

Transforming and Reshaping Identity: A Study of Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

By

Dr. Pushkal Giri

Daudpur, Chpra

Abstract

The word 'diasporic' can be called an umbrella term which takes into its fold the expatriate, the exile and the immigrant experience. Where being diasporic can be seen by some as suffering a loss of identity and culture, there are others who might choose to view it as a process of acquiring new identities, establishing cultural hybridity and may see in this new space a scope of growth and opportunities. Undisputedly, identity thus forms an important thread of the diasporic experience and writing. In such a context comes Bharati Mukherjee who openly acknowledges and identifies herself as an American writer. Instead of focusing on what has been left behind and looking at the past like half januses, she focuses on what lies ahead, on the immigrant experience. The present paper strives to focus on Jasmine as a tale of shifting identities, consciously adopted and accepted by the protagonist as a means to assimilate in the immigrant land, without giving up her individuality. It traces her journey from 'being' an expatriate Indian to finally coming to 'belong' to an immigrant nation. Mukherjee, through Jasmine, explicates the immigrant experience as one of mutual give and take, a bilateral process. She has exemplified that it is not just the host country that transforms the immigrant; the immigrant too plays a role in transforming it. The diasporic experience is not only about dislocation, but also about relocation; not just about being uprooted but also about being re-rooted.

Keywords: diasporic, identity, immigrant, expatriate, cultural hybridity

The word 'diasporic' can be called an umbrella term which takes into its fold the expatriate, the exile and the immigrant experience. Where being diasporic can be seen by some as suffering a loss of identity and culture, there are others who might choose to view it as a process of acquiring new identities, establishing cultural hybridity and may see in this new space a scope of growth and opportunities. Undisputedly, identity thus forms an important thread of the diasporic experience and writing. In such a context comes Bharati Mukherjee who openly acknowledges and identifies herself as an American writer. Instead of focusing on what has been left behind and looking at the past like half januses, she focuses on what lies ahead, on the immigrant experience. The present paper strives to focus on *Jasmine* as a tale of shifting identities, consciously adopted and accepted by the protagonist as a means to assimilate in the immigrant land, without giving up her individuality. It traces her journey from 'being' an expatriate Indian to finally coming to 'belong' to an immigrant nation.

Jasmine, Jazzy, Jase, Jane, had no clue what course her life would take when she was born in the small village of Hasnapur as Jyoti. She describes herself as "fast and venturesome" at the tender age of seven, has the audacity to call the astrologer who predicts her "widowhood and exile" a "crazy man" and views the wound on her head as her third eye (Mukherjee 3). As a young girl, placing her palm on the light switch had given her a feeling of being in control and holding the head of the staff by which she later kills a beast had made her feel empowered. She had taken silent notes on rebellion from a widow who bought onions from the market when she was not allowed to and wanted to grow up and become a doctor and set up her own clinic when her father had only thought of the position of stenographer for her. Jyoti was the fifth daughter and the seventh child of her parents. Her mother had tried to strangle her at birth to save her from the suffering of growing up as a girl child. She recalls, "I survived the sniping. My grandmother may have named me Jyoti, Light, but in surviving I was already

Jane, a fighter and adapter”(Mukherjee 40). She has zeal to live, to not be defeated and not cower down in the face of a threat.

At age fourteen, she marries Prakash, who imbues her with modern ideas and transforms her into Jasmine. Prakash “wanted to break down the Jyoti I’d been in Hasnapur and make me a new kind of city woman. To break off the past, he gave me a new name: Jasmine”(Mukherjee 77). She feels elated when she is met with the prospect of moving to America with Prakash and sees it as her chance to deceive fate. Days later Prakash becomes victim of a bomb blast orchestrated by the Khalsa fundamentalist Sukhwinder Singh and dies. Initially heartbroken and traumatized, she convinces her brothers to arrange for a passport for her which they acquire illegally for her. Jyoti intended to go to America and commit sati.

As Jyoti begins her travel from India to America, Mukherjee takes this opportunity to reflect on expatriates and refugees and their uprooted identity. Jasmine poignantly ruminates:

We are refugees and mercenaries and guest workers; you see us sleeping in airport lounges; you watch us unwrapping the last of our native foods, unrolling our prayer rugs, reading our holy books, taking out for the hundredth time an aerogram promising a job or space to sleep . . . We are the outcasts and deportees, strange pilgrims visiting outlandish shrines, landing at the end of tarmacs, ferried in old army trucks where we are roughly handled and taken to roped off corners of waiting rooms where . . . customs guards await their bribe. We ask only one thing: to be allowed to land; to pass through; to continue(Mukherjee 100-101).

Forced to surrender to men for tiny favors and later raped by Half-Face, the captain of the ship in a cheap motel, she contemplates suicide but changes her mind as she slices her tongue and takes the form of Kali and stabs her violator to death. She sets her belongings to fire and watches the fire consume it along with her old self.

Jyoti’s family had been migrants too. Like innumerable other people, they had migrated from Lahore to Hasnapur during the partition of India, leaving behind the comfort of a big home and riches which were sacked by people belonging to a different religious section. Her mother could never forget the Partition riots and her father, for as long as he lived, lived in the past. She states, “Lahore visionaries, Lahore women, Lahore music, Lahore ghazals: my father lived in a bunker” and she rightly opines, “He’ll never see Lahore again and I never have(Mukherjee 42). Only a fool would let it rule his life” and Jasmine was no fool(Mukherjee 43). In a foreign land the least one could do was not to be plagued by the past.

She is taken in by one Lillian Gordon who takes on the role of a “facilitator”(Mukherjee 131) in her life, transforms Jasmine into ‘jazzy’ and teaches her to walk and talk like an American. From here she moves to Professor Vadhera’s house in Flushing who provides her with a roof but her real transformation begins in the house of Wylie and Taylor Hayes, where Lillian’s daughter Kate finds her employment as their adopted daughter’s caretaker. She falls in love with Taylor’s light hearted humor and carefree attitude and craves to be a part of it- of being American. They treated her as an equal instead of a subordinate and welcomed her to be a part of their family. She is no more a widow, but a confident woman entering an Americanized life. She comes to see Taylor, Wylie and Duff as family and muses, “America may be fluid and built on flimsy, invisible lines of weak gravity, but I was a dense object, I had landed and was getting rooted”(Mukherjee 179). Being Americanized also brings with it cultural differences. The idea of adoption of a child that came so naturally to Taylor and Wylie, appeared “monstrous”(Mukherjee 170) to her. She also becomes witness to the fragile nature of human relationships in America. That Wylie had fallen out of love with Taylor and into love with Stuart is no less than a shock to her. She realizes, “In America, nothing lasts . . . 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" and "there was no word I could learn, no one I could consult, to understand what Wylie was saying or why she had done it"(Mukherjee 181-182). America had taken her by surprise again.

Jasmine describes her transformation as a voluntary and conscious process, and not something thrust upon her from outside. Change is inevitable and better than slipping into the past and oblivion. She asserts, "I changed because I wanted to. To bunker oneself inside nostalgia, to sheathe the heart in a bulletproof vest, was to be a coward"(Mukherjee 185) and declares, "I bloomed from a diffident alien with forged documents into adventurous Jase"(Mukherjee 186). But this paradise world of hers was soon shattered with the appearance of Sukhwinder in the central park at Manhattan where he spots her with Taylor and Duff. She moves to Iowa, not only to secure herself but also to protect Taylor and Duff from imminent danger. In Iowa, with the help of Mother Ripplemeyer, she gets a job in her son's rural bank. A few months later they begin to live together. Jase becomes Jane to Bud. Together they adopt a son Du, a victim of the Vietnamese war. Both Du and Jasmine are immigrants. Indisputably, violence too forms a significant aspect of the immigrant experience and transformation. At one point, an officer compares the border to Swiss cheese and the refugees to mice squirming through the holes which make Jasmine reflect, "Du and me, we're the ones who didn't get caught. The only mystery is who'll get caught and who'll escape. Du made it out of the refugee camp, and his brothers didn't"(Mukherjee 28). Du's mother and brother were hacked to death by a jealous camp mate who couldn't get a visa for himself. Jasmine had lost her husband Prakash to a bomb blast. She had herself committed murder and so had Du. Jasmine remarks, "There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself. We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams"(Mukherjee 29). For an immigrant, experience has the potential to kill and past is something one must constantly flee.

Jasmine is essential, almost indispensable to the lives of the people she touches upon, so much so that Taylor comes back to take her and implores her to come with him. The relationship between Duff and Jasmine is one of love and care, of mutual admiration and learning. Jasmine speaks of Duff with fondness, "She was the only American, at the time, that I was capable of totally understanding. For her, I was a wise adult without an accent. For me she was an American friend whose language I understood and humor I could laugh at. And she laughed at mine . . . I was learning about the stores, the neighborhood, shopping from her"(Mukherjee 173). Wylie calls her a 'caregiver' and exclaims, "I don't know what I'd do without her. Jasmine's a real find"(Mukherjee 175). Taylor falls in love with her; Bud recounts the awe he experienced when he saw Jasmine for the first time, "I saw you walk in and I felt my life was just opening to me. It felt as if I was a child again . . . you were glamour, something unattainable"(Mukherjee 199). He tells Jasmine, "Baden was death until you came . . . you brought me back from the dead"(Mukherjee 200). Karin, Bud's ex-wife, regrets later for calling her a 'gold digger' and apologizes, "I was wrong to call you a gold digger. I don't know if I could have nursed him"(Mukherjee 228). She does not have to forfeit her true self to mean so much to so many people. Speaking of Bud, she says, "I rejuvenate him simply by being who I am"(Mukherjee 200). In fact it was Asia that had transformed him. Culture, taste, values and ways of living are highly fluid entities. Both the migrant and the host trade them when they come in contact with each other. Jasmine engrosses and takes in the American way but also in the process introduces Indian taste to the people around her. "I took gobialoo to the Lutheran Relief Fund craft fair last week. I am subverting the taste buds of Elsa County. I put some of last night's matar paneer in the microwave. It goes well with pork, believe me"(Mukherjee 19).

Jasmine while thinking of the transformation both Du and she had undergone, concludes that Du was ‘hyphenated’, a ‘hybrid’, he was a ‘Vietnamese-American’ while she herself had left the past completely behind her in order to embrace the future. Identifying herself as an American, Bharati Mukherjee had stated, “Rejecting hyphenation is my refusal to categorize the cultural landscape into a center and its peripheries; it is to demand that the American nation delivers the promises of its dream and its Constitution to all its citizens equally”(Mukherjee, American Dreamer). Du returns to his sister in Los Angeles, thus returning to his community while Jane after a brief moment of hesitation decides to leave with Taylor. She explains her choice, “I am not choosing between men. I am caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness”(Mukherjee 240). It may be said that in choosing to leave with Taylor, she makes a very American choice. Like Wylie, she chooses to be happy. As she leaves with Taylor, she realizes, “I’ve already stopped thinking of myself as Jane. Adventure, risk, transformation: the frontier is pushing indoors through uncaulked windows. Watch me reposition the stars, I whisper to the astrologer who floats cross-legged above my kitchen stove”(Mukherjee 240).

Jasmine was published fourteen years after *Wife*. This period had been one of personal growth for Mukherjee as she saw herself transitioning towards an immigrant sensibility. Jasmine is different from Mukherjee’s earlier protagonists as unlike Dimple and Tara who find themselves caught and struggling between expatriate and immigrant sensibilities, Jasmine enters America as an immigrant. Her aim is to belong. This shift from an expatriate to an immigrant sensibility is not an easy one. It took Mukherjee, “a decade of painful introspection to put nostalgia in perspective and to make the transition from expatriate to immigrant”(Mukherjee, American Dreamer). In *Jasmine*, we see the prototype of the New Woman who breaks the traditional impinging shackles and dares to make decisions for her individual self. We see a woman who remains undefeated and undeterred in the face of challenges, constantly undergoing change to weather the changing dynamics of life.

What places Bharati Mukherjee at a markedly different position from other diasporic writers is her affirmative outlook towards migration as a ‘gain’. She clearly states, “If you wait surrendering little bits of a reluctant self every year, clutching the souvenirs of an ever retreating past, you will never belong anywhere”(Mukherjee, Darkness). She asserts, “As a writer, my literary agenda begins by acknowledging that America has transformed me. It does not end until I show that I (along with the hundreds of thousands of immigrants like me) am minute by minute transforming America”(Mukherjee, American Dreamer). Mukherjee, through *Jasmine*, explicates the immigrant experience as one of mutual give and take, a bilateral process. She has exemplified that it is not just the host country that transforms the immigrant; the immigrant too plays a role in transforming it. The diasporic experience is not only about dislocation, but also about relocation; not just about being uprooted but also about being re-rooted.

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