

## IDENTITY AND TRANSFORMATION: MANIFESTATIONS OF DIASPORA IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S *JASMINE*

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**Abstract:** This paper examines how the identity and transformation in Bharati Mukherjee's novel 'Jasmine' explores diasporal manifestations. In recent times, the post-colonial 'Diaspora Writing' principally concerns with the themes such as marginalization, resistance, racism, ethnicity, adaptability and self-independence. Bharati Mukherjee's novel 'Jasmine' showcases the problems of women and particularly the problems of cross-cultural crisis and quest for identity. The transformation of identities presented in this novel much closer to diasporal dreams. Her quest for identity and admiration for Americanness transcends into run-of-the-mill issues in the novel. Bharati Mukherjee's recognition as a 'voice' of expatriate immigrant sensibility and the unresolved dilemma of modern woman has been evidently presented in 'Jasmine'. In this context, "Identity and Transformation: Manifestations of Diaspora in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*" attempts to reveal distinctive approach to expatriatehood as a metaphysical experience of exile and explores manifestations of diaspora through the protagonist's search for identity and transformation in this novel.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, gender, Americanness, quest for identity, independence, revolt and transformation.

### INTRODUCTION

This paper illustrates the manifestations of diasporal dreams and prominent post-colonial issues such as transformation and identity in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*. Etymologically, the word 'Diaspora' derived from the Greek word 'Diasperien' which means "to sow or scatter seeds". However, the term is used now "to signify a more general sense of displacement, as well as, a challenge to the limits of existing boundaries" (Mitchell, 1997, p.259). Referring originally, the term 'Diaspora' to the people living outside their homeland and historically suggests the settling of Jews in different parts of the world.

In fact, Mukherjee has gone on record that she considers herself as an American writer and not an Indian expatriate writer. Even her roots are from India she makes clear in an interview with Amanda Meer (1989), "I totally consider myself an American writer, and that has been my big battle: to get to realize that my roots as a writer are no longer, if they ever were, among Indian writers, but that I am writing about the territory about the feelings, of a new kind of pioneer here in America. I'm the first among Asian immigrants to be making this distinction between immigrant writing and expatriate writing. Most Indian writers prior to this, have still thought of themselves as Indians, and their literary inspiration, has come from India. India

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has been the source, and home. Whereas I'm saying, those are wonderful roots, but now my roots are here and my emotions are here in North America" (*Amanda Meer*, 1989). Bharati Mukherjee is one of the major novelists of Indian diaspora who has achieved a popular position within a comparatively short creative period. She has been recognized as a 'voice' of expatriate-immigrant sensibility (*Nagendra Kumar*, p. 14). As an extensively acclaimed author and winner of the National Book critics Award, Bharati Mukherjee considers her works, a celebration of her emotions that she brings out of her heart. The unresolved dilemma of modern woman is a recurrent theme of her novels.

At the very outset, Mukherjee's note on her South Asian immigrant experiences in her Introduction to *Darkness* is remarkable: "If you have to wonder, if you keep looking for signs, if you wait surrendering little bits of reluctant self every year, clutching the souvenirs of an ever-retreating past you'll never belong, anywhere....I have joined imaginative forces with an anonymous, driven, underclass of semi-assimilated Indians with sentimental attachments to distant homeland but no real desire for permanent return. I see my 'immigrant' story replicated in a dozen American cities, and instead of seeking my Indianness as a fragile identity to be preserved against obliteration (or worse, a 'visible' disfigurement to be hidden), I see it now as set of fluid identities to celebrate" (*Darkness*, p.3). The shift to America brought sea-change in her personality and presented a new stimulus to her literary aspiration. Her own acknowledgement regarding this is highly remarkable as, "For me it is a movement away from the aloofness of expatriation to the exuberance of immigration" (*Darkness*, p.3).

The central figure in this novel, Jasmine, on reaching American soil begins to search for self-independence. She strenuously struggles to achieve it and finally realizes that self-independence is not to be an Indian or American but to be at peace with herself denotes her broader diasporal glimpses. Jasmine is shuttled between her identities. "I shuttled between identities" (p.77). Similarly, this identity reflects her two worlds both India and America. Bharati Mukherjee symbolizes the virtue of representing immigrant issues as she was born in a period of transition where she was a sensitive observant of the subsequent socio-political conditions. This adaptable and renowned novelist describes herself as, "A writer from the Third World, I left India by choice to settle in the U.S. I have adopted this country as my home. I view myself as an American author in the tradition of other American authors whose ancestors arrived at Ellis Island" (*Carb, The Massachusetts Review* 29.4: 650). Her vivid presentation of Jasmine highlighting two different cultures and the concept 'New Woman' has been rightly pointed out by Gupta as: "the emotional segregation of women and man, which brought about and led to the development of a specifically female world" (*Gupta Monika*, p. 154).

### **Transformation of Identity: Diasporal Representation**

Bharati Mukherjee's diasporal dreams of transforming identities have been wonderfully represented in *Jasmine*. Jasmine, the woman protagonist, born in India and migrates to America appears in different transformational phases. In the first phase, born as Jyoti to a person, was driven from his affluent house in Lahore to a life of ignominious poverty in the remote Punjab village Hasnapur during the partitions riots. Jasmine has early acquaintance with the heart-wrenching agony of people uprooted from their homesteads. She spent an uneventful childhood despite of being resigned to her supposedly inferior status in society for the sin of being born a girl, and constantly made aware of her misfortune as a dowry less daughter.

Bharati Mukherjee illustrates the elements of diaspora and gender discrimination encountered by Jasmine is quite remarkable in this novel. In view of the female protagonist, Jasmine declares herself as: "the fifth daughter, the seventh of nine children" (p.39). There was no celebration and welcome of Jyoti's birth following the attitude of people in various places towards a girl child. In fact, woman having a girl child is considered a form of sin. Therefore, Jasmine expresses that: "If I had been a boy, my birth in a bountiful year would have marked me as lucky, a child with a special destiny to fulfill. But daughters were curses. A daughter had to be married off before she could even enter heaven, and dowries beggared families for generations. Gods with infinite memories visited the girl children on women who needed to be punished for sins committed in other incarnations. My mother's past must have been heavy with wrongs" (p.9).

Bharati Mukherjee's portrayal of transformation of identity apparently replicates the diasporic elements from the inception of Jasmine's marriage with Prakash which brought a rapid change in her mindset. In Jasmine's first move after her marriage with Prakash from her native town Hasnapur to Jalandhar, she becomes a subject of male dominance. A different shade of transformations in her life has been manifested from Jyoti-Jasmine-Jase-Jane. She could resist every adverse situation in her life with bold face. The 'newness' of life in Jalandhar beginning with the change of her name to Jasmine, "You are small and sweet and heady, my Jasmine. You'll quicken the whole world with your perfume" (p.77). Prakash, highly educated with a liberal mind, "trash some traditions". Abiding by Prakash's will, Jasmine follows her husband, breaking the traditional code for a daughter-in-law by not moving in with her in laws. "Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttled between" (p.77). Jasmine faces a drastic situation in her life when Prakash is killed in the bomb blast by the Khalsa terrorist, Sukkhi, the extremist ridicules Jasmine and women like her as "prostitutes! Whores!" (p.93)...they are violent fundamentalists who reject the "peaceful change towards modernity" (*Dayal*: p. 69).

Mukherjee's artistic presentation of two incidents in Jasmine's memory of Hasnapur has been figured prominently to initiate her diasporal dreams to be a reality. One is to kill a mad dog rushing to attack her and the other receiving a star-like wound on her forehead while she tripped and fell in an attempt to run away from an astrologer who predicted an early widowhood for her. The permanent scar left on her brow by this wound, her third eye as she loved to refer to it "It's not a scar," I shouted, "It's my third eye". "Now I'm a sage (p.5)..." is in a way an indication of the continued hold the astrologer's words exercise on her even after her breaking from Indian roots and settling in America evidently reflects the mark of transformational identity to be occurred in her life. Her desire to learn English is dimly perceived by everyone as her "want the world" (p.68). In this connection, Melanie Kaye's remarkable comment on this particular narrative technique merits a close scrutiny, "Mukherjee's particular gift is montage, a jump out movement that creates a bond with the first person narrator and distance from everyone else, thus underscoring with great economy the immigrant's isolation, by-product of American opportunity" (Melanie Kaye). Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* is a multi-dimensional novel filled with diverse socio-cultural experiences relates to a process involving multi-faceted negotiation and in exchange it does not share any hostile estrangement from her native soil. Jasmine does not neglect the call of the alien identity.

### **Perceptions on American Outlook**

Bharati Mukherjee's concept of Americanness as a perspective on life has been embodied through image of Jasmine. In broad sense, diaspora suggests a displacement from one's own homeland, location of origin to different regions or foreign states. Jasmine's effort to reshape her own destiny and make it the foundation of the development of her inner potential is sheer naivety. America as a fantasy country for Jasmine which assures a wonderful future has been excellently depicted by Mukherjee in this novel. Inderpal Grewal has rightly mentioned as, "even though the protagonist in *Jasmine* encounters many kinds of violence in the United States, the country offers her something that India cannot, which is the choice to reinvent herself" (Grewal, p.69). She succeeds on her brothers to arrange for her transport to America on a forged passport; Jasmine's attempt to reach America on a forged passport to commit 'sutti' on the soil of America, where her husband Prakash was admitted a student was depicted as Fate's cruel thwarting of her husband's diasporal dreams. If it just a giving up on life, she could have committed suicide in Hasnapur itself. Her intense nature means idealistic expression and at this stage in her life, 'sutti' was the only sublime action. Her hazardous voyage to abroad being measured her instinctive affinity to the American ideal of valiant enterprise.

The portrayal of Jasmine presents the readers the diasporal impressions of out-look on American life. Davidar has rightly pointed out here as, "Some people were meant to be American even if they never leave their village in Punjab. At heart they are American. It is a desire for more, more, more" (*Davidar, p.5*). She obviously identifies her ability to adapt in New York: "I wanted to become a person they thought they saw: humorous, intelligent, refined, and affectionate. Not illegal, not murderer not widowed, raped, destitute and fearful" (p.171).

Bharati Mukherjee's illustrative skill on presenting socio-cultural aspects in *Jasmine* is vibrant with her eager savoring of the bracing typical American reverence for the independence of the individual. Her pioneering skill of alternately highlighting one or the other of the transformation in her heroine's identity ideally presented in this novel. It is a fact that the socio-cultural aspect of women is determined by numerous aspects and it differs from region to region as well as the process of transformation eventually takes place in the life of Jasmine. To quote Jasmine: "the war between my fate and my will (p.12). The breakthrough of barriers of tradition, culture and region played a significant role in her life journey. Her constant journey from the life of Hasnapur to the American civilization has been well depicted with transnational elements reflects a flow of 'diasporic predicaments'.

Jasmine's will to resist herself instead of ending her own life brings drastic change in her life. The desire to hold her own against the blind forces of destiny urges her to leave India, but unfortunately her American experience begins on a strident note-her bitter experience after reaching America as she was raped by Half Face in the room at Flemingo court hotel. She wants to kill herself after Half-Face has raped her but check herself because she feels her mission was not yet over: "I didn't feel the passionate embrace of Lord Yama that could turn a kerosene flame into a lover's caress. She kills Half-Face in a very violent manner and after murder the stains of blood spread out in the entire room and even on her body. In this context, she states: "No one to call to, no one to disturb us, just me and the man who had raped me, the man I had murdered. The room looked like a slaughterhouse. Blood had congealed on my hands, my chin, my breasts" (p. 119). "I could not let my personal dishonor disrupt my mission. There would be plenty of time to die... I extended my tongue and sliced it" (P.117-118). "My mouth had filled with blood. I could feel it on my chin" (p.118). This pictographically description visualizes the diasporal manifestation of the Indian Goddess Kali incarnates to destroy the devilish elements.

### **Symbolic Representation of Indian Goddess**

Mukherjee's symbolic representation of Indian Goddess Kali has been symbolized through the image of Jasmine. The horrible experience of Jasmine stands for double oppression and abuse especially for female immigrants, where Jasmine steps on

the soil of America on a forged passport. “When, Jasmine, the heroine of Bharati Mukherjee’s eponymous novel arrives in the USA as an illegal immigrant, Jyoti does not carry with her a sense of nostalgia for a lost home. Mukherjee here presents a wonderful fabric of diaspora sensibility—one that actively and eagerly seeks new cultural experiences and roles” (*Nayar*:p177). The dismal view of the Florida swamps that she gets on her first entry into America, “Eden’s waste: plastic bottles, floating oranges, boards, white and green plastic bottles sacks tied shut”... (p.107) seems to be an appropriate backdrop to the horrible fate awaiting her. After her sudden molestation and dishonor Jasmine decided to commit suicide but instead of ending her own life, she cut the throat of Half Face like the Goddess Kali. She burnt her wedding clothes and rejuvenates for the quest of American identity.

Bharati Mukherjee brilliantly portrays two archetypal images to enact the killing: the Goddess Kali’s devastation and vigor and the broken pitcher “When a clay pitcher breaks the air inside is the same as the outside there are no insides and outsides” (P.120-121). Jasmine confronts the reality of American society where nothing lasts. In this context, the lines from Jasmine are worth noting as: “We arrive so eager to learn, to participate, only to find the monuments are plastic, agreements are annulled. Nothing is forever, nothing is so terrible or so wonderful, that it won’t disintegrate” (p.163).

After this incident, Jasmine met Lilian Gordon who entered into her life as a ray of hope. It was Mrs. Gordon cared for educating her, made her free from her past memories and strengthened her will to survive. She suggested Jasmine, “Let the past make you wary, by all means. But do not let it deform you” (p.131). Her advice helped Jasmine physically and mentally. The symbolic representation of burning her traditional wedding clothes and inviting new American life pattern symbolizes the cultural diversity varies from region to region obviously indicates transnational elements. Jasmine decides to meet professor Vadhera, the gentleman who was instrumental in Prakash’s drop from in an engineering course. Knowing the fact that the professor is eking out a living not by teaching but by trading in human hair, and annoyed by the meticulously guarded ‘ethnicity’ in that household including the sternness of widowhood she is expected to observe, she remarks, “If we could just get away from India then all fates would be canceled . We’d start with new fates new stars. We could say or be anything we wanted. We’ be on the other side of earth, out of God’s sight” (p.89). It is too deeply engraved on Jasmine’s mind to allow her to agree to getting surrounded by inward-looking and she leaves the place to survive on her own. This indicates that self-realization is getting shape in her life and it was made possible by changing through to the American way of thinking.

In this context, Bharati Mukherjee records her comments on the uncertainties in America, where nothing remains for forever, not even a human relationship. She remarks, "In America, nothing lasts. I can say that now and it doesn't shock me, but I think it was the hardest lesson of all for me to learn. We arrive so eager to learn, to adjust, to participate, only to find the monuments are plastic, agreements are annulled. Nothing is forever, nothing is so terrible or so wonderful, that it won't disintegrate" (p. 181).

### **Admiration for Americanness: Diasporal Dreams**

The future transformation in Jasmine's life begins with the association of Lillian Gordon. This association makes a remarkable for positive move and bright vision for her future. The multiple names of transformation follow for Jasmine initially Jyoti, Jasmine for Prakash, Jase for Taylor, Jane for Bud. Jasmine's departure from Bud's life is not a meaningless act of frivolity. Her two remarks: "The moment I have dreamt a thousand times finally arrives" (p.237) and "I am not choosing between two men. I am caught between the promise of America and old – world dutifulness" (p.140), elucidate that it was not a rash desertion of responsibilities. In a way this decision of Jasmine is a resonant response to the courage she admired in Du in trying to take charge of his life and the cowardice of Darrel in trying to run away from the problems of life by taking the extreme step of death. Jasmine's quiet acceptances of the change in own scale of values and the largest of Taylor in remaining above racial and culture barriers is remarkable: "Taylor didn't want to change me. He didn't want to scour and sanitize the foreignness..... I changed because I wanted to. To bunker oneself inside nostalgia to sheath the heart in a bulletproof vest, was to be a coward. On Claremont Avenue, in the Hayeses' big, clean, brightly lit apartment I bloomed from a different alien with forge documents into adventurous Jase" (p.185).

Bharati Mukherjee has carved a niche here in Jasmine's self- independence and financial autonomy in fulfilling her diasporal dreams into a reality. After a short period of hand-to-mouth existence, Jasmine gets an opportunity to work as 'caregiver' to Duff, the little daughter of Wylie and Taylor. Jasmine takes pleasure in her new financial autonomy as well as the affectionate behavior she is shown by her employers. Here, she is called 'Jase' and she stays for two years and learns the ways of American family life, husband helping in the kitchen, wife working for long hours outside and that the young couple could adopt a daughter and not wait for the natural child. "Adoption was as foreign to me as an idea of widow remarriage." Her love for American world expresses, "its ease, it's less confidence and graceful self absorption (p.171)." She could grasp the foreign culture rather greedily. This particular stage could be able to make her life to gain a personality

and instilled confidence in her character. In this connection, S. Indira has rightly remarked as: “With the healing touch of people like Lilian Gordon, Kate and Taylor, who treated her as an intelligent, refined, sincere and affectionate person, Jasmine blooms from being a different alien with forged documents into adventurous Jase, living only for the present (*Indira.S*, p.70).” Wylie’s disagreement of love with Taylor and her decision to be in this world with another man astonishes Jasmine. Shortly a relation of intimacy builds up between her and Taylor. In this magic land of America with his help she learns to talk and walk American and turn into a new confident woman, to return to the normal real world, with normal man-woman relationship with Taylor. “He smiled his crooked –toothed smile. I mean, I began to fall in love ... with what he represented to me, a professor who served biscuits to a servant, smiled at her and admitted her to the broad democracy of his joking, even when she didn’t understand it. It seemed entirely American/ I was curious about his life, not repulsed” (p.167).

Bharati Mukherjee’s description regarding courage and determination of Jasmine has been excellently depicted in this novel as Jasmine’s remarks, “The moment I have dreamed a thousand times finally arrives” (P.237) and “I am not choosing between two 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” (p.240), clearly indicate her true determination and courage. In this context, Lauren D. Hazenson has rightly pointed out : “In order to sustain the text’s inclusivity the character of Jasmine cannot always be the feminist ideal of strength and she cannot achieve her version of the American Dream within the text. The true victory in *Jasmine* is for each character touched by the maximalist perspective that Jasmine embodies to begin to survive and recognize their desires on their own terms. By doing so each character, like Jasmine, is presented with the possibility to resignify and reinvent themselves in the image of their dreams” ( *Lauren D. Hazenson*, p.32). America has transformed Jasmine and she has transformed America as well: “Then there is nothing I can do. Time will tell if I am a Toronado, a rubblemaker, arising from nowhere and disappearing into cloud. I am out of the door and in the pothole and rutted driveway, scrambling ahead of Taylor, greedy with wants and reckless from hope” (p.241). In majority of her novels Bharati Mukherjee discusses her views concerning the post colonialism marginalization, resistance, racism, ethnicity, adaptability and transformation etc. According to Tandon, Considering herself as an American writer she expresses as, “I totally consider myself an American writer, and that has been my big battle: to get to realize that my roots as a writer are no longer, if they ever were, among Indian writers, but that I am writing about the territory, about the feelings, of a new kind of pioneer here in America” (*Tandon, Sushma*, p. 135).



Here in this context, Bharati Mukherjee illustrates the progress of Jasmine's adventurous life towards achieving her own identity and presents her admiration towards Americanness in the diasporal form replicates her journey to America is a process of her quest to find her own self. Despite of unexpected bitter experiences in her life, she is able to face obstacles and gain new identity. In this regard, Sumita Roy has appropriately said, "Consequently, to read Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* as an ambitious endeavor to outline the life of a woman engaged in a serious quest for values is rewarding" (*Sumita Roy*, p.187).

### **Quest for Identities**

The quest for the identities from time to time shows the identity struggle of Jasmine. Of course, her life journey begins as Jyoti, a traditional Indian girl, modifies her name to Jasmine to vanish her past. After reaching America, she was named as Jase in the Wylie household. Finally she settles her identify as Jane by Bud Ripplemeyer, who was fascinated by oriental charm. This eventual change in course of her life symbolizes the quest for reconstructing the past to present. In this context, a renowned post colonial critic, Jennfer Drake rightly remarks as 'rebirths' to this changing identities. Taking various shades from the past to present and killing all her previous identities, Jasmine proves the gender oppression, transformational process, diasporic concept entangled in this novel. But above all the idea of return to the home land and finally her decision to leave for California with Taylor determines that she has taken an independent move to her own way. In this context, Inderpal Grewal has appropriately remarked, "even though the protagonist in *Jasmine* encounters many kinds of violence in the United States, the country offers her something that India cannot, which is the choice to reinvent herself" (*Inderpal Grewal*, p.69).

Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* is animated with typical American admiration for the autonomy of the individual. Jasmine's image seems to be by Bharati Mukherjee according to the concept of American out-look on life. As cited by Davidar, "Mukherjee's particular gift is montage, a jump out movement that creates a bond with the first person narrator and distance from everyone else, thus underscoring with great economy the immigrant's isolation, by-product of American opportunity". "Some people were meant to be American even if they never leave their village in Punjab. At heart they are American. It is a desire for more, more, more" (*Davidar*, p.164). Bharati Mukherjee furnishes various segments of Jasmine's life in its wandering course through the grounds of Hasnapur, Jullundur, Florida, Columbia and California. The phase of transformation in her names suggests her identity to reconstruct a new one. In this context Davidar has rightly pointed out as, "Some people were meant to be American even if they never leave their village in Punjab. At heart they are American. It is a desire for more, more, more".

Explaining various forms of transformation in names of Jasmine as Jyoti-Jasmine-Jazzy-Jase-Jane: Elizabeth Bronfen in her “A Sense of Strangeness: The Gender and Cultural Identity in Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*” remarks, “this ‘J’ serves as a signifier for the dialectic of a progressive engendering of identities as these bar any already existing identities, putting them under erasure without consuming them” ( *Elizabeth Bronfen*, p.79). Jasmine constructs a new identity for every new situation by taking new thoughts, ideas, and skills by rising above from her sources. Identity is not something that is given to her by her culture, but something she discovers as she journeys inventing and re-inventing herself. “How many more shapes are in me, how many more selves, how many more husbands” (p.215). Jasmine becomes Jase and falls in love with Taylor in New York where she is a caregiver to Duff. She leaves him in fear when she identifies Prakash’s killer Shikwinder, and on her way she comes cross Mother Ripplemayer, the Iowa counterpart of Lillian Gordan.

The novel concludes when Jasmine leaves Bud Ripplemeyer to join Taylor on a Californian adventure despite being pregnant with Ripplemeyer’s child and highlights the complex and identity transformation of a woman in exile as: “Then there 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 pot holed and rutted driveway, scrambling ahead of Taylor, greedy with wants and reckless hope” (p.241).

## CONCLUSION

Thus, Bharati Mukherjee’s novel *Jasmine* replicates with spontaneity of diasporal elements focuses on identity and transformation throughout the novel. The quest for the identities from time to time denote the struggle of Jasmine in representing alienation which pre-occupies the hearts of people culturally as well as geographically cut off from their homeland. Thus, Bharati Mukarjee’s conscious endeavor in depicting *Jasmine* with plentitude of diaspora; female oppression and transnational elements depict agony of immigrant women in an alien society. Jasmine’s image resembles as a personification of novelist’s perception of Americanness as an outlook on life. As Sumita Roy has appropriately pointed out, “Consequently, to read Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* as an ambitious endeavor to outline the life of a woman engaged in a serious quest for values is rewarding” (*Sumita Roy*, 1996, p.187).

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