



LITERARY QUEST

An International, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access, Monthly, Online Journal of English Language and Literature

Journey in Search of Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

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Abstract

Jasmine, a novel written by Bharati Mukherjee, an Indian born American diasporic writer, as a continuation of one of her short stories in *Middleman and Other Stories*, presents how a young Indian widow and an illegal immigrant in North America tries to adapt the American way of life in order to be able to survive and have her own self and identity in the social-cultural milieu of American society. In that process Jasmine changes her identity several times and fights against the brutalities and violence surrounding her. To achieve her identity, Jasmine uproots herself from her life and culture in India, her past and re-roots herself in America in search of a new life and the image of an American. Mukherjee shows that assimilation/Americanization is the only way to achieve the wholeness of identity in North America.

Keywords

Journey; Search of Identity; Bharati Mukherjee; *Jasmine*.

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Jyoti, an unlucky child born as “the fifth daughter, the seventh of nine children”, (*Jasmine* 39) but a beautiful girl from the Punjabi family at Hasnapur, who is “foretold (of her) my widowhood and exile” (*Jasmine* 3) by an astrologer, with all her beliefs in fate and superstitions marries Prakash Vijn, who is her brothers’ friend and a twenty four years old electronic student. Prakash, who changes her name as Jasmine is killed by a bomb planted in the Central Bazaar of Jullundar by Sukhwinder Singh, a Sikh terrorist belonging to the Sikh Khalsa Lions. To fulfill her husband's unfulfilled wish of studying in Florida and to burn herself/ to perform sati along with her husband’s suit at the site where he would have gone to university, Jasmine manages to reach America with fake documents. She says,

“It is my mission to bring my husband's suit to America. I am taking it to his school and bring it where we were going to live”. There, Half-Face, the man who smuggles her to Florida rapes her in a motel. But Half-Face is killed

by Jasmine who assumes herself the reincarnation of Kali. She confesses “I feel so potent, a goddess” (*Jasmine* 12). America the country of “opportunities” illustrates many transformations undergone by Jasmine.

The transformation of identity starts from this moment. The transformation of identity from a dutiful widow into an assertive criminal and individualistic American woman is in full swing. So, she confesses “for the first time in my life I understood what evil was about” (*Jasmine* 116). “I wanted that moment when he saw me above him as he had last seen me, naked, but now with my mouth open, pouring blood, my red tongue out” (*Jasmine* 118) shows Jasmine's full transformation from the victim into a vengeful goddess, the reincarnation of Kali “I was walking death. Death incarnate” (*Jasmine* 119)

Juggling a bit with Hindu mythology, a bit with American dream, Mukherjee creates the illusion of a continuum between the Indian female oppressive identity and the new invigorating, multiplying American subject hood. Jasmine survives innumerable beginnings and ends, she has “hurtled through time tunnels” (*Jasmine* 240) and cries “though all the lives (she has) given birth to, (cries) for all (her) dead” (*Jasmine* 241). She steps from the old world of ethics of submission, helplessness and doom to exciting new ethics of adventure, risk and transformation.

“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, traveling light” (*Jasmine* 121) shows that Jasmine has come to the first concept of American life: “no backward glance”.

Then Jasmine comes to Lillian Gordon and becomes Jazzy. Here she is tutored by Lillian: “Now remember, if you walk American and talk American, they'll think you were born here. Most Americans can't imagine anything” (*Jasmine* 134-135). Here Jasmine has become Jazzy, the American illegal immigrant, full of promises and possibilities.

Jazzy moves from Lillian to Taylor and Wylie Haye in Manhattan as a paid nanny to Duff, their adopted daughter. There Jazzy is renamed as Jase by Taylor and that starts her transformation into a sophisticated American Woman. Enlightened by Taylor on the advantages of democracy, Jase learns about America when she moves out of the family home to move in with the wealthy Stuart Eschelman,

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. (*Jasmine* 181)

This new situation makes her to adapt to situations. She becomes Taylor's lady love. When Jase is obsessed with the arrival of unwanted goods, Taylor demonstrates how to return them by writing in thick marking pen "RETURN TO SENDER" (*Jasmine* 186). Though Jase has learnt a lot on how to accept or manage things and situations, on seeing Sukhwinder in the Central Park, a Sikh terrorist who has killed her husband Prakash, while she is living in Unheimlich, a luxury apartment in New York, she flees to Iowa, forgetting every skill she has learnt and used in the past, for fear of being killed by Sukhwinder. In Iowa she is sheltered by Bud Ripplemeyer, a fifty year old banker with an Indian wife an adopted son Du, a Vietnamese. Bud renames Jase as Jane. The circumstances portray that Iowa is the territory of transition between old and new America. When Bud is shot by an angry farmer and to be in a wheel chair, Jane nurses him and looks after him. Jane also becomes pregnant.

When Taylor approaches her, Jane leaves Bud and Du without any sense of guilt and shame. She goes away bearing Bud's child and boldly remarks: "I am not choosing between men. I am caught between the promise of America

and the world of dutifulness (*Jasmine* 240) and “I am out the door and in the potholed and rutted driveway, scrambling ahead of Taylor, greedy with wants and reckless from hope” (*Jasmine* 241).

Jasmine's power is indicated in her restlessness to keep changing her shape and her houses and her confession “I have had a husband for each of the women I have been. Prakash for Jasmine, Taylor for Jase, Bud for Jane, Half-Face for Kali” (*Jasmine* 197) justifies and becomes evident that Jyoti, a hyper sensitive Indian rustic girl has an evolutionary growth by ways of up-rooting the Indian life and culture and re-rooting in the new North American life and culture to get her identity.

Work Cited

Mukherjee, Bharati. *Jasmine*. New York: Groves Press, 1989, Print.

MLA (7th Edition) Citation:

Ravichandran. “Journey in Search of Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*.” *Literary Quest* 2.2 (2015): 73-77. Web. DoA.

DoA – Date of Access

Eg. 23 Aug. 2015. ; 05 April 2017.