

Alienation in the Works of Bharti Mukherjee with Reference to – ‘Jasmine’

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Bharti Mukherjee was born on 27th July 1940 in Calcutta, India, to an upper middle class, Hindu Brahmin family. She was the second of three daughters of Sudhir Lal and Bina Banerjee. Both husband and wife provided ample education opportunities to their daughters. Mukherjee's mother was determined that her daughters' lives would not be confined to home and family. She was the driving force behind the success of her daughters. At the age of 15 Mukherjee finished her High School and went on to a Calcutta University affiliated women's college run by Irish nuns. After getting her B.A. degree from the University of Calcutta in 1959 and her M.A. in English and Ancient Indian Culture from the University of Baroda in 1961, she came to Iowa, United States to participate in a writer's workshop on P.E.O. (International Peace Scholarship).

She planned to study there to earn her M.F.A. degree, then return to India to marry a Bengali Brahmin as per her father's wish, as Hindu tradition forbade intercaste, inter-language, inter-ethnic marriages. Bengali tradition even discouraged emigration. To remove oneself from Bengal was to dilute true culture. But here she was drawn to a Canadian writer Clark Blaise. After a fortnight's courtship, the couple married impulsively in a Lawyer's office above a coffee shop. She soon realized that the bond was permanent.

After receiving her Ph. D in 1968, Mukherjee moved to Canada with her husband where she became a naturalized citizen in 1972.

The fourteen years in Canada were some of the hardest of her life. The country was hostile to the immigrants while it propagated the concept of cultural assimilation. In 1966 she joined Mc. Gill University. Beginning her career as a lecturer Mukherjee moved up very swiftly to become a professor in 1978. In those challenging years in Canada, she was able to produce her first two novels. 'The Tiger's Daughter' (1972) and 'Wife' (1975).

Mukherjee felt the need to claim her identity in a powerful way, turning aside prejudice to which she was subjected.

These tensions emerge in these two novels. She also registered her sentiments in her first collection of short stories 'Darkness' (1985) reflects her mood of cultural transplant. Mukherjee was unhappy with her life in Canada. She encountered many difficulties as a writer. She felt that there was a strong bias against Canadian citizens of Indian origin. In 1980, she left Canada, and migrated to United States – with her family as a permanent U.S. resident and started work at the University of California, Berkeley, California.

Mukherjee felt great relief in America and merged much more easily with the life and people around. She felt that America had a more positive attitude towards Indian immigrants as compared to Canada. Canada is a country that resists cultural fusion. Mukherjee states:

*"Canada refuses to renovate its national self-image to include its changing complexion. It is a new world country with old world concepts of a fixed exclusivist national identity."*¹

She had diverse experience throughout life. She lived through several phases of life including a life of exile in Canada and finally as an immigrant to U.S.

*"In an American writer, in the American mainstream trying to extend it [.....] not an Indian writer, not an exile, not an expatriate but an immigrant whose investment is in the American reality not the Indian."*²

Bharti Mukherjee's voice has increasingly gained special attention in Contemporary Modern English literature. A close examination of Mukherjee's background and her life reveal a series of displacements.

1. Bharti Mukherji, American Dreamer. An Essay from Mother Jones 1997 Issues, Website
motherjone.com/commentary/columns/19
97

2. A Four- Hundred – year old Women; American studies Newsletter 29(Jan 1993) Ed. By Janet Sternberg, (New York, p.24).

She moved from place to place, nation to nation. This has been observed and state clearly by Fakrul Alam as follows:

*She has produced fiction not only about uprooted individuals, but the anguish of expatriation and the inevitable frustrations felt by immigrants trying to cope with loveliness and an often hostile culture but also about the excitement of immigration, the sense of rebirth and the expectations of a better that are part of the immigrant experience.*³

As an immigrantherself, Mukherjee had seen and experienced life closely and intensely. This led to a colouring of her vision of life and her novels are the projection of her quest for identity in a world full of loneliness and despair.

3. Fakrul Alam, Bharti Mukherjee, (New York: Twayne Publishers 1996) p. 9.

Mukherjee had a strong desire to express the shifting tensions and complexities of an immigrant in an alien land. In her fiction, her women characters are seen struggling to obtain a footing in a New World and re-defining for the values, the beliefs and quests for an identity in a world that is rapidly changing. Alienation, identity, crisis, cultural clashes are some of the themes that characterize contemporary fiction. Mukherjee's novels frequently use the quest mode. Her characters variously have quest for identity, quest for peace, quest for roots and quest for meaning. Mukherjee is primarily concerned with the problems of women immigrants.

Mukherjee's women who migrate cannot accurately imitate the original. As a consequence, they suffer from 'culture - shock'. The term culture – shock describes the anxiety produced when a person moves to a completely new environment. This term expresses the lack of direction, feeling of not knowing what to do or how to do things in a new environment. We can also define culture shock as the physical and emotional discomfort one suffers when coming to live in a place different from the place of origin.

Mukherjee has repeatedly asserted in her interviews and essay that America has always been a

country of immigrants, which means that any one central dominant culture does not exist. America has the melting pot cultures. But in 'Jasmine' she has moved to 'fusion' rather than 'melting pot' signifying that everyone changes slightly while retaining original self. Melting pot assumes the loss of the old self and the creation of a new self.

Bharti Mukherjee has moved to fusion from the 'melting pot theory'. She refers to this phenomenon in explicit terms:

*"It was not right to describe the American experiences as one of the melting pot but a more appropriate word would be 'fusion' because immigrants in America did not melt into or were forged into something like their white counterpart but immigration was a two way process and both the whites and immigrants were growing into a third thing by this interchange and experience."*⁴

These days immigrant are economic refugees, leaving their country and willing for the satisfaction of some personal ambition. For the immigrant, the new culture which develops in an alien land is completely different from the parent culture. The migration of multiple races, classes and cultures to America has totally changed the face of America. Those immigrants, who choose to stay and finally settle down, experience cultural transformation.

4. Bharti Mukherjee, The Hindustan Times, 9th Feb. 1990, p.3

A leading theme throughout Mukherjee's novels is the clash of cultures and how it affects identity. Mukherjee states:

*"Culture clashes and coalescences always been very important in understanding who we are as peoples and as individuals. Imperial literature, past colonial literature, 'first – contact' literature in North America – just to name a few sub-genres have spoken the importance of addressing the process of specific cultural encounters."*⁵

The present paper aims at an in-depth study of various facets of identity crises of immigrant Indians, especially women. The first investigation is of the problems faced by women within Indian culture in India. Indian

women confront numerous anxieties, regarding marriage and adjustment to in – laws. Mukherjee brilliantly and sensitively perceives and defines the personal yet universally recurrent reactions.

5. Harper Collins Canada Ltd. Website
www.harpercanada.com/catalog/author_xml.asp

JASMINE

The novel of Bharti Mukherjee chosen for the proposed paper is 'Jasmine'.

When Bharti Mukherjee's 'Jasmine' was published in 1989, it received wide critical attention in the media. The publication had been preceded by her gaining the distinction of becoming the first naturalized American citizen to win the 'National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction'. She won the award in 1988 for the 'Middleman and other stories'.

After social and gender related titles of daughter and wife, 'Jasmine' the third novel by Bharti Mulherjee, points at a change in the title itself. The central character rises above being merely daughter or wife. The novel chronicles the experiences of a Hindu teenaged widow, named 'Jyoti' as she travels from India to America faced with a loss of identity at each stage of the journey. Jasmine manages to evolve a new identity at each stage. Whenever necessary, she frames her own code of conduct to suit the given situation.

Bharti Mukherjee analyses complicated layers of cross cultural reality through a series of adventures which the heroine undertakes during her odyssey from Punjab to California via Florida, New York and Iowa. Her odyssey is symbolic of transformation, displacement and a search for identity. The story opens with the village astrologer, under the banyan tree, foretelling Jyoti's '*widowhood and exile*'. Jyoti belongs to a society where '*bad luck dogged dowry less wives, rebellions wives, barren wives. They fell into wells, they got run over by trains, they burned to death heating milk on Kerosene stoves.*'¹pg.41.

Bharti Mukherjee explores the burden of old world responsibilities and cultural ties, which represent female oppression, along with the potential of American style, individualism and the female spirit of liberation. The novel tells the story of a young girl born in the village of 'Hasnapur', India, who undergoes enormous personal and

cultural changes. Jyoti is a poor but a bright student who aspires for good education. She is educated, inspite of the protest of her conservative father. She shows the capacity, to fight and to survive. Jasmine's mother shows unusual courage in opposing the plans of the family to push her daughter into a hurried marriage with an aged widower. Jyoti eventually marries a modern, Indian man 'Prakash' whose dream is to study in the US and to start an electronic business. Jyoti is now re-named 'Jasmine' by her husband. She experiences her first identity shift in the move from feudal Hasnapur to urban Jalandhar. She continues to be influenced and guided by her traditional upbringing and considers Prakash to be merely hi-tech export who knows nothing about a woman's desire to be a mother.

Prakash Vigh's values are those of Gandhi and Nehru, unlike other men of his generation. As a village girl, she is '*born in what kind of submission that expectation of ignorance*'.^[204].

Prakash, tragically enough, cannot escape the violence that has spread from the provinces, to the city. A bomb wired into a radio kills him. With Prakash's death, Jyoti develops a new sense of purpose. She decides to go to U.S. alone, with the sole purpose of committing 'Sati' in the campus of the University where Prakash had planned to enroll himself. '*I had planned it all so perfectly. To lay out the suit, to fill it with twigs and papers. To light it, than to lie upon it in the white cotton sari I had brought from home.*'^[118].

This gruesome plan inspires her to travel to the U.S. Jasmine leaves for America on forged papers knowing not what future holds in store for her. She is skeptical of life, in the unknown country. '*What country? What continent? We pass through wars, through players. I am hungry for news, but the discarded papers are in characters or languages I cannot read.*'^[101].

She ends up in a motel room at the run down Florida court with the captain of the traveler, 'Half-Face', whose name derives from the loss of an eye, an ear and half his face in Vietnam. Half Face communicates his carnal intention to Jasmine. '*You know what's coming and there aren't nobody here to help you, so my advice is to lie back and enjoy it. Hell, you'll probably like it. I do not get many complaints.*'^[115].

In the words of Rappel F. Timothy:

"[... For Half Face and has, cohorts, women have not complained because ultimately they accepted the inevitability of the hierarchical situation and their presumed sexual nature, thus discovering

¹ Bharti Mukherjee, *Jasmine* (New York: Grove Weidenfield (1989), p.41. All subsequent citations are from the same text.

that they “really” liked it after all. In this interested configuration of desire, cause and effect are conflated, and the threat of violence occluded.²

Jasmine tells him that she is a wretched, Hindu widow. She has not come to America to follow the American dream of life, liberty and happiness but rather to fulfill the ‘traditional role of the Indian widow and her mission is to bring her husbands’ suit to America. He laughs mirthlessly at her idea **‘getting your ass kicked halfway round the world just to burn a suit, never heard such a fool notion.’**[114]. He rapes Jasmine. The rape signals a crucial moment in her successive transformation and the formation of the spirit of survival. Instead of killing herself and passively accepting herself solely as a victim, she kills her attacker. Jasmine’s killing of Half Face is a kind of self-assertion. Samir Dayal comments:

“She experiences an epistemic violence that is also a life affirming transformation.”³

After this evil incident, Jasmine starts afresh. She happens to meet Lillian Gordon, a kind Quaker lady, who harbors her, renames her ‘Jazzy’ and teaches her to talk, walk and dress like an American. Lillian Gordon is a woman whose personal mission in life is to help ‘Americanize’ illegal immigrants in poetical common ways.

‘She wasn’t a missionary dispensing new visions and stamping out the old; she was a facilitation, who made possible the lives of absolute ordinariness that we ached for.’[131].

With her new name, Jasmine slowly gains confidence in acting American **‘Jazzy in a T-shirt, tight cords and running shoes. I couldn’t tell if with the Hasnapuri sidle I’d abandon my Hasnapuri modesty.’**[133]. She advised her. **‘Let the past make you wary, by all means. But do not let it deform you.’**[131]. Later on she helps Jasmine to proceed to New York for a suitable job, with an introductory letter to her daughter staying there. Mukherjee explores the promise of American style, individualism and female liberation. Jasmine survives in this strange -New World. Jasmine believes that she has

been born more than once. Thus, her changing names reflect her rebirths. Jasmine’s journey serves as a metaphor for the ever moving regenerating process of life itself.

Jasmine decides to get in touch with the Indian professor, Devindra Vadhera, who had been instrumental in her husband’s admission. Here, among the Vadhera’s she is a helpless widow, not entitled to enjoy life. She feels increasing panic yelling up within her:

“I felt my English was deserting me [.....] Nirmala brought plain saris and salwar-kameez outfits for me from the shops so, I wouldn’t have to embarrass myself or offend the old people in cast off American T-shirts. The saris patterns were for much older women, widows.” [144-145].

Having experienced the freedom of being an American, she finds the restrictions misplaced. She leaves the professor’s family and contacts Lillian’s daughter, Kate.

With the help of Kate, Jasmine continues to transform herself into an independent American woman. Kate finds her work with Taylor and Wylie Hayes. They gave her new name ‘Jase’.

“I liked the name he gave me: Jase. Jase was a woman who bought herself spangled heels and silks charter use plants.” [176].

The addition of a steady income adds to Jasmine’s transformation. She is absorbed in the American world, forgetting all about her mission, as she herself accepts:

“I should have saved; a cash stash is the only safety net [.....] Jyoti would have saved. But Jyoti was now a sati-goddess; she had burned herself in a trash – can – funeral pyre behind a boarded lived for the future, for Vijn and wife. Jase went for movies and lived for today.”[176]

Jasmine’s life changes further when Duff gives her another name; ‘Day Mummy’. In the new surrounding marked by personal warmth, Jasmine becomes more Americanized, more confident of her proficiency in English but her Indian values do surface now and then, for instance – Wylie’s idea of leaving her husband Taylor in search of ‘real happiness’, shocks her. She feels:

“American had thrown me again. There was no word and I could learn, no one I could consult, to understand, what Wylie was saying or why she had done it. She wasn’t happy? She looked happy, sounded happy, acted happy. Then what

² T. Timothy Rappel, ‘Re-inventing ourselves a Million Times: Narrative, Desire, Identity, and Bharti Mukherjee’s ‘Jasmine’. College Literature vol.22 issue 1 (1995) pp.181-191, (p.182).

³ Samir Dayal, ‘Creating, Preserving, Destroying: Violence in Bharti Mukherjee’s Jasmine’ Bharti Mukherjee: Critical perspectives ed. Emmanuel S. Nelson, (New York: Garland, publishing, 1993), p.71.

did happy mean? Her only chance? Happiness was so narrow a door, so selective”? [181-182]

For the traditional Indian wife, it is impossible to think about breaking her bond with her husband. Jasmine learns the transitoriness of human relationship in America. She begins to understand the bitter truth.

“In America nothing lasts. I can say that now and it doesn't shock me hardest lesson of all for me to learn. We arrive so eager to learn, adjust, to participate, only to find the monuments are plastic, agreements are annulled. Nothing is forever, nothing is so terrible, or so wonderful that if won't disintegrate”. [181]

Jasmine establishes herself and is no longer haunted by rootlessness. At this juncture, Sukhwinder, the assassin of her husband appears in New York. To protect her new family, Jase escape to Baden, Iowa. Her escape is not a sign of cowardice, it represents the 'life affirming' force. She is running away to preserve life and not escaping from life. This journey becomes a tale of moral courage, a search for concrete identity. Uprooted from her native land, Jyoti does her best to absorb herself into a new and alien society as an immigrant.

Jasmine's metamorphosis with its shocking upheavals and its show evolutionary steps incorporates all the traumas of cultural transplant and identity crisis. In Iowa, Jasmine gets a job as a teller, and meets the fifty year old Bud Ripple Meyer, an old banker. Bud not only gives her a new name – 'Jane'. It is her strangeness that adds to her beauty, 'Bud courts me because I am an alien.

“I am darkness mystery, inscrutability. The east plugs me into instant vitality and wisdom. I rejuvenate him simply by being who I am”. [200].

Every move by Jasmine is a step forward in her Americanization. Jasmine's flight to Iowa and her new name Jane is indicative of steady immersion into the melting pot of American culture. It is argued that, Mukherjee gives Jyoti more than one name during the course of the story to portray the ability of a modern woman to have multiple selves during her life time.

Jasmine willingly embraces the company of Bud out of matrimony and also carries his child in her womb. When Taylor and Duff arrive Iowa, Jasmine decides to cast off the role of the caregiver and drops the name Jane.

“It isn't guilt that I feel; its relief. I realize I have already stopped thinking of myself as Jane. Adventure, risk, transformation: the frontier is pushing indoors through in caulked widows. Watch me re-position the stars.” [240]

Jasmine finally decides to leave the American dream to the fullest and begins her journey to California to make that dream come true. She leaves Iowa for the promise of a new state, opens all the possibilities of the woman she is capable of becoming.

Jasmine's restless moves from one place to another, betray her alienation and bewilderment. She remains very conscious of the fact that she is an 'outsider' in America – an illegal immigrant without a passport – living among aliens. She is always apprehensive about Americans and she constantly suffers humiliation and disappointments.

“This country has so many ways of humiliating and disappointing. [29]. Her Indian values echo in her heart; 'a good Hasnapur wife doesn't eat just because she is hungry. Food is a way of granting or withholding love.' [216]. [...] I will wait supper for you. Indian wives never eat before their husband's”. [213].

This proves that even if she is living with an American in an American household, her ideal is an Indian wife, who is by nature self-sacrificing.

Jasmine is also a rebel and revolutionary. She protests against Indian stereotypical patriarchy – defined concept of womanhood. She revolts against the conservative Indian attitude towards poor widows who are treated like non-entities. Bharti Mukherjee, through her character raises her voice against 'Sati' system, which compels young widows to sacrifice their lives.

In the novel 'Jasmine', Bharti Mukherjee describes in detail, the changes the immigrants undergo as they forge new lives for themselves in America. Some, like, professor Vadhera and his wife Nirmala, never truly let go of their past lives, creating for themselves a world in America that is never really American.

‘[...] they had Indian food stores in the block, Punjabi news papers and Hindi film magazines at the corner news stand and a movie every night without having to dress up for it. They had a grateful servant who took her pay in food and saris’. [145-146].

The novel presents Jasmine as a pioneer, who hopes to find complete assimilation into the melting pot of culture. Jasmine is the tale of the representative immigrant. Bharti Mukherjee has created a heroine as exotic as the many worlds in which she lives. Mukherjee suggests that the only way to survive in the new land is to be like Jasmine and not an *'attempt to preserve the fragile identity as an Indian'*⁴ and she believes in fusion; *'Immigration was a two way process and both the whites and immigrants were growing into a third thing by this interchange and experience'*⁵.

Kali symbolize the icons of a woman's inner strength, to be her own guide and savior. Jasmine committed herself on a dangerous journey to carry out her husband's unfulfilled wishes. After Half-Face has raped her, she wants to commit suicide, but resists because she feels her mission is not over yet, *'there would be plenty of time to die' [...] I extended my tongue and sliced it'* [117]. Then she turns into death incarnate and kills Half-Face. *'My mouth had filled with blood. I could feel it on my chin.'* [118].

This terrible incident of cutting her tongue symbolizes the evaluation of a new woman. *'With my mouth open, pouring blood, my red tongue out.'* [118].

She reflects:

"What a monstrous thing, what an infinitesimal thing, is the taking of a human life; for second time in three months. I was in a room with a slain man, my body blooded; I was walking death. Death incarnate." [119].

Mukherjee is inverting the Kali myth. Kali is one of the several names of the female consort of Shiva. Jasmine, in the course of the novel, goes from one man to another. Related to the same incident Bharti Mukherjee uses another popular Greek myth of the legendary bird *'Phoenix'* who turns to ashes and rises again Jasmine acts as a kind of phoenix – she burns her dishonored. Clothes and out of the ashes rises phoenix – like in a new self. The phoenix represents this higher, spiritual principle of release from the bondage of matter and soaring high to the supreme divine. Jasmine undergoes re-birth and begins her journey into the U.S. marching on for a new identity. *'I could not let my personal dishonour disrupt my mission. There*

would be plenty of time to die; I had not yet burned my husband's suit. I had not stood under the palm trees of the college campus.' [118].

Mukherjee believes that,

*"Our souls can be reborn in another body, so the perspective I have about a single character's life is different from that of an American writer who believes that he has only life."*⁶

Jasmine denied death and March on:

"I buttoned up the jacket and sat by first fire. 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." [121].

With Prakash's death, the astrologer's prediction of widowhood and exile come true. Instead of leading a life of a widow, she, aims for America. America gives her the power to change her fate. She is no longer confined to the social order and cultural patterns of her forefathers. Jasmine shapes a new identity for herself. With each phase of her life, she matures as a woman. After her husband's death, she does not seal her life; she continues living in all circumstances in order to survive. At the end of the novel, Mukherjee's approach is feministic. Her heroine is very optimistic at the end when she moves in with Taylor Hayes – a Columbia Physicist, whom she thinks, she actually loves. She is the mother of seventeen year old 'Du' – on immigrant like herself out of sympathy; she decides to have the baby of 'Bud' – a local banker who is paralyzed. When Taylor asks her to join them as they resettled in California, she is pregnant and she agrees to go along. She identifies herself as someone, *'Greedy with want and reckless from hope.'* [241].

Mukherjee is defining a modern woman. She is actually trying to convey her message through her mouthpiece Jasmine that,

*"Change and adaptability are the key to survival, and that the successful immigrant has the instinct."*⁷

Some critics are of the view that in order to seek fulfillment of her dreams and to survive, Jasmine crosses all barriers of set rules of conventional morality, but Mukherjee contradicts and says that she has portrayed Jasmine;

⁴ Bharti Mukherjee, Introduction to Darkness (India: Penguin 1990), p.3

⁵ Bharti Mukherjee, An Interview, The Hindustan Times, 9th Feb. 1990, p.3

⁶ The Massachusetts Review, p.651

⁷ Iowa Review, op. cit., p.23

“Lovable, but [.....] not moral in the conventional sense. She is moral in her own way. She knows what’s right and wrong for her. But she does end up being a tornado who leaves a lot of debris behind.”⁸

In this way, Bharti Mukherjee, very skillfully portrays the joys and sorrows of jyoti, throughout her gradual transformation and adjustment to the NEW World. This novel can also be read as the study of the desire of a young girl to lead a full life.

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⁸ Iowa Review, op. cit., p. 25