

## TRAUMATIC STATE OF DIASPORIC WOMAN IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S JASMINE

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### **Abstract**

In the post-colonial international interface, where identities and cultures keep getting defined, discovered, and valued for bridging at a macro level, phenomena such as globalisation and cultural assimilations have emerged to command center space and write the new world script. At the same time, diverse level of confusion and noise among competing cultures creates identity crisis at the forefront that results in accretion of homogenous identity. It is against such slow culture-change, wherein cross-cultural assimilation and immigrant literature, of recent times, has peeled off the blooming identity concerns with a protagonist. The essay is specifically interested in the analysis of cross-cultural conflict and the ultimate quest of identity of Indian immigrant women Jasmine, who attempts to face the issue of loss of culture and attempt to take on a new identity in America. It speaks about how her own personal creative imagination is constantly driven and influenced by cultural tension even though she has faith and pride in the Indian civilisation and society.

**Keywords:** Identity Crisis, Cultural Conflict, Cultural Assimilation, Immigration, Globalization

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Bharati Mukherjee is a diasporic fiction writer and has been the custodian of the migratory experience and enriched expatriate literary works. In fact, her expatriate experience is the major source of her writings. Her novels also touch upon the issue of identity, the notion of belonging, the feeling of alienation and rootlessness, migrations, dislocations and relocations. Her writings are refined by her diasporic self, immigrant existence as well as her personal experience of being a female. In her writings, Mukherjee represents India as a postcolonial writer who imitates the West and now, she is one of the finest authors of postcolonial immigrant existence in America.

A voice familiar in the Indian diaspora, Bharati Mukherjee describes her cross-cultural struggle through women characters in her novels. She too had to grapple with the acceptance of the culture, custom and tradition of other countries,

which she describes through her female protagonist's cultural dilemma. The collision of the western and eastern cultures along with the ideologies involved and its impact in the life of the protagonist is wonderfully depicted in her novel *Jasmine*, it came out in 1989. At the time of her immigration in the US, the protagonist encounters a multicultural society that later changes her into a new being. *Jasmine* happens to be one of the most desired novels of Bharati Mukherjee. The novel is set in the modern time and revolves around a young Indian woman, Jasmine who emigrated to the United States and is trying to adapt to the American culture and changes identities several times in an effort to survive.

The novel captures Mukherjee's victorious style of violent identity adjustment through broad confrontations in the dominant culture. In brief, *Jasmine* is the story of a Punjabi teenage girl Jyoti. She is born in a small extremist-infested village of Punjab and becomes transformed into the characters of Jasmine, Jazzy, Jase and Jane in her journey from an Indian village to the American cities. Jasmin's transformative journey is marked by widowhood, fake documents, murder, rape and a stubborn passion to stay alive through whatever circumstances came in her way. The novel documents the journey of a woman in search of her factual and unfragmented self and includes the transformations she experiences hopefully surrounded by the positivity.

As the protagonist, Jasmine leaves her country for America to fulfil her desires and realise the dream of her husband and in search of her self-independence and true self in America. She struggles very hard to achieve it and ultimately understands that self-independence has nothing to do with being an American or an Indian but to be peaceful with oneself. The story unfolds as a story of a mid-teenaged girl suddenly widowed at seventeen. She shifts her immediate world from India to America for a new life and hope. It is a tale of displacement and resettlement as the protagonist continues to lose lives to enter newer roles and responsibilities. The symbolic odyssey of the woman protagonist starts with Jyoti of India where she fights against the role that the traditional practices and patriarchal order of her nation had in store for her.

In this novel, the author has dramatized the process and evolution of westernisation, Americanisation in this case, by presenting young Indian girl's sufferings and successes in her struggle to establish a new identity for herself. The novel is written from a first-person's point of view by the female protagonist, who is compelled to undergo a number of identity shifts in her quest for self-enabling and happiness. Violence-wreathed, Mukherjee uses the film-like devices of flashback and cross-cutting to combine Jasmine's past and present. The author has created an exotic and unconventional heroine in *Jasmine*; as devoted as the multiple worlds she inhabits. Still a teenager, when Jasmine is suddenly left a widow, she seems destined to a life of trauma and distress in a tranquil isolation of a small Indian

village where she was born. The novel unfolds with the twenty-four-year-old heroine, Jane, as the live-in girlfriend of Bud Ripple Meyer, fifty-four years old, a banker based at Iowa in the US, who by flashback, takes us back to the past retracing her life from her childhood days in Hasanpur, a Punjab state village in India where she was born Jyoti, the unwanted fifth daughter of a poor Hindu family. The story starts with the prediction of the astrologer for Jyoti's lifetime widowhood when she was only seven years old.

Jyoti is described as an entrepreneurial individual with fight reflex in a patrilineal society which is a part of the Indian society. "She was then only seven and shrieked, no! You are a demented old fellow. You have no idea what the future holds for you!" (3). Choosing to defy her destiny, Jyoti begins to empower herself by learning English, for "to want English was to want more than you had been given at birth, it was to want the world". Having more ambitions and interests than the average girl, she aspires to further study with the intention of becoming a doctor and taking her own decisions in life ahead unlike the girls in the village who are "like cattle" and move "whichever way you lead them" (39). The first conflict Jyoti faces is the one between the patriarchal society and the modern urban world she desires.

Jasmine's another fascinating transformation starts at fourteen years of infancy when she marries Prakash, an engineering student and an urban male who is a firm believer in equality of both sexes and did not expect a submissive role of an Indian wife. "To break off the past", Prakash renames her to Jasmine and gradually shapes her to play a new role for herself and become an urban woman. Prakash wanted to strip Jyoti that I had been in Hasnapur and remake me into a new kind of city woman. To cut the past, he gave me a new name: Jasmine. He told me that you are little and sweet and intoxicating, my Jasmine. You'll shake the whole world with your most treasured. "Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttled between identities" (70). Then the first major tragedy of her life strikes when Prakash gets assassinated and becomes a victim of the Sikh extremists' movement. Determined Jasmine now decides to go alone to the US to achieve her dream.

Jasmine felt that since Prakash had created a Jasmine from a Jyoti, then Jasmine should live up to Prakash's ambitions. Here we can see her bravery and a great willpower of Jasmine, who decides to go on an unexpected trip to a new world. She comes to her brothers to arrange an illegal document in order to immigrate to the US. Yet another tragedy hits when she gets raped by the captain of the ship on the first day of her stay in the US. As an Indian lady, the heroine takes this as a calamitous injury to her because in ethnic culture chastity is typically considered the most precious among all the riches owned by a woman. Being deprived of her chastity, she tries suicide.

Jasmine turns back to her native culture and pray in front of the statue of Ganpati to give her “the strength to survive, long enough to kill myself” (116). Seeking vengeance and punishment of the half-faced man for defiling a Hindu widow, she decked the Goddess Kali and murders her rapist using her devotional forces. When she murders the gruesome half-faced man, Jasmine departs the motel upon which she is luck enough to meet Lillian Gordon, a sort of patron of illegal immigrants who then organizes her meeting with Professor Vadhera who had also played a crucial role in her husband’s entry into the US.

At Florida, her saviour Gordon laments to her that the shoes she wears reveal her culture, “Undocumented aliens wear boxy shoes with ambitious heels” (132). Lillian helps Jasmine to wear a new identity nicknaming her Jazzy before sending a hello word to the Vadheras. Now living in Florida with the Vadheras, Jasmine is surprised to learn the Vadhera family’s daily struggle against the western culture in maintaining their identity as an Indian family. It is hard for her to comprehend why the family is so striving in maintaining their Indian cultural-identity in a foreign nation to them. When the tide turns ugly, Jasmine elects to step away from the orthodox Vadheras. She then relocates herself to Manhattan in hopes of liberating herself from the Indian culture and traditions that had kept her in captivity and engulfed her even in a foreign country.

There at Manhattan, she experiences tranquil living with an American family, comprised of Taylor, his wife Wylie and adopted daughter Duff, who retains her as a caretaker with them. Here she begins to blend herself with the western consumer society and culture by mimicking the dress-up and demeanor of an American young woman. Though, Jasmine tries to integrate herself in the western culture, she still has a soft corner for Indian values and traditions in her heart. Such moments in the context of the Indian culture and traditional norms are found to be spontaneous as well as repeated. Such is the assumption on one’s mind when she finds out that Duff is their adopted and unnatural child. Later as Wylie decides to abandon Taylor for her newly found love – Stuart and seek true happiness, Jasmine has another culture shock in store.

Jasmine then discovers that nothing lasts forever even in the American consumerist culture and society of human relationship. As one would expect by now, Jasmine’s bliss at Manhattan is short-lived. Though, she is settled in her life looking after Duff but then come the flashbacks of the past regarding the deeds of Sukhi, the murderer of her husband. Just the mention of the name Sukhwinder, the “Khalsa Lion” and the murderer of Prakash, makes her nervous. She makes a decision under the pretence of saving the couple from religious extremists to move to Iowa, where another character is waiting to greet her. Jasmine had a friendship with Bud Ripple Mayer, a banker, in Iowa, who offers her a fresh new life and new name and identity as his Jane. Jane gets into live-in relationship, considered to be

unlawful in India's society, with her new sweetheart in the banker. When the couple moves in together, the welcome by Jane of the western culture and the voluntary acculturation on her part are revealed.

Then, when Jane becomes pregnant against her will, she begins to experience a sense of guilt in the persona of her learned cultural heritage. The maddening conflict between Indian cultural norms and American customs takes centre stage by now in the progression of the story. We witness two sides of a girl who had killed a man earlier who had offended her chastity and now blissfully decides to be in a live-in relationship and even gives birth to his child in her womb. Still very much active in her affair with Bud, Jane leaves the lines of communication open with Taylor. Subsequently, when Taylor pleads her over to accompany him and settle in California, she finds herself to be a confused woman and cannot decide on her alternatives. In a quagmire, she is now caught between the conventional dutifulness to the helpless Bud and her persistent affection for Taylor and Duff that splits her into two equally important choices of life in terms of her natural and native values.

Going along with her inner voice, finally Jasmine decides to leave Bud for Taylor. Having shed the skin of her former life, she is now free to be and decide for herself. "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?" (240). Her last decision reflects the acculturated aspects of the two societies when she chooses to think of herself first over everybody else. The story introduces one to the life and the transition of an Indian rural immigrant youth. In a span of a few years, Jyoti is transformed into Jasmine, Jase and to Jane; pregnant blissfully by a middle-aged Iowa banker and an adoptive mother of a Vietnamese refugee as well. Jasmine's metamorphosis with its abrupt revolutions but slow evolutionary tempos illustrate the formation of an American living organism. The evolution of her identity from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jane to Jase is symptomatic of the death of one personality and the emergence of another without any apparent ill effects. The heroine does not view her "Indian-ness as a delicate identity to be protected against erasure, now it is a fluid set of identities to be celebrated" (5).

Throughout the story in the Americas, Jasmine is dogged in attempting to create a truer version of herself to be incorporated into the American culture. This is thought of as a struggle for her because she cannot stop dwelling on being trapped between her initial culture and latest one. Much of her former familiar thoughts and practices still remain with her as she tries to acclimate to the newer and foreign ones. Although Jasmine gets lost at times, she is portrayed as a strong as well as a determined mind. Jasmine is never shown to give up in struggle for her actual independence and identity. At the time of intersection of her native land and a

foreign land that seem to have consumed the sheltered sphere comprising her emotions and attachment.

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