

**Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*  
A Paradigm of Psychic Disintegration and Regeneration**

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Bharati Mukherjee

Courtesy: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bharati\\_Mukherjee](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bharati_Mukherjee)

**Abstract**

The term *Diaspora* refers to the dispersion of religious or ethnic groups from their established homeland either forced or voluntary. Initially this word was used for the dispersal of Jews when they were forced into exile to Babylonia. However, today it has come to mean any sizeable community of a particular nation or region living outside its own country and sharing some common bonds that give them an ethnic identity and consequent bonding.

The contribution of Indian Diaspora to the world literature cannot be denied. The diasporic writers belong to different category; they have Indian origins, but live in the west, mainly England, Canada and the U.S.A. A large number of these diasporic writers have given expression to their creative urge and have brought credit to the Indian English Fiction as a

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distinctive force. The phenomenon of migration of Indian people to U.S.A. and other countries, their status there, and their nostalgic feelings for the mother country as well as their alienation to the new one is the major subject dealt by the Diasporic writers.

The Indian-born American writer Bharati Mukherjee is one of the prominent novelists of Indian Diaspora. She has created a fair place for herself in the literary circle abroad, by her contribution to Indian English writing. Her commendable works place her in the class of great diasporic writers like Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Jhumpa Lahiri, Bernard Malamud, Issac Babel, and Yashmine Gunratne. The traumas and the agonies that people of Indian Diaspora face, in fulfilling their dreams, constitute the prime concern of Mukherjee's literary oeuvre. She mainly focuses on her diasporic women characters, their struggle for identity, their bitter experiences, and their final emergence as self-assertive individuals, free from the bondages imposed on them. Hence, this paper is intended to explore the series of transformations that the protagonist of Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* undergoes, as an illegal immigrant to America and her regeneration after many transformations with disintegration.

**Key Words:** Immigration, alienation, Transformation, disintegration, regeneration, and assimilation

### **Modern Indian Diaspora**

The Modern Indian Diaspora began during the colonial period when the British Empire had spread its tentacles around the globe and the red stain of imperialism had leaked into diverse land masses. The Diaspora could be classified as colonial and post-colonial. In the colonial category there was first the labourer and then the entrepreneur Diaspora. In the post colonial the trajectory of migrants takes in education as well as employment opportunities. Most of the Diasporas have been well represented in creative writing. Diasporic writing, born out of the dialectic between displacement and relocation raises theoretical formulations which provide fresh perspective to creative works.

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Among the fascinating diasporic voices Bharati Mukherjee stands apart by the virtue of representing Immigrant issues. She is an Award winning Indian born American writer. Bharati Mukherjee, born in a period of transition was a sensitive observant of the then socio-political condition. She is a writer who is at her best when she draws on her experiences of the old world while writing with insight about the New World to which now she belongs. This versatile 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 most remarkable works reflect not only her pride in her Indian heritage, but also her celebration of embracing America. Her writing has gained significant recognition because she depicts the immigrant experiences, particularly that of the South Asian Diaspora in North America. In her writings she voices her own experiences to show the changing shape of American society. She describes herself as unhyphenated American and not the hyphenated Indian- American title:

I maintain that I am an American writer of Indian origin, not because I'm ashamed of my past, not because I'm betraying or distorting my past, but because my whole adult life has been lived here, and I write about the people who are immigrants going through the process of making a home here..(Carb, *The Massachusetts Review* 29.4: 645)

### **On New Pioneers**

Bharati Mukherjee has written about a small minority group 'the new pioneers' that tries to adapt itself to the patterns of 'dominant American Culture.' This group has to assimilate the two hundred old years of American history and get adjusted to the newly adopted society. Her main theme throughout her writing discusses the condition of Asian immigrants in North America, with particular awareness towards the changes taking place in

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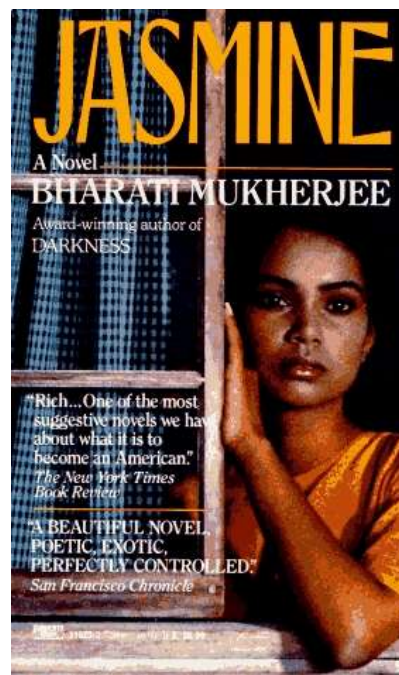
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South Asian women in a new world. Her protagonists are well-aware of the brutality and antagonism that surround them and are often made victims by various forms of social restraint; she characterizes them as survivors. The phenomenon of migration, the condition of new immigrants, and the sensitivity of estrangement and alienation often experienced by expatriates and the struggle of Indian women as immigrants are the major themes of her novels.

### *Jasmine*



Bharati Mukherjee's popular novel *Jasmine* is basically the story of transformation with disintegration and regeneration. The protagonist of the novel is an Indian peasant woman whose journey takes her from the village Hasnapur, Punjab, to Florida, to New York, to Iowa and as the novel comes to a close she is about to set off to California. Jasmine metamorphoses herself constantly during this journey, which starts from Jyoti the village girl in Hasnapur, to Jasmine, the city woman, to Jazzy, the undocumented immigrant, to Jase, the Manhattan Nanny, to Jane, the Iowan woman who enters the story. It is a story of dislocation and relocation, as the protagonist continually sheds her existing role to move into other roles. In this novel, the author expresses the idea of assimilation and makes it clear that Jasmine, the central character needs to travel to America to achieve something significant of her life,

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because in the third world she encountered only desolation and loss. In the beginning, the central character is immersed in the prejudices, exploitation and violence of migration- but it allows her to overcome these difficulties by internalizing the very tactics used against her.

### **Journey Metaphor**

In *Jasmine*, journey is a metaphor that advocates the ever-moving, regenerating process of life itself. In India, as Jyoti, Jasmine is seen against the backdrop of the rigid and patriarchal Indian society. In America, her self-awareness is reflected in the relationships with Bud, Taylor, and Du. However, her first husband Prakash initiates her transformation from traditional Jyoti to self assured emancipated American woman, Jane.

Jasmine was born in a rural village, Hasnapur. She tells the story as a twenty-four-year-old pregnant widow, living in Iowa with her crippled lover, Bud Ripplemeyer. Jasmine juxtaposes in her memory each of her identities- as Jyoti, Jasmine, Kali, Jazzy, Jase and Jane, implying that she evokes and revises her past in articulating her identities. The author depicts this transformation and regeneration as a positive and optimistic journey. Jasmine creates a new world consisting of new ideas and values, constantly unmasking her past. She tries to establish a new cultural identity by integrating new desires, skills and habits. This regeneration is defined more significantly in the changes in her attitude.

### **The Protagonist**

Jyoti, the protagonist of *Jasmine* being “the fifth daughter, seventh of nine children” (Mukherjee, *Jasmine*: 39) is literally strangled to death by her grandmother is a survivor and fighter from the beginning. Jasmine survives the infanticide only to become a rebellious child who stands apart from other traditional women in words and actions. From the very beginning Bharati Mukherjee has delineated Jyoti as a rebel against blind beliefs and superstitions. Early in the novel Jyoti tries to raise herself above such blind belief in Fate which is predicted by the astrologer thus:

Fate is Fate. When Behula's bridegroom was fated to die of snakebite on their wedding night, did building a steel fortress prevent his death? A magic snake will penetrate solid walls when necessary (Mukherjee, *Jasmine*:2)

### **Break from the Tradition**

Breaking from the usual tradition she chooses Prakash Vihh, an educated, intelligent young man, who renames and reshapes her Jasmine. The renaming is to continue every time she becomes a new woman. He supports her and nurtures her spirits instead of suppressing them. She confesses,

Pygmalion wasn't a play I'd seen or read then, but realize now how much of Professor Higgins there was in my husband. He wanted to break down the Jyoti I'd been in Hasnapur and made me a new kind of city woman  
(Mukherjee, *Jasmine*:77)

Jasmine appears to be jubilant sharing the ambition of her husband, intent to go to America, a land of her dreams and opportunities. But the fate snatches her husband from her when she had just started her life, leaving her shattered and heartbroken at the age of seventeen. Prakash is killed in a bomb blast on the eve of their departure to America. Grief stricken after his death, Jasmine hears his voice exhorting her from every corner of her room:

There is no dying, there is only an ascending or a descending, a moving on to other Planes. Don't crawl back to Hasnapur and feudalism. That Jyoti is dead  
(Mukherjee, *Jasmine*: 86)

### **Journey of Transformation**

So, instead of succumbing to fate and leading a life of widowhood she decides to set off for America, of course with the help of her brothers. "Prakash had taken Jyoti and created Jasmine, and Jasmine would complete the mission of Prakash" (Mukherjee, *Jasmine*: 63). Mukherjee here sets her free from the claustrophobic and culturally absurd native place. She sets off for America with forged documents.

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## **Brutal Raping**

Thus begins her journey of transformation with disintegration and regeneration in the alien land. As an attractive young girl, who arrives alone and unescorted on alien shores, Jasmine come across a series of shattering incidents during the adventurous journey. She meets Half-Face, the captain of the trawler in which she crosses over to Florida. Half-Face had “lost an eye and ear and most of his cheek in a paddy field in Vietnam.”(Mukherjee, *Jasmine*: 104). She is brutally raped by Half-Face in a motel. She disintegrates and becomes heart-broken at this incident and decides to commit suicide but at another moment American outlook redeems her and is enlivened with the spirit to survive through eliminating the American evil and is mad to emerge like Indian goddess Kali to slit the throat of her rapist as a symbol of complete eradication of evil of consumerist culture. Jasmine’s full transformation, from the victim into a vengeful Goddess, seems to be reinforced by imagining herself as the reincarnation of Kali.

## **Will and Desire to Survive**

Jasmine is surprised at her own desire for survival; she wipes out the finger prints, burns the unwanted luggage and walks into the streets of the American dawn. Her progress is marked by supreme confidence:

With the first streaks of dawn, my first full American day, I walked out the front drive of the motel to the highway and began my journey, travelling light (Mukherjee, *Jasmine*: 121)

Her Indian identity leaves her at this point; the desire to fulfil a mission which had seen her through the difficult passages to America is abandoned. The body becomes a mere shell, soon to be discarded and what she discards is her Indian psyche and is reborn in America as Jase and Jane. Shuttling between the past and the present, the first-person narrative reaches its turning point. She is reborn several times. Hence Jasmine’s transformation of identity occurs not only through construction, but also by the destruction of her existing self.

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## **Transformation**

It is strange to note that an incident of violence and disintegration is associated with each transformation in Jasmine. First, at her early age, as Jyoti at Hasnapur, her father is gored to death by a bull and her masterji is killed by terrorists. Next as Jasmine, she encounters an incident which shattered her into pieces, that is death of her beloved husband Prakash Vihh, who is killed in a terrorist bomb attack. Next during her immigration to America, as an illegal immigrant, she is exploited by Half-Face who rapes her repeatedly and whom she kills that very night itself. Fourth as Jase to Taylor, while leading a life as a 'caregiver', she meets Sukhwinder Singh who reminds her of the death of her beloved husband. Then as she is leading a happy life with Bud, unexpectedly bud is severely injured in shooting incident and his legs are paralysed. Darrel's suicide is another incident of disintegration associated with Jane Ripplemayer. Despite of these shattering incidents, Jasmine, through her undaunted spirit rises as a powerful figure capable of struggling for survival and proved her affability.

## **Many Rescuers**

Lillian Gordan, the first among Jasmine's many rescuers, introduces Jasmine to the first concept of American life. Lillian bestows upon her the nick name 'Jazzy', a symbol of her entrance into and acceptance of American culture which she welcomes gladly. While staying with Lillian; she begins her process of assimilation by learning how to become American. Lillian exhorts her:

Now remember, if you walk and talk American, they'll think you were born here. Most Americans can't imagine anything else (Mukherjee, *Jasmine*: 134-35)

Then, Jasmine lodges with Prakash's Professor, Mr. Vadhera. But she feels uncomfortable in Professorji's house which they have converted into a Punjabi ghetto. She wants to get away from the traditional 'Indianness' and Bharati Mukherjee brings out this contrast between tradition and modernity through the contrast between Professorji's wife Nirmala and the protagonist, Jasmine: Nirmala only takes, Jasmine not only takes and but also gives. Jasmine in a state of utmost frustration because of the Indian ghetto in Flushing,

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decides to run away from another claustrophobic atmosphere at Prof.Vadehra to join the lonely and empty people of American consumerist society and culture.

### **Undaunted Spirit**

Jasmine is not feeble and timid to accept all whatever comes on her way, instead her undaunted spirit to survive and her valour helps her to adapt herself to the new situation. She confesses, “I survived the sniping. My grandmother may have named me Jyoti, Light, but in surviving I was already Jane, a fighter and adapter” (Mukherjee, *Jasmine*:40).As a fighter and adapter, she survives, regenerates even after so many transformations and disintegrations. But still she is in a dilemma that who she is.

### **Off to a City**

Jasmine moves to Manhattan, New York to join a glamorous and emancipated couple, Taylor and Wylie Hayes and their adopted daughter Duff as a Caregiver. Jasmine is renamed as Jase by Taylor and starts her transformations into a sophisticated American women. Jasmine transforms but this time the change is not from a reaction, but rather from her very own yearning for personal change. In becoming Jase, Jasmine gets increasingly comfortable with her sexuality which she always tried to repress earlier, more so, after her traumatic experience. Here Jasmine boldly 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. On Claremont Avenue, in the Hayeses’ big, clean, brightly lit apartment, I bloomed from a diffident alien with forged documents into adventurous Jase (Mukherjee, *Jasmine*:185-186).

### **A New Identity**

Though Jasmine creates a new identity for every new situation, her former identities are never completely erased. They emerge in specific moments and aggravate the tension which results in disintegration, thereby causing Jasmine to create another more dominant identity, different from all those that came before.

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Taylor becomes Jase's American instructor; he teaches her about all the advantages of democracy. He helps her transform herself from a diffident alien with forged documents into adventurous Jase. Taylor feels desolate when Wylie moves out of the family to move in with the wealthy Stuart Eschelman. Here Bharati Mukherjee registers her comments on the uncertainties in America, where nothing lasts for a long time, not even a human relationship. She says,

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 (Mukherjee, *Jasmine*: 181)

### **Taylor and Jasmine**

Taylor gets romantically involved with Jasmine and embraces her different ethnicity without orientalisising her into an exotic fantasy. At long last, Jasmine feels that she has landed and is rooted. But her fate never leaves and the romantic life between Taylor and Jasmine ends abruptly when the past creeps upon her once again manifested in the form of Sukhwinder, the murderer of her husband. When she saw Sukhwinder, she becomes restless for the security of Taylor and Duff and recedes to Jyoti culturally for the safety of her beloved and his child and instantly decides to run away from their life for their betterment and for herself.

### **Personal Continuum**

*Jasmine* enters a personal continuum of time where events swing backwards and forwards from place to place and from childhood to adult, from despair to hope, compassion and love. The inescapability of memory, and the boundless nature of time is stressed here and Jasmine finds her life distorted by the different consciousness through which now she experiences the world. She loses even her sense of self expression. Unable to live with this plethora of conflicting identities she flees to Baden County, Iowa to give her life a new

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beginning. She prepared herself physically and psychologically for another transformation of identity. Bharati Mukherjee, through this affirmative novel, presents Jasmine as a Phoenix who rises from her ashes. Jasmine can face all challenges, whether it is killing a mad dog in Hasnapur, or travelling round the world as an illegal immigrant, being repeatedly raped, without suffering any bad consequences she calmly takes on a new name for each role. In this novel the womanhood has been depicted not as an incarnation of weakness but as a personification of strength.

Another opportunity after bidding impermanent farewell to Taylor knocks at in the form of Mother Ripplemeyer, whose kind offer of finding employment for Jasmine in the bank owned by her son, ends in Bud's falling in love with her. Here she becomes Jane and tries hard to settle down to a peaceful life in Bud's house but her inherited sense of reliability and dutifulness doesn't set her completely free. She is completely contented with her new life as a step mother to Du, a sixteen year old Vietnam War victim adopted by Bud, the estranged husband from his sons and wife, Karin. Here again it happens her to disintegrate, because Bud's legs are injured and paralysed in a shooting incident. Bud's miserable condition makes Jane to render wifely devotion in order to comfort him, which ought to have been done by his wife, Karin.

### **Assimilation of Immigrants**

Bharati Mukherjee has carved out the assimilation of Third World immigrants into the American 'melting pot' which is enriched by those, she describes as pioneers. Jasmine is one of these pioneers, a survivor with courage. The protagonists of her first two novels Tara and Dimple are completely dislocated both in India and in America, whereas Jasmine survives and reinstates herself to a new life. Finally she makes an outcry like her author, who defiantly announces to her American readers, "I am one of you" and in this assertion she has declared herself as an American in the immigrant tradition. The exuberance of immigration, which comes with the acquisition of Americanness and the immigrant Indianness as a sort of fluid identities to be celebrated, does not come easily.

Jane becomes pregnant and her inherited value compels her to be engrossed by the guilty consciousness. She feels that she is prompting the break-up of Bud and Karin relationship. Meanwhile, Jasmine receives a letter from Taylor that he would be calling her shortly; perhaps she is also waiting for, because she wants to get rid of her sense of guilt. But she feels for Bud's loneliness, as Du goes to California and stays with his sister. Jane also feels sorry for young Darrel, their next door neighbour in rejecting his love proposal and his unexpected suicide shatters the plan of Bud and Jane to legalize their relationship. Taylor's arrival at this juncture makes the situation more complex as she is caught between the old world dutifulness for the Bud and her affection for Taylor and Duff. Both of them are equally important as per her innate and native values which could not have been eliminated in her professed transformation. With half hearted, she accepts to go with Taylor and Duff but it has been very difficult for her to leave Bud lonely. Her bidding farewell to Bud's life is not a wanton act of utter selfishness rather it presents her in a state of confusion as she is dangling between the morality of India and the practicality of America. The following excerpt focuses her pathetic condition: "I am not choosing between two men. I am caught between the promise of America and old world dutifulness" (Mukherjee, *Jasmine*: 240).

### **Restless Search of a Rootless Person**

In *Jasmine*, the protagonist's struggle symbolizes the restless search of a rootless person irked by a depressing sense of isolation all around. Her journey through life leads Jasmine through many transformations in various locations. In her 'Land of Opportunity', Jasmine is thrown from one state of insecurity to another and she lets go all her hold on things which she would have held dear in India. She realizes that she has become a drifter moving in a world of uncertainties:

I feel at times like a stone hurtling through diaphanous mist, unable to grab hold, unable to slow myself, yet unwilling to abandon the ride I'm on. Down and down I go, where I'll stop, God only knows ( Mukherjee, *Jasmine* :139)

Bharati Mukherjee ends the book on a novel note, and re-emphasizes the complex and alternating nature of identity of a woman in exile,

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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 potholed and rutted driveway, scrambling ahead of Taylor, greedy with wants and reckless hope. (Mukherjee, *Jasmine*: 241)

### **Disruption, Change and Survival**

It is explicit that Jasmine cannot remain in a stable life because disruption and change are the means of her survival. Jasmine is always disrupted, for destruction is the manner in which she ultimately transforms and recreates herself. Thus, in this text, agency is not equated with the individual's total power to transform herself, but rather it is the ability to develop an identity that is based upon the perceptions and desires of others as well as the destruction of the existing aspects of one's identity. The surrounding environments influence her formation of her identities and she navigates through various locations, her perception of herself changes, thereby resulting in a multiplicity of consciousness. These create a tension within her and she feels the need to reconcile these conflicting perceptions, so that they do not wage a psychological war within her. Thus she reinvents her identity completely.

Jasmine has achieved a proper identity and balance between and modernity in the concluding part of the novel. The transformation of the heroine from tradition to modernity satisfied her inner self rather than the society. This change in her is a proof to picturize courageous nature of the heroine who acts according to the self consciousness. In *Jasmine*, the life of Jyoti is glorified by herself and her inner consciousness which made her act according to her own wish. Mukherjee's novel finally attains the theme of fulfilment within the inner self.

Thus, Bharati Mukherjee's masterpiece *Jasmine* reveals that the protagonist, Jasmine is a survivor, fighter and a trend setter. The protagonist Jasmine is a 'wily participant' in the dominant culture. The potential of fluidity which Bharati Mukherjee attributes to American culture is epitomized with the main character's metamorphosis from Jyoti to Jasmine, Jasmine to Jazzy, Jazzy to Jase and finally to Jane. Each of these character transformations is marked

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by changes in behaviour and personality. Through her various transformations, Jasmine sets herself to be a best example for the girls in rustic areas in overcoming various stumbling blocks despite difficulties. The transformation of Jasmine is full of violence with disintegration which brings tremendous changes in her in all respects such as psychologically, emotionally and physically. In this process she emerges victoriously self- assertive. Thus Jasmine succeeds in her attempt to regenerate herself through various transformations with disintegration.

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