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**A CRITICAL STUDY ON BHARTI MUKHERJEE'S  
NOVEL 'JASMINE'**

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# A Critical Study on Bharti Mukherjee's Novel 'Jasmine'

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**Abstract –** *Jasmine*, the 1985-novel by Mukherjee, explores, in a radical and violent way, the danger – but also the potential – represented by displacements and uprooted identities. In the novel, the pivotal play of migrations, forced and voluntary, literal and figurative, found in the plural female subjectivity of the young protagonist/narrator – initially named Jyoti Vih – represents the dislocation and progress within the tangled framework of the protagonist's/narrator's personal history, a 24-year history that moves with astonishing speed from the Punjabi village of Hasnapur to the urban centre of Jullundhur, to the Gulf Coast of Florida, to a Hindu ghetto in Queens, to upper-class Manhattan, to the farming landscapes of small-town Baden, in Iowa, and finally to California, in a certain way closing successfully Jyoti's journey from East to West.

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## INTRODUCTION

In *Jasmine*, Bharati Mukherjee tries to move away from traditional Indian outlook to a growing acceptance of its ethnic diversity which in turn leads to a globalization of mind and body of a central character, Jasmine.

In *Jasmine*, her complexity of identity crisis comes on the surface by the remarkable use of stream of consciousness technique with flash backs in a fine blending of time past and time present scheme. During this period, she left Canada with her husband Clark Blaise because of racism and multiculturalism. She moved to America and claimed herself as "American writer of Indian origin" (Hogan). She argues that "In the age of diaspora ones biological identity may not be ones identity" ("American Dreamer").

Perhaps instead, of crossing borders, the borders (multiple and virtual victors of energy, power, desire and capital) will cross and criss – cross, deterritorialize and reterritorialize us...we will no longer go to the border : The border will become to us.

Here too, in her American narrative, she enjoyed her Third World status. She makes her best efforts to assimilate as well as celebrate the touch of difference : When racial or ethnic difference is celebrated people must find meaning in difference and this meaning comes from an endless process of contrasting one's group with other groups.

In the twilight, in-between spaces of waiting rooms in airports and railway stations, in trawlers and cheap hotels that carry and lodge illegal immigrants to the

United States, the protagonist's/narrator's middle passage is constantly haunted by violence and sexual assault. Jyoti's spatial dislocations are also followed by constant changes of her name, usually through the agency of a husband/lover/employer.

On the one hand, these constant changes of name imply the subversion of a fixed, uniform subject, and of a stable, well-rooted identity. On the other hand, however, the protagonist's/narrator's plurality of names helps to mask her ethnic difference and enables her to survive in a hostile, alien land and culture.

The action in *Jasmine* does not follow linear or chronological development, shifting constantly between past and present, between different places in India and in the United States. The protagonist/narrator is represented through fragments of her personal history, which only in the final scene coalesce to form a more embracing whole, one which leaves room for yet other developments, dislocations, subjectivities. As the novel opens, 7-year-old Jyoti is anxious to escape the confines of her Hindu cultural identity and the village's predetermined codes of femininity. She is also eager to escape a local astrologer's prediction that she will be a young widow and an exile.

The fifth daughter of seven children, Jyoti is nearly strangled at birth by her mother, who wanted to save her from a life of poverty and indignity, "by the time my turn to marry came around, there would be no dowry money left to gift me the groom". Good-looking and intelligent, Jyoti stands out among the young

people in Hasnapur and charms the old English teacher, who lends her his own books.

At this point in the narrative, Mukherjee positions her protagonist/narrator very clearly in relation to important literary texts, products of a colonial past: "the British books were thick, with more long words per page. I remember *Great Expectations* and *Jane Eyre*, both of which I was forced to abandon because they were too difficult".

*Jasmine* is a novel of emigration and assimilation, both on physical and psychological levels. In this novel, Bharati Mukherjee fictionalizes the process of Americanization by tracing a young Indian woman's experiences of trauma and triumph in her attempt to forge a new identity for herself.

The story is told from the first-person point of view by the female protagonist, who undergoes multiple identity transformations in her quest for self-empowerment and happiness. Mukherjee uses the cinematic techniques of flashback and cross-cutting to fuse Jasmine's past and present. The novel is steeped in violence.

The book begins with the twenty-four-year-old narrator, Jane Ripplemeyer, living as the common-law wife of Bud Ripplemeyer, a fifty-four-year-old invalid banker in Baden, Elsa County, Iowa. Through flashbacks, she recalls her story from childhood in Hasnapur, a village in Jullundhar District, Punjab, India, where she was born as Jyoti, the unwanted fifth daughter in a poor, displaced Hindu family. When she was seven, an astrologer predicted that she was doomed to widowhood and exile. Determined to fight her destiny, Jyoti begins to empower herself through learning English, for "to want English was to want more than you had been given at birth, it was to want the world."

While Mukherjee's representation of Jasmine's early life might seem to suggest that Jasmine's India is stunted by its blind commitment to tradition, which justifiably bothers critics, I propose reading these moments within the critical context of the massive trauma of Partition. Mukherjee is not criticizing her homeland, but exploring the social and cultural impact of this moment on families like Jasmine's, particularly as it pertains to attitudes towards women.

In *Jasmine*, Mukherjee authors a character defined by her exceptionality and defiance of expectations. While she performs domestic (female) tasks like boiling milk and haggling prices down at the market with notable skill, she also excels at school. She displays enough promise to be allowed six years of schooling – "three years longer than her sisters," who were married off by a cousin who taught them that men prefer village girls with "no minds of their own". Her mother complains that God is "cruel...to waste brains on a girl," but Jasmine's intellectual potential earns admiration from the village teacher, who lobbies for her to be allowed

to continue her education and pursue a career. As her father so eloquently puts it, "That masterji fellow thinks you are a lotus blooming in cow dung". However, Jasmine's paternal grandmother disagrees, arguing with her son that he won't find a husband for an educated daughter, stating matter of factly that "Some women think they own the world because their husbands are too lazy to beat them". These exchanges not only demonstrate that Jasmine stands apart from other girls and women in her village, but also that the skills and talents that allow her to do so elicit resentment and the threat of violence. They represent a level of concern with individualistic success that in a woman is unseemly at

best and dangerously subversive at worst, especially given the direct correlation between a daughter's opportunity to marry well and her family's economic interests.

It is worth noting that Inderpal Grewal takes issue with Jasmine's exceptionality, arguing that "Jasmine's claim to the reader's interest and attention seems based on the notion that she is unlike other Indian women – that she is active, a risk-taker and adventurous." Mukherjee has called this quality being "American," claiming that many "Americans" live in other parts of the world, but in *Transnational America*, Grewal refers to these "Americans" as neoliberal subjects of U.S. imperialism.

Indeed, Jasmine's transformations drive the narrative and translate the ideals of the American Dream, such as renewal and possibility, into the language of her Hindu beliefs. She observes that "in America, nothing lasts...the monuments are plastic, agreements annulled. Nothing is forever, nothing is so terrible, or so wonderful, that it won't disintegrate". Although this statement could be read as a somewhat depressing indictment of American culture, it also points to some of the more celebrated perceptions of life in the United States, the more hopeful interpretation that this impermanence allows for continual improvement. While she adopts renewal as a means to becoming an American, Jasmine – sometimes violently – couches her experiences as death and rebirth, or reincarnation: "we murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the image of dreams". Although she does not literally carry out her mission to commit the self-sacrificial act of *sati* to honor Prakash, Jasmine does symbolically murder who she was after her rape by Half-Face by burning everything she brought with her from India. At this point in the narrative, having suffered this ultimate violation, living with the memory of what happened to her seems like more of a sacrifice than death. To complicate matters, Jasmine refers to herself as Kali, so that Half-Face's death also becomes an important turning point in Jasmine's first transformation, from sacrificed to sacrificer. Because her rapist in essence came to possess her, by murdering him she punishes both him and herself; having lost her purity, Jasmine attempts to subvert the meaning of *sati*.

Throughout the text, Jasmine refers to the various identities she has possessed and admits, "I do believe that extraordinary events can jar the needle arm, jump tracks, rip across incarnations and deposit life into a groove that was not prepared to receive it". Although, reincarnation belongs to her Indian culture, she integrates each new life into her American identity, effectively transforming both. Like the references to *sati* and the goddess Kali, Mukherjee uses reincarnation to show that Jasmine does not abandon her culture, but translates particular aspects of it into her new American context.

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