

**SEXING THE GENDER DYSPHORIC BODY: IMMIGRANT
INTRICACIES IN MUKHERJEE'S JASMINE**

M.Elizabeth Rani
Assistant Professor
Department of English
TRP Engineering College,
Irungalur, Tamil Nadu, 621105

Life in the myth....is making...present of the past...
A renewal of the past in the present...
We murder who we were--- Thomas Mann

Bharati Mukherjee has made unmentionable contributions to the realm of immigrant literature and recorded the inner voices and anguish of Asian American in synchrony with writers like Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston. She herself as a writer and as an individual has travelled culturally and geographically from India to the United states and therefore gives a first hand experience of the problems and perspectives faced by the people from all sections of the Indian society in an alien land. This is evident from her interview given to John Crabbe and cited by John.K.Hoppe in his article, *The Technological Hybrid as Post-American: Cross-Cultural Genetics in Jasmine*. Mukherjee profoundly observes the diasporic disintegrations, the problems and predicaments of ethnicity and rootlessness in a new nation as :

We [immigrants] have experienced rapid changes in the history of the nations in which we lived. When we uproot ourselves from those countries and come here, either by choice or out of necessity, we suddenly must absorb 200 years of American history and learn to adapt to American society. Our lives are remarkable, often heroic.... Although they [the fictional immigrant characters] are often hurt or depressed by setbacks in their new lives and occupations, they do not give up. They take risks they wouldn't have taken in their old, comfortable worlds to solve their problems. As they change citizenship, they are reborn. (137)

Mukherjee's novels do not blindly promote or project American multi-culture or celebrate assimilation. They poignantly present and represent a definitive order to confront the historical and psychological circumstances that exist in the context of race and ethnicity in the United States. There are also concealed interpretations of Americanization, U.S. hegemony, and a chaotic situation of hybridization which neither the centre nor the periphery holds. She questions the role of individuality in a multi-cultured and crowded country through her novel *Jasmine*

The novelist blends the literal with the metaphorical and presents her character Jasmine in an ambience of ambivalence. Jasmine is both a destroyer and preserver, who destroys her ruthless past and preserves her identity so as to recreate in a strange land. She is also like the goddess Kali who kills to feed the cycles of birth and re-birth. Jasmine as the heroine and as the metaphor of goddess transforms to uproot violence against the self and does prove that there is

no singular self of herself. This transformation creates her sense of belongingness not only to the country she has emigrated but also to the cosmos on the whole.

Mukherjee succeeds most brilliantly in her 1989 novel, *Jasmine*. In *Jasmine* we see most clearly not only the evolution of the central character (*Jasmine*) as she enters her unfamiliar American culture and moves through an oscillating series of painful and joyful experiences, but we are asked by the author to comprehend *Jasmine's* metamorphosis (and her impact on the culture) through the implicit interplay of American myth and Hindu religious imagery. The religious and mystic synthesis defines the progress of the narrative and informs the psyche of the central character. (Sudha 151) After all, as *Jasmine* reflects, "Fates are inter-twined in modern world and how can God keep them straight?" (12)

The novel *Jasmine* is a culmination of Mukherjee's characters: although a young Asian woman is the protagonist, she has changed from being a victim or passive agent to someone willing to make hard choices in pursuit of an identity not offered by the easy, pre-existing patterns from which she can choose: to be the burnt widow of her first husband; to be the victim of the man who raped her; to settle into a "Little India" enclave, isolated from America; or to be the caregiver of an older man. Instead, she and the motley recipients of her love have remade themselves into an atypical-and therefore more truly American-family unit. (Victoria Carchidi 94)

Jasmine is a tell-tale version of the female mind presented through the eyes of a village girl, *Jasmine*. She gets uprooted from her native land and finds herself in Florida, an unknown land. The rest of the narrative unfurls and explicates the travesties and struggles of *Jasmine* through her *Odyssey* in the United States. She is unfortunately widowed and finally wishes to undertake a journey to the United States to fulfill and re-live the dreams of her husband. She undergoes many re-christening of her names from *Jyoti* to *Jasmine* and finally from *Jase* to *Jane*. Being the best example of a chaste Hindu wife, *Jasmine* decides to reach Florida, the long awaited destination and prepares to kill herself by burning herself in a funeral pyre made from her husband's clothes. She is suddenly raped upon reaching America and murders the rapist.

The story then shifts to New York where she gets the job of a care-taker in the house of an academically inclined couple. *Jasmine* becomes *Jase* at the home of Taylor, a genteel intellectual. Her next name transformation becomes fruitful at Iowa. She moves there with a banker, and later adopts a Vietnamese son and becomes pregnant after that. *Jasmine* is torn between the promises of the old world in India and the promises of new dreams in America. She continues to be born again and again to adopt herself to the changing times.

In Mukherjee's book, *Jyoti* is presented as an unformed mass of stereotypical values and beliefs. Through the multiple losses of her identity, or rather a lack of one, she finally seems to obtain a sharper definition and an identifiable personality. The metamorphosis is equally a movement from object- someone whose personality is viewed, observed and made note of- to subject, a character who carries the action of the text with her. The move occurs in the context and because of the insertion of *Jyoti* in the west and the penetration of her body by a western male. As long as she remains an object of contemplation in the walls of Indian

culture, jasmine is seen as the victim of the text- victimized by her father who resists educational growth, victimized by the culture that has turned her to a Sati performing bride and later victimized in the West, when she is raped or subjected to stereotypical readings. Thus she is a victim in the hands of third world patriarchy, Economics and the first world of imperialism.(Aneja 75)

As the novel opens, one could feel the pangs of pain experienced by Jyoti when she is told of the untimely death of her husband by an astrologer. She is extremely frightened and angered by the thought of being widowed at an early age. Jyoti falls to the ground and recalls, “My teeth, cut in to my tongue. A twig sticking out from a bundle of firewood.I’d scavenged , punched a star shaped wound into my fore head(1).The wound to her forehead scars to what she later boasts of a third eye”(2). The metaphor of the third eye draws the reader close to associate the third eye to Lord Shiva, the alpha and omega of creation and destruction. Shiva, by his third eye causes the cycle of Birth and Death of Creatures in the cosmos.The image of the Third- eye sets the tone of the novel in manifesting the dimensions of destruction and renewal in its narration.Jyoti becomes an incarnation of creation and destruction in her own life and in the lives of others.Her identity undergoes a series of deaths and re-births from Jyoti, a rustic Punjabi girl to Jane at the close of the novel.

The first change in her Identity is instigated by her husband Prakash,who gives her the first rebith.This early experience of her re-making ensues further revamp constituted by the Hindu concept of Samsara, the unending cycle of Birth/Life/Death/ Rebirth. “A modern city man Prakash carries jyoti away from her native village and coaxes her to discard many of her village traditions and her feudal assumptions about women, marriage,child-bearing and caste.To establish her break from past, he renames her jasmine.As jasmine ruminates, “Jyoti,Jasmine, is shuttled between Identities “ (70).

Jasmine’s journey to the next life sets off when she begins a sojourn to the United States as an honour to the memory and desires of her husband Prakash. She forges all documents to fulfill her husband’s wishes and begins a long and a secretive journey to the U.S. She then realizes her collective identity among many refugees when she says,

We are refugees, mercenaries and guest workers; you see us sleeping in airport lounges, you watch us unwrapping the last of our native foods, unrolling our prayer rugs, reading our holy books.... We are the outcasts and strange pilgrims visiting the outlandish shrines, landing at the end of tarmacs, ferried in old army trucks . . . dressed in shreds of national costumes, out of season, the wilted plumage of international vagabondage. We ask only one thing: to be allowed to land; to pass through to continue. (90-91)

Jasmine continues to bear the hardships of the journey and tries to cover the night at the Gulf of Florida.She plans to proceed to Tampa, where she envisions burning Prakash’s wedding suit and ending her life by performing sati and throwing herself on the pyre.She is brought to an abandoned hotel by half-face, the captain of the trawler, who rapes her.jasmine’s rape and her response to the rape by murdering the captain when he is asleep reveal two profound motifs in the novel.The first, is jasmine creating a new identity of Goddess kali who destroys the evil and the other a woman, who grows from strength to strength to survive and fight in a lonely land.

The killing of half-face reminds one of an earlier incident in the novel, where Jyoti kills a dog, outside her village of Hasnapur.

A dog, but not a dog. It was bigger than a pariah. . . almost the size of a wolf. . . A dog that dragged its hind legs . . . that danced jerkily as it walked...its eyes glowed red. Tremors raised pink ridges on its hairless sides. It stopped so close to me I could see flies stuck in its viscous drool (49). At the moment of attack, jyoti strikes the beast with a pointed staff, crushing its snout, "I'd never seen so much blood" (50).

The attack of half-face becomes a virtual reinforcement of an earlier assault. Half-face represents the beast that jyoti killed and becomes the goddess kali who kills the demons to establish righteousness in the world. During an interview Mukharjee emphasized the importance of kali in Jasmine as

[Jasmine] becomes kali, the goddess of destruction. . . All Bengalis including me are kali worshippers. She is the goddess of destruction but not in a random haphazard way. She is the destroyer of Evil so that the world can be renewed. (Connel 21)

Jasmine is about the transformation experienced by Jyoti who turns into Jasmine first and finally Jane. The novelist shows, in spite of the discriminations and suffering that Jyoti faces in the new land, she accepts it as hers and creates a new identity. In every aspect Jasmine accepts the changes she has faced in her life progresses with stifled confidence and acceptance.

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 lowan woman, who centers the story, the 'J' will represent the element of continuity within transformation. (Ameena Meer 93)

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