

Migration, Adaptation and Survival in Bharti Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

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Abstract

Bharti Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* is undoubtedly an inspiring novel. It deals with the themes of exile, migration, homelessness, assimilation and eventual survival. This paper explores the process Jasmine follows to fight her fate. She leaves her home, goes to abroad and faces a lot of difficulties but ultimately assimilates in their culture. The only aim she carries is survival. She does not waste her time in crying over the loss but rebuilds herself and changes her ways in order to stay there. She understands something at the very early stage of her life for which people take a lifetime. It is all about survival. She has to adept in order to be alive. She does not hesitate to change her name, clothes, and even in culture to achieve that aim. This paper explores how important it is to assimilate as early as possible in order to grow in life.

Keywords: Exile, Rootlessness, Assimilation, Survival, Identity, Nostalgia, Disassociation

There are a number of women writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, Ruth Praver Jhabwala, Anita Desai and Kiran Desai who stay in abroad. There are others like Taslima Nasreen who are forced to leave their nation. They all stay in abroad but most of the time they look for inspirations in India for their writings. The reason for this is their immeasurable nostalgia for their home. In their novels they deal with the problems of migration and assimilation. Bharti Mukherjee is one of those prolific writers writing with diasporic sensibility. She has authored many novels like *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Wife*, *Holder of the World*, *Leave It to Me*, *Desirable Daughters* and *The Tree Bride*. She is a bit different from other writers living in abroad. She does not write to accentuate the pain of rootlessness, alienation, disassociation and homelessness. She rather prefers to look for future. In her novels she definitely talks about the wretchedness of the people who leave their home but she never allows lamenting it for long. Arasi has to say, "In Mukherjee's novel '*Jasmine*', the plot follows the titular character in the process of becoming an empowered individual more than that of becoming an American" (68). People usually leave their home either voluntarily or involuntarily. When they are forced to leave it becomes involuntarily exile but people leave their homes for better prospects, money, comfort or fame it becomes voluntarily migration. In the novel *Family Life*

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Ajay was taken by his parents to America in the hope of a good life. When he moves there as a child he feels everything fascinating. He believes that when people move somewhere by their own will there should not be space for grudges. He finds the complaints as a mark of inferiority complex, "I personally think that all the anti- Western movies of the seventies like *Hare Rama Hare Krishna* and *Purab and Pachhim* sprang not from the unease of hippies arriving but from our sense of inferiority before the munificence of the west" (Sharma 5). The sense of rootlessness remains the same but the attitude of people changes. Some people accept it happily while others always remain in a state of nostalgia. In this way they are neither able to embrace the new place nor forget the old one. They live in 'living hell' every day and fail to find happiness. Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* manifests the same spirit. She is forced to leave her home and goes to America. America is considered a place of various cultures and a land of immense opportunities. She faces many hardships but never thinks of retreating even once. She becomes a woman of strength. She tackles all her problems with audacity and eventually establishes herself as a woman of great potential.

The novel starts with a forecast "...the astrologer cupped his ears- his satellite dish to the stars- and foretold my widowhood and exile" (Mukherjee 3). The setting of the novel in the beginning displays the typical Indian arena where an astrologer sits under a Banyan tree and prophesizes a girl's eternal doom. The village, astrologer, riots, terrorism and political upheaval form the Indian atmosphere. Jasmine's struggle takes place amidst the same chaos. But Jasmine is not the girl who would accept her fate that easily. In the very beginning she shows the signs of rebellion in her blood when she responds angrily to the astrologer, "No! I shouted. You are a crazy old man. I don't know what my future holds!" (Mukherjee 3). She never leaves her life at the mercy of fate. The novel begins in the retrospection when the forecast for Jasmine is already made. The nostalgia prevails in her life and at every other point she goes back to the memory of her home and her love Prakash. She comes abroad to fulfill her husband Prakash's dream. Prakash fills her eyes with his dreams. She does not have any idea what time holds for her. Prakash's death in a bomb blast makes prophecy true and she is thrown into an eternal exile. She never loses hope. When she finds that there is nothing left for her in the home she plans to go to America holding the vision of a happy and prosperous life.

A man wins half the battle when he knows what he wants to become, but Jasmine wins the whole as when she says, "I know what I don't want to become" (Mukherjee 5). Jasmine remains quite clear in her visions and leads her way without digression. Jasmine's source of strength is her firm belief in her abilities. Her confidence is what distinguishes her from everyone else. She could have mourned her husband Prakash's death, could have stayed at home as a widow accepting her fate. But fatalism is not her food. Though it is difficult for her to comprehend her situation and its reasons but still she sees the life and its aim something bigger than a man's understanding, and tries to clarify it "...that the whole life's mission might be to move a flowerpot from one table to another; all the years of education

and suffering and laughter, marriage, parenthood, education, serving merely to put a person in particular room with a certain flower. If the universe is one room known only to God, then God alone knows how to furnish it, how to populate it” (Mukherjee 60). She assumes many roles as Jyoti for Prakash, Jane Ripplemeyer for Bud, Kali for half faced man and Jase for Taylor. She changes and adapts herself as the situation demands. Her identity changes with the passage of time from a daughter to a wife then from a wife to widow and so on and so far. Bharti Mukherjee shows it as the need of the time through the characterization of her most powerful character Jasmine. At times she feels the rootlessness, alienation and a longing for her belongings and her exilic sensibilities try to overpower her but every time she shifts her focus on her ambition and moves on. She overcomes her sense of homesickness and accepts everything.

In the novel Jasmine is shown twice suppressed. She suffers for being a woman first in India and later when she shifts to America she is suppressed for being a foreigner. She is a simple village girl who never knows the hypocrite ways of the world. Her lessons start from the very first day she comes America. Her eyes have dreams but she needed to have a close glance at the world. Her initial encounter with the half faced man shows her vulnerability in the place. She believes him without giving a second thought. He helps her just to extract benefit from her. He violates her but she is not a woman to accept that silently. Initially she wants to kill herself but then in the fit of anger she assumes the form of Kali, the destroyer of evil and preserver of good, in Indian Mythology. She kills him as a punishment and leaves that place. The aggression comes from the injustice done to her. She comes to America through a fake way so it is not possible for her to get the justice. Thus she takes up the task on her shoulders. Despite being alone in an alien country without any back up she does that with courage. She is not scared of the consequences. Thus shows the incredible bravery by punishing her convict.

Bharti Mukherjee is one of those people who believe that in order to grow, one needs to see the entire world as home. Jasmine not just grows mentally but also spiritually. She shows that if she is there she has to do what she intends. In front of her there is only one mission to survive in that country at any cost. It is the only condition that can reduce the pain of the rootlessness. Jasmine lives this idea. Her mission makes her alone however she is not afraid of that loneliness but fears the failure. Resiliency of the character becomes her virtue and strength in the process of success. Jasmine follows the law of nature which teaches the ability to survive. She always finds herself in search of her identity. In Bud or Taylor both, she always tries to find her home, a place to call her own and which can give the comfort to her battered soul. But she also knows that it is not easy for them to accept her as she is. Mukherjee is fully aware of the difficulties of migration and assimilation. She knows how hard it is to survive in such constrictive atmosphere. But she does not make her characters a failure but fills them with the enthusiasm of a survivor. Jasmine’s parents give her name Jyoti, which means to light others by burning itself. Jasmine does the same throughout the

novel. Jyoti breaks the stereotypes and denies accepting her fate. She goes to America and becomes Jasmine which is a flower. She spreads the fragrance of her beauty and attracts danger. The half faced man takes the advantage of her fragility and then she has to become Kali for him. Then she becomes Jane absorbs the American identity with Taylor. In this way her names show the rigorous changes in her personality. At every point she proves the meaning of her name thus justifying her identity.

Mukherjee has written this novel in stream of consciousness technique. Jasmine comes a long way and thinks of her life in retrospect. Her journey starts from India and ends up in America. She suffers throughout her life but always prefers her freedom over everything. When she becomes Jasmine, she is no longer an Indian woman. She rejects to live a life given to her as a widow. She thinks of her friend Vimla who becomes a widow, “When she was twenty-one her husband died of Typhoid, and at twenty-two she doused herself with kerosene and flung herself on a stove, shouting to the god of death...” (Mukherjee 15). She knows that in her village Vimla’s story does not create any reaction but, “The sad story would be a woman Mother Ripplemeyer’s age still working on her shell, bothering to get her hair and nails done at Madame Cleo’s” (Mukherjee 15). Her revolt against the rotten tradition takes her to America. She completely assumes the identity of an American woman. She stays with Bud without marrying him and gets pregnant. For her America is synonymous to freedom. Though after reaching there she confronts a different picture of the country and finds that extremely unsupportive and exploitative to immigrants. But she never loses hope.

The novel presents a contrast between Punjab and New York. Jasmine constantly thinks of Punjab and finds that more convenient than New York. She finds the dullness of India a luxury, “Dullness is a luxury” (Mukherjee 6). Bud and Taylor disregard her Indian sensibilities and want her to be fully converted into an American. His amputation is symbolic of the crippled culture of America. American culture is shown as a culture that gives high importance to materialism. Initially she sees the world of America with awe and wonder but gets disillusioned soon, “I suppressed my shock, my disgust. This country has so many ways of humiliating, of disappointing” (Mukherjee 29). It is quite obvious that the other country never accepts a foreigner. Bud never takes interest in Jasmine’s past and her country. He gets irritated when she talks about India. For a woman like Jasmine assimilation can be possible in the country by marrying an American. She never gets opportunity to showcase her talent, In Wilkerson’s novel the protagonist as an immigrant faces the issue of partiality when he, “... knew he was as smart as anybody else- smarter, to his mind- but he wasn’t allowed to do anything with it.” (Wilkerson 7). She makes her way on the plane of reality no matter how painful it is. She knows that she cannot go back so she has to accept it as her home as soon as possible and she does so.

She finds that the relations in America are drastically different from India. She is a widow but she forgets this when she reaches there. She has only one ambition to fulfill and that is to make a shop of her husband’s dream in America. So she becomes whatever is

required. Bud does not like her foreignness and that is the reason he changes her name for his own comfort. Jasmine too thinks, “My genuine foreignness frightens him. I don’t hold that against him. It frightens me, too” (Mukherjee 26). Jasmine feels the repercussions of being a foreigner. Soon she feels the pain of humiliations. She has to change her dressing style, “Once we start letting go- let go just one thing, like not wearing our normal clothes, or a turban or not wearing a tika on the forehead” (Mukherjee 29). She loves the heritage of her culture but simultaneously she understands that to become one with American culture she has to forget that. At the very early stage she comprehends the fact, “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).

Jasmine creates her own identity. She makes a lot of compromises to sustain her spirit. She takes the responsibility of fulfilling her husband’s wish herself. Her dreams are her only property she knows, “Owning is rebellion, it means not sharing, it means survival” (Mukherjee 30). The new city makes her remind her identity on frequent intervals. Taylor’s friends ask her, “You’re Iranian, right? If I said no, then, “Pakistani, Afghan, or Punjabi?” (Mukherjee 33). It is not at all easy for her to forget who she is. Assimilation is an important aspect of survival. Jasmine has to forget everything from the past in order to be comfortable in the new atmosphere. She tries to escape her past but fails to do that. Bharti Mukherjee focuses on the difficulties coming in the way of assimilation. The novel carries the autobiographical accounts as she herself is an expatriate. She writes with her experience of being in a different nation.

Jasmine is torn between Taylor and Bud. She loves Taylor but she feels herself responsible for Bud as well. It becomes very hard for her to choose between them. She chooses Taylor and ends her agony. She has to move on and for that she has to put aside all the questions of ethics. She eventually goes for what suits her best. Between obligation and love she chooses love which is many times not at all easy for an Indian girl. This is very particular for survival that one must choose that is necessary. She remains in continuous conflict of two different cultures. Her soul constantly suffers from the dilemma of action and every time she makes choices. The making of choice is the assertion of identity and individuality. She surpasses the restrictions of her background and makes a new foreground for her in America because, “Jasmine’s migration and transformation into American culture is certainly better than bunkering in nostalgia on remaining torn between two worlds” (Urmila 63). She undoubtedly thinks about India but she takes America as her present.

Thus Bharti Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* is the tale of modern age. It talks about the migration and difficulties of assimilation. Jasmine leaves her country and moves to America. In India she feels herself trapped and America becomes a way of freedom to her. But the process of migration, assimilation and survival remains long and difficult for her. The novel propagates the idea of adaptation at any cost. Jasmine wants to become a part of America and for that she changes her identity, culture, beliefs and transforms herself into a person who can

survive there. The requirement of the time is to be able to change according to it. Migration brings with it a pain of rootlessness, alienation, identity crisis, homelessness, and subsequent disillusionment. But Mukherjee believes in the resiliency of the character and person. Jasmine is the perfect example of that. She is able to survive because of this resiliency of her being. Finally she learns to put herself first and make herself happy. “Jasmine has achieved a proper identity and balance between tradition and modernity in the concluding part of the novel” (Dhivya & Ravindran, 77).

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