebrate cultural assimilation rather they highlight the convolutions of diasporic subject-formation and evinces the genuine pleasures and violence of cultural exchange. In the essay “Two Ways to Belong in America” Mukherjee describes her immigrant experience as:

America spoke to me—I married it—I embraced the demotion from expatriate aristocrate to immigrant nobody, surrendering those thousands of years of ‘pure culture’, the saris, the delightfully accented English.

In her works and interviews she suggests that cultural assimilation and rejection of hyphenated

identities are the sole ways for Asian Indians or any other immigrant to annihilate their imperceptibility in America. However, to Mukherjee the absorption of foreign culture appears to be violent and traumatic since it involves a deliberate repudiation of one's roots, past traditions and heritage to adopt and assimilate the dominant culture. The willful obliteration of one's selfhood thus occurs through psychological and physical violence, which, in turn, enables individuals to refashion their identities.

The assimilation between the cultures of the home-land and the host land, the clash between the oriental and the occidental and its effect on the life of an immigrant is wonderfully depicted in Bharati Mukherjee's novel "Jasmine", published in 1989. Mukherjee wrote this novel after she migrated to U.S.A. and it is a touching tale of endurance, accommodation, losses, compromises, adaptation and reconciliation involved in the process of acculturation to American life. The story is about a simple peasant girl from Hasnapur in rural Punjab who confronts cultural conflict both in and out of her own culture. In this fiction the novelist has tried to reveal the intricate layers of cross cultural reality, through a series of adventures which the protagonist of the novel, Jyoti, undertakes during her journey from Punjab to California via Florida, New York and Iowa. Through the journey of the eponymous narrator, Mukherjee has tried to unravel the personal refashioning that the immigrants experience in course of their journey from one culture to another.

At one point in the novel Jasmine expresses her opinion regarding the construction of an immigrant's identity:

There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake one's self... we murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of our dreams.

Violence, thus, becomes a catalyst in creating immigrant identity in Mukherjee's fiction.

"Jasmine" replicates her celebratory tone of forceful transformation of identity through radical negotiations in the dominant culture. The condition of exile, a sense of deprivation, the pangs of separation and disorientation makes Mukherjee's novel a quest for identity in an alien land.

Jasmine weaves the story of a simple girl, Jyoti, from Hasnapur in rural Punjab. From her very childhood she proves to be a very clever and a bright student. But her patriarchal family takes her talent for granted. Her life is completely controlled according to the wishes of her father and brothers. This domination of the male members on Jyoti overtly indicates the marginalisation of women in Indian culture. Marriage of girls at an early age is still practiced in some parts of India. Even the person whom a girl will marry is also decided by the members of the girl's family. Jyoti is also married to Prakash at a very young age. In spite of being a bright student, Jyoti does not deny to get married which betrays her thorough conditioning in the Indian culture where girls getting married at very young ages seems nothing unusual. However, Jyoti becomes Jasmine when she marries Prakash, a progressive man, who dreams of reforming the age old tradition. The change of Jyoti's name to Jasmine seems to hint very clearly at her ultimate shift from Eastern culture to the western one. Prakash always wanted to leave behind the backward and stagnant Indian culture behind and live a more satisfying life in America. It was his dream to migrate to U.S.A. to study and open an electronic business in which Jyoti who has been renamed as Jasmine will also assist. Prakash instills in Jasmine's mind the urge to assert her individuality instead of keeping herself as a docile wife. Prakash wanted Jasmine to step out of the four walls of domestic life and prove herself in front of the whole world. As he says at one point in the novel:

You are small and sweet and heady, my Jasmine.

You'll quicken the whole world with your perfume.[77]

Jasmine wholeheartedly supports her husband so that his dreams get materialised and herself starts dreaming about migrating to America. But, unfortunately, Prakash falls a prey to the Khalsa Lions, the rebels demanding a separate land of Khalistan for Sikhs. Prakash is killed by a bomb planted by the Sikh terrorists and this incident renders her a widow. Jasmine vows to complete Prakash's dream and migrates to America to self-immolate herself in the name of her dead husband. She is raped the very day she lands in the United States and experiences herself completely ignored in an all-white locality. However, through her chanced encounters with some well-intentioned people in America, she entirely alters herself from an benighted, impotent immigrant to a confident working woman, an unwed mother, an impulsive lover and finally she denies the material comforts of a secure domestic life and yields to the esoteric call of adventure and an uncertain life by eloping with her former lover. Thus, Mukherjee, through the fabrication of the character of Jasmine, stipulates the necessity of repudiating stagnation and some traditional cultural norms which hinder progression and the dire need of renovating one's self by eclipsing one's origins and going beyond the socio-cultural norms to establish oneself potently visible in an alien host-land. Immigration, in this sense, can be regarded as the phenomenon concerning the rebirth of an immigrant, just like the Brahmins who are believed to be twice born after the ceremony of 'Upanayan'.

In *Jasmine* Mukherjee has portrayed America as a liberal country whereas India as an inert nation. The idea which forms the core of Mukherjee's Americanisation is that it is this 'liberal' America where identity could be a matter of choice, in other words, it depends on

the individual will and acts of a human being. According to her identities remains frozen and rigid in countries like India while in America identities are flexible and multifaceted. Prakash's act of changing Jyoti's name to Jasmine in a way hints at the fluidity of identity in the Western culture. After being renamed as Jasmine, she gives vent to her feeling thus:

Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttled between identities.[77]

She views America as a hopeful world of advancement unlike India which is a land of stasis and subjugation in her perspective. America has been delineated in this novel as a nation which offers a wider scope and a brighter future. It is true that so far as the protagonist of this novel, *Jasmine*, is concerned she confronts a lot of violence in the United states but in spite of those odds the host-land offers her something which her home-land failed to offer, i.e. the choice or the scope of reinventing and renovating herself. And it is in this incessant process of unlearning and relearning, breaking down and building up of self hood that Jasmine encounters violence at every step.

It becomes quite evident from the incidents of the novel that Jasmine's life appears as a chain of violence. Before her diasporic immigration to the United States violence shows its face to Jasmine in the form of her mother's attempted infanticide. Jasmine was born with a ruby red choker of bruise around her throat and sapphire finger prints on her collarbone. Jasmine's mother was the housewife of a middle class Indian Sikh family where she faced the kind of oppression and subjugation which are generally found in a patriarchal society. So in an attempt to spare her daughter from a history similar to hers, a history of incessant child bearing and physical torture, she tries to kill Jasmine at birth. But Jasmine does not find this act of her mother to be horrific in

any way rather she considers this to be a manifestation of her mother's intense love for her which prompted her to perform such an act. This horrific act further strengthens the notion of India as a gloomy and oppressive nation. India appears in this novel as a land of ingrained violence and, no doubt, such a delineation perpetuates the stereotype of a 'Third World' in Western minds. By depicting India as a country which is undeveloped, regressive and a nation where identities remain frozen, Mukherjee legitimizes Jasmine's migration to America for reinventing herself. However, from the very outset, the novel indicates that Jasmine's life is destined to be transformed violently. When Jasmine is about seven years old an astrologer predicts that she will become a widow at a very young age and suffer the pang of exile. She rejects the prediction and her act of defiance in a patriarchal society leads to a violent reaction from the village astrologer who jolts her hard on the ground. She falls and a twig sticking out of the bundle of firewood punctures a hole in her forehead, leaving a permanent star shaped scar. At a symbolic level this incident may mean that Jasmine is born to reposition the stars by repudiating the traditional fatalism of Indian society. Jasmine's defiance proves that she is a non-conformist and it is her insubordinate attitude which invites violence in her life. Unlike her sisters, Jasmine studies at the local school despite the unwillingness of her family members. She very earnestly tries to learn the English language. In their local culture the wish to learn the English language "was to want more than you had been given at birth, it was to want the world". After her marriage, her husband, Prakash inspires her to challenge destiny, urges her to continue education even after marriage, instigates her to annihilate the shackles of a feudal society and implants the American dream in her mind. They both dream of relocating in America which appears to them as a realm of opportunity and emancipation, and a land where self realisation is possible. But their dream

of migrating to America is shattered by the sectarian violence. Prakash is killed by a bomb wired into a radio. The bomb was actually meant for Jasmine since there is a hint in the novel where Prakash's assassin yells "Prostitutes! Whores!". Jasmine becomes a political target because her ambitions threaten the patriarchal social order based on the concept of subjugation and marginalisation of women. She becomes a widow in the war of feudalism.

It is true that self-immolation, sati, on a husband's pyre may have been banned in India, but life for many widows in this country is still disheartening and dehumanizing as they are shunned by their communities and abandoned by their families. Still in some cultures the death of a husband means exile, vulnerability and abuse. And a same thing happens with Jasmine, her widowhood deprives her from enjoying all material happiness in Indian culture. She is compelled to live an isolated life of a widow according to the local customs. Occidental Hindu culture, thus, attempts to stifle the fighting spirit of Jasmine and at every moment she feels that to live the life as a widow is similar to live the life of a person being buried alive.

F. Timothy Ruppel, in the article " 'Reinventing Ourselves a Million Times': Narrative, Desire, Identity and Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*", writes:

At this point in the novel, India merely serves as a regressive and repressive background to further Mukherjee's thematic aims. It is a timeless India that is forever feudal, undeveloped and barbaric, and, hence, still in need of Western guidance.

However, to escape from the tyrannical clutches of India's feudalism, Jasmine decides to migrate to America. She strongly feels that She needs America to rescue her from her hopeless situation. And armed with this fantasy of hope she recklessly spend all her savings in procuring a

fake passport . Her journey from Hasnapur to the United States takes place aboard unregistered aircraft and ships. And when finally she reaches America as an illegal immigrant she is required to surrender not only her history but also her body. She ends up in a motel room with the captain of the trawler, Half-face, who rapes her. Initially Jasmine contemplates to commit suicide as a consequence of the defilement of her chastity which, according to Indian culture, is considered as one of the most precious assets of women. But the next moment she thinks that instead of killing herself and passively conforming to an identity politics that would define her solely as a victim, she decides to kill her violator, and succeeds in murdering the monstrous Half-face in the same motel room. This incident signals a crucial moment which indicates Jasmine's first emancipatory journey towards self assertion.

However, Jasmine fortunately encounters a well intentioned American lady, Lillian Gordon, who can be considered as a well wisher of the unauthorised aliens. Lillian warns Jasmine not to let her past deform her. Inspired by her Jasmine literally buries her past, by wearing Western clothes and shoes, adopting the American accent and a different style of walking, accustoming herself to different food habits and it is here that she realises the worth of becoming financially independent. Lillian helps Jasmine to travel to Flushing, New York, so that she can find a shelter in the family of Prof. Devinder Vadhera, Prakash's mentor, who played a significant role in getting Prakash admitted to the University of Florida. Jasmine starts living with the family of Prof. Vadhera and they happen to be very kind to her. But in spite of their good behaviour, Jasmine feels uncomfortable in the Vadhera family since she realises that this family forcefully attempts to maintain the Indian culture even in an alien country. Here she is reminded from time to time that she is a helpless Indian widow. She is compelled to wear sari in

the proper pattern an Indian widow is expected to wear. This forceful practice of oriental culture in the host-land seems to smother Jasmine. At this point she expresses her feeling that she wants to keep herself aloof from everything Indian and everything 'Jyoti-like'. Jasmine requests Prof. Vadhera to procure her a 'green card' so that she can seek some kind of paid work and live her life safely in the immigrant space of Flushing. It is at this point that she stumbles upon an underground transnational beauty economy that conducts the process of sorting and importing women's hair from Indian rural areas. Prof. Vadhera gives her the proposal of selling her hair, as he says:

“You could sell your hair, if you wanted to. It is eighteen inches at least, I think. We are purchasing Indian Ladies' hair only. Indian women are purists, they're cleansing their hair with berries and yogurt only, they're not ruining their hair with shampoos, gels, dyes, and permanents. American women have horrible hair— this I have learned since settling here. Their hair lacks virginity and innocence.”

Jasmine realises that her act of selling her hair would fetch her the 'green card' which would enable her to seek an employment and safety in this host-land. Her beautiful hair at once includes her into a new nation through its exchange value and at the same time it also marks her as a racialised immigrant minority. It also betrays how the culture of a nation is transcending the national border and establishing itself in an alien land.

Jasmine, however, finds it suffocating and impossible to stay long with the conservative Vadhera family and hence she runs away to Manhattan. In Manhattan she dresses herself as a young American woman to blend herself into the American consumerist society and

culture. Here she restarts her life as Jase in the house of Taylor and Wylie and their adopted daughter Duff, where she works as a caregiver. She earnestly tries to make herself acceptable to their family. She tries to enact the expectations that others have for her and recreates her selfhood in their fantasy. Though Jasmine tries to assimilate in the occidental culture from the core of her heart, her inclinations towards her traditional oriental values and norms becomes overtly visible time and again. Her oriental mindset becomes evident when she shows cultural concern after learning that Duff is an adopted child of Taylor and Wylie. She also becomes very upset when Wylie decides to desert Taylor for economist Stuart in search of 'real happiness'. She perceives that in this alien consumerist culture nothing lasts for a long time, not even human relationship. At this point in the novel, Jasmine feels a sort of attraction towards Taylor and her sole purpose becomes to make herself desirable to him. But Jasmine fails to stay in Taylor's place for a long time. Their relationship ends abruptly when the past creeps upon her once again manifested in the form of Sukhwinder, the murderer of her husband, Prakash, in the disguise of a Hotdog vendor. She fears that the fact of her illegal immigration might be detected if she stays with Taylor for a long time and she also fears that the Khalsa Lion, Sukhwinder, may harm Taylor and his family. Unable to live with this plethora of conflicting identities she decides to leave New York and move towards Baden County, Iowa to give her life a new beginning. In Baden she meets Bud Ripplemeyer, an American Banker, who instantly falls in love with her oriental beauty. Bud gives her a new life and a new name, Jane. She starts living together with Bud. Jasmine's indulgence in a live in relationship shows her willing adoption of the Occidental culture. And as a consequence of this live in relationship Jasmine becomes pregnant with Bud's child, which again gives rise to a kind of conflict in her mind between the oriental and the

occidental cultural values.

Jasmine's deracination is vividly portrayed in her multiple names. She was born as Jyoti a traditional Hindu girl in a village in India. Her progressive husband renames her as Jasmine to wipe out her feudal past. Throughout her American Odyssey, Jasmine has multiple relationship with white men who recreate her in their own image. Thus, she becomes Jase in the house of Taylor and in the end she becomes Jane to Bud Ripplemeyer who is bewitched by her oriental beauty. The change in names suggest a psychic violence in her as she symbolically murders her previous identity again and again to recreate a new one. Jasmine/ Jane's internal rumination speaks of her consciousness in role playing. She knows that she has to play into the male desire and accentuate her exoticism in order to survive and assimilate in the 'New' world. Thus, caught between the two cultures of East and West, past and present, old and new, Jasmine constantly 'shuttles' in search of a concrete identity. At every step she attempts to reconcile her Indian heritage with the American surrounding. The fiction ends on a novel note which reemphasises the complex and alternating nature of identity of a woman in exile. At the end of the novel it is found that Jasmine, pregnant with Bud's child, decides to desert Bud and move to California with Taylor. This decision of Jasmine shows how much her perspective has changed. She is no longer the woman who used to become upset on seeing relationships breaking up in the American culture rather she is now a woman who has imbibed the culture of the host-land where nothing lasts long, not even human relationships. Thus, she prepares herself for a next transformation. Jasmine, finally, learns to live for herself and not for anybody else.

Bharati Mukherjee in this text attempts to show how her protagonist, Jasmine, is becoming an American and at the same time how America is becoming Jasmine. At one point in

the novel Jasmine says:

I took gobi aloo to the Lutheran Relief Fund craft fair last week. I am subverting the taste buds of Elsa county. I put some of the last night's matar panir in the microwave. It goes well with pork believe me. (19)

This suggests that each new immigrant who enters its space, legally or otherwise, shifts and alters the boundaries of the host-land. The host-land is delineated as a corporeal body which undergoes incessant mutations. Not only the face of the host-land changes when new races migrates to that land, but immigrants like Jasmine are also capable of changing its palate and sensibilities. Jasmine thus transforms the American taste buds when she carries gobi aloo to the Lutheran function or serves matar panir with pork. Mukherjee, thereby, suggests the union of the oriental and the occidental culture where differences melt into similarities. Thus, she suggests that in this age of globalisation the whole world is shrinking into a global village where the term 'nationalism' appears to be much constricted. Mukherjee instills in the mind of the readers the desire to unite and to think transculturally to bridge the gap between the Oriental and the Occidental.

WORKS CITED

Mukherjee, Bharati. *Jasmine*. Penguin Books, 1990.

Pal, Adesh. "Theorising and Critiquing: The Indian Diaspora". New Delhi: Creative Books, 2004.

Internet Sources:

- Carter-Sanborn, Kristin. ““We Murder Who We Were”: Jasmine and the Violence of Identity”.
American Literature, Vol.66, No. 3 (Sep., 1994), pp. 573-593. JSTOR,
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2927605>
- Drake, Jennifer. “Looting American Culture: Bharati Mukherjee’s Immigrant Narratives”.
Contemporary Literature, Vol.40, No. 1 (Spring 1999), pp. 60-84. JSTOR,
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1208819>
- Reddy, Vanita. “Beauty and the Limits of National Belonging in Bharati Mukherjee’s
“Jasmine””. Contemporary Literature, Vol. 54, No. 2 (Summer 2013), pp.337-368. JSTOR,
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/43297880>
- Ruppel, F. Timothy. ““Re-Inventing Ourselves a Million Times”: Narrative, Desire, Identity and
Bharati Mukherjee’s “Jasmine””. College Literature, Vol. 22, No. 1, Third World Women’s
Inscriptions (Feb., 1995), pp. 181-191. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25112173>
- shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/140717/6/06_chapter1.pdf