

# An Analysis of the Identity Transformations and the Survival of an Immigrant in Bharati Mukherjee's 'Jasmine'

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**Abstract**—Identity formation is integral to every human being where by a person locates oneself in society. However, in the case of immigrants, many of them undergo identity transformations as part of their adjustments with the host society. Bharati Mukherjee's 'Jasmine' is the story of a village girl from India who immigrates to America and undergoes multiple identity transformations to assert her place in the American society. This paper is an exploration into Jasmine's journey of transformed identities and how she emerges not only as a survivor but also a successful immigrant in America. It explains why these different identities are integral for her survival as an immigrant and ultimately throws light into the fact that for immigrants if the past is replete with sufferings and hopelessness, it is better to discard the past and move forward in life.

**Index Terms**—Identity, transformations, immigrant, survival, Bharati Mukherjee.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Immigrants shuttle between two worlds, the old and the new- the old world where they once belonged and the new world where they seek a sense of belonging. During their odyssey from their home country to the host country, they don several identities. In their struggle to assert a place for themselves in the host country, the immigrants undergo several transformations- names, jobs, personalities etc. Each transformed identity has a role to play in the life of immigrants and those who flow with these changing identities and overcome the obstacles emerge as survivors.

Bharati Mukherjee's novel "Jasmine" is the story of a young widow who uproots herself from her life in India and re-roots herself in search of a new life and image in America. Mukherjee rejoices in the idea of assimilation and makes it clear that Jasmine needs to travel to America to make something significant of her life, because in the so called 'Third World' she faced only despair and loss. The protagonist Jasmine is a village girl from Hasnapur, Punjab. She was born with the name 'Jyoti'. She gets married to a city man named Prakash who has a liberated outlook towards life and who yearns to go to Florida to get an engineering degree. When the extremists kill him, Jasmine ventures on her trip to America alone. With a forged visa and passport she lands on American soil. Raped on her arrival, she becomes the

murderer of her rapist the first day in America. From there, Jasmine's journey into different identities and roles begin. Lillian Gordon rescues her and later on Prakash's professor Devinder Vadhera provides shelter for her. Jasmine's determination to strive and assert her place in the American society persuades her to accept the job of an 'au pair' with the Hayes's and later on become the common-law wife of Bud Ripplemeyer. Thus, Jasmine's life is a constant shuttling between identities and the individuality of Jasmine undergoes tremendous transformation.

Jasmine undergoes a metamorphosis during her life in America. There occurs a transformation to her entire personality that enables her to come out of the shell being a village girl to a matured and liberated Jasmine. Jasmine journeys through multiple identities to become an American woman and strives to fit in the American society. Jyoti-Jasmine-Jase-Jane- each name has a certain purpose assigned to it, which ought to be fulfilled by her. To her, life can be "like a giant long-playing record with millions of tracks, each of them a complete circle with only one diamond sharp microscopic link to the next life and to the next and only god to hear it all". [1] As her experiences become more variegated, she begins to wonder whether she has 'rippled across incarnations or jumped tracks' [1]. Jasmine realizes that 'Jyoti of Hasnapur was not Jasmine, Duff's day mummy and Taylor and Wylie's au pair in Manhattan; that Jasmine isn't this Jane Ripplemeyer... [1]. So, there occurs a constant flow and transformation in Jasmine's life [2].

## II. THE JOURNEY THROUGH TRANSFORMED IDENTITIES

Identity formation is the process by which a person locates oneself in society. The overall conditions of a life, such as class, cultural background and location can be considered as the factors that contribute to identity formation. Renowned psychologist Henry Clay Lindgren [3] opines about identity formation thus.

Our involvement in the roles we play is likely to have some kind of effect on the kinds of people we become or, more accurately, are continually becoming. Although a role may be viewed as a kind of psychological garment that we put on and take off and that effects our appearance and behavior for the moment, the fact that this metaphor is appropriate does not necessarily mean that there is no residual effect when we are no longer playing the role in questions...Furthermore, carrying out role-appropriate sequences of behavior requires that we learn certain perpetual styles-certain ways of looking at ourselves and our environment.

Manuscript received August 10, 2014; revised January 10, 2015.

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As far as Jasmine's life is concerned, it becomes evident that not only her names but her sensibility also undergoes radical change. There is a remarkable transformation from Jyoti, the silent village girl to the out spoken Jasmine to Jane, the teller of tales. Jasmine's life in the village of Hasnapur as Jyoti is that of a survivor. Having been born as the fifth daughter in a family where daughters are considered to be curses, Jasmine becomes a survivor with 'a ruby-red choker of bruise around her [my] throat and sapphire fingerprints on her [my] collarbone'. [1]. She thus survives the snipping and by surviving she already becomes 'a fighter and adapter' [1]. In the opening of the novel itself, the fact that a vehement transformation is awaiting Jasmine is quite evident. An astrologer foretold her widowhood and exile, which she refuses to believe and the argument results in a bloody wound, the shape of a star on her forehead. Jasmine considers her star shaped wound her 'third eye' [1] It can in fact be called the bleeding stigmata that portends her endless self-transformation: it glows, a spotlight trained on lives to come' [4]. Jasmine carries with her, her 'third eye' and that remains as a 'symbol of her arrogant refusal to be sealed by her fate' [5].

The nodal point in Jyoti/Jasmine's life is her marriage to Prakash, who renames her 'Jasmine' and urges her to break the shell of feudalism and instills in her the need to embrace new and better things in life.

He wanted to break down the Jyoti I'd been in Hasnapur and make me a new kind of city woman. To break off the past, he gave me a new name: Jasmine. He said, "You are small and sweet and heady, my Jasmine. You'll quicken the whole world with your perfume". Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttled between identities [1]

The transformation of Jasmine begins at this juncture. Jasmine becomes part of Prakash's 'Vijh&Wife' and his dream to study in America. But fate buffets their plans in the form of Prakash's death that is caused by the Khalsa Lions, the Sikh extremist group. After her husband's death, Jasmine becomes socially excluded from the world of the living, exerting selves. During her forlorn life as a widow, one day it occurs to her that Prakash 'had created life. Prakash had taken Jyoti and created Jasmine, and Jasmine would complete the mission of Prakash' [1]. Jasmine thus plans for her journey to America to burn her husband's suit in the Florida college campus and to commit 'Sati' there. She asks her brothers to get a passport for her. 'A village girl, going alone to America, without a job, husband or papers...I had sworn before God. A matter of duty and honor, I dared not tell my mother' [1]. As Samir Dayal [4] comments, the transformation of the 'feudal' Jyoti into the modern English-speaking Jasmine, inevitably, involves a violent baptism in Prakash's blood. Jasmine exhibits tremendous will power in battling against fate and decides to leave for America. Though Jasmine begins her American journey to fulfill the dream of free enterprise-'Vijh&Wife', it gradually evolves into a series of fantasies, induced by the cosmopolitan dream of endless self-improvisations. [5].

On her arrival in America, Jasmine is raped by 'Half-Face', the captain of the ship on which she sailed to America. She wishes for death on her first day of arrival but realizes that she is incapable of killing herself. Unable to kill herself, she kills

Half-Face. Jasmine becomes Goddess Kali-like; she pours blood from her mouth on Half-Face, the evil incarnate. Her transformation into the Hindu Goddess Kali is pivotal because from this point on she severs her bonds with the past. At this point, Jasmine passes from innocence and enacts a radical break suggesting a form of resistance that is contingent, disruptive and strategic. She is intent upon murdering her past because in the opinion of Jasmine, it is the only way to make a new life [6].

There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself. We murder who we were so we can rebirth in the image of dream [1].

After Half-Face's murder, Jasmine discards all her luggage and starts her journey on foot. She is rescued by a kind American lady named Lillian Gordon, who provides her with shelter and her daughter's clothes. Ms. Gordon gives Jasmine her first American identity by renaming her 'Jazzy'. At this juncture Jasmine undergoes a physical transformation as well. A new American identity and American clothes changed her demeanor in such a way that even Jasmine herself couldn't believe that it is actually the old Jyoti from Hasnapur who is clad in a new American image.

I checked myself in the mirror, shocked at the transformation. Jazzy in a t-shirt, tight cords and running shoes. I couldn't tell if with the Hasnapuri sidle I'd also be abandoned by Hasnapuri modesty [1].

As Jasmine moves forward in her life as Jazzy, she decides to move into the Vadhera household. Jasmine's American image takes a step back here and she is seen as being tossed back to her old widow image that she wants to forget. Some sort of anonymity grips her, as she wasn't referred to even by a name. She ends up looking after the old folks in the household just like a widowed daughter-in-law. Here we find that Jasmine moves from her exciting new American identity to almost anonymity and she feels that her life is stagnated. She finds herself 'a prisoner doing unreal time' there [1]. The strong urge in her to re-invent herself and her eagerness for independence and self-reliance made her life difficult at the Vadhera household. Her only option there was total silence and she finds herself losing herself in the superficial rituals and cultural adherence in that house. However, she gets Mr. Vadhera to arrange a green card for her and on getting it, flies to a new terrain. She seeks the help of Lillian Gordon's daughter Kate to arrange a job for her. Thus, Jasmine takes on a new identity and gets a job as a baby-sitter in the house of Taylor and Wylie Hayes.

Jasmine's role as a baby-sitter or 'day mummy' to Duff can be considered as a pivotal point in her identity transformation. Here, Taylor calls her 'Jase'- another role and identity for Jasmine.

Taylor called me Jase...I like the name he gave me. 'Jase'. Jase was a woman who bought herself spangled heels and silk chartreuse pants [1].

A drastic change can be identified in Jyoti who came to commit Sati on her husband's suit, and the present 'Jase' in the Taylor household. Taylor Hayes acknowledges her liminal state: 'Taylor didn't want to change me...I changed because I wanted to. To bunker oneself inside nostalgia, to sheathe the heat in a bulletproof vest, was to be onward' [1]. On asserting her willingness to change and be part of America,

from a 'diffident alien', Jasmine becomes 'Jase, the prowling adventurer' [1]. However, Jasmine's shuttling between identities is not an easy process. It carries with it an intense struggle with the self, with tradition, with the wonders and horrors of a new culture accompanied by growing aspirations, hopes and desires. Mukherjee's comments about her survivor immigrant characters deserve special mention in this context. She said: 'although they are often hurt or depressed by set backs in their new lives and occupations, they do not give up'. [7]. It is, in fact, this incorrigible optimism and fighting instinct in Jasmine that keeps her going and shows the world what 'a girl from swampy backwater could accomplish' [1].

Jasmine sets out on a new life; she realizes her transition into a new life while holding a marine iguana. She would never have done that in her old life in India. Indian village girls do not hold large reptiles on their laps. They would scream at the swipe of a dry tongue and the basilisk stare of a beady eye. [1]. This can be considered as Jasmine's rebirth in a way, where she becomes a more daring self, ready to face the umpteen challenges and roles that lay ahead of her. She convinces herself that it is always the way forward for her in her life and there is no going back. What ensues is a constant discovery on the part of Jasmine about her strengths and capabilities and she takes in everything with so much enthusiasm and for her even the air around 'crackle with so much intelligence' [1]. She says:

I became an American in an apartment on Claremont Avenue across the street from a Barnard College Dormitory. I lived with Taylor and Wylie Hayes for nearly two years. Duff was my child; Taylor and Wylie were my parents, my teachers, my family. [1]

Jasmine's sensibility gets detached from the past as she tries to be part of America. In her own words, 'language on the street, on the forbidden television, at the Hayes's dinners...all became my language, which I learned like a child, from the first words up. The squatting fields of Hasnapur receded fast' [1]. Moreover, the Hayes's treatment of her as the 'caregiver' rather than a domestic helps her tremendously in her Americanization. Her transformation into Jase is remarkable. She becomes part of the American way of life by shopping in stores along Broadway and big department stores. Her earlier name 'Jyoti' has receded into the past and non-existent for the new 'Jase'. She speaks about her transformed identities thus:

Jyoti was now a Sati-goddess; she had burned herself in a trash can-funeral pyre behind a boarded-up motel in Florida. Jasmine lived for the future, for Vijn & Wife. Jase went to movies and lived for today. [1]

Jasmine dons yet another identity when she leaves her role as 'caregiver' and moves to Iowa to become the common-law wife of Bud Ripplemeyer, a local banker and mother to their adopted son and later on becomes pregnant with Bud's child through artificial insemination. Bud renames her 'Jane' and her Americanization is complete. She becomes a new individual in Iowa where she enjoys her new liberated self and her new role allows for ambition, curiosity, talent and sexuality and she becomes a part of the American society. She feels that she has chosen the life of an immigrant in America and hence her Americanization is 'genetic' [1]. Jasmine chooses America, 'the land of Recombinant identities' [8].

She examines the duality involved in being 'always moving and always still', shifting and multiple identities that are in a state of perpetual transition. [6]. Thus we find the acceptance of a plural self in Jasmine that helps her to survive and she remarks, 'there are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself' [1].

There is a constant flux of identities for Jasmine. It is found that her neighbor calls her 'Ju-ahne' and in the bar where she goes with Bud, she is given the identity of a prostitute! She tells Bud that she prefers 'Plain Jane' to some one like Jane Russell because 'Plain Jane' is a role. Jasmine considers each part of her life, each of her changed identities, as roles assigned to her, and on fulfilling the duties entrusted to each role, she moves on to another. So, when Taylor and Duff came back and ask her to be part of their family, she leaves with them and perhaps a new identity awaits her there. Jasmine's act of leaving Bud shows her desire to belong to be part of American society with a man who accepts her for who she is and who she has been. After all, to be American 'is a quality of mind and desire. It means that you can be yourself, not what you were fated to be...you can try to shape your fate yourself' [9].

Thus, Jasmine floats through the ups and downs and an array of identity transformations. It is undeniable that her 'mindscape has a plethora of denials, pains, pathos and an array of sufferings.' [10]. Jasmine, however, emerges as a survivor and her life as an immigrant eventually is a success.

### III. JASMINE AS A SUCCESSFUL IMMIGRANT

Immigration to America gives different experiences to the immigrants; some of them surrender to fate whereas some emerge as survivors. Jasmine is a clear instance of a survivor. She displays courage and the ability to survive even while in Hasnapur by killing a rabid dog. Even before that she escapes her mother's snipping as a new born. Jasmine tries not to be a victim of the feudalistic society in Hasnapur and after her husband's death embarks on a journey to America. Even though raped by Half-Face, she moves on and prepares herself to embrace life in America. The fighter and survivor in her battles against the odds and overcomes the obstacles in her path. In her journey with multiple identities, Jasmine discovers more and more of her and seeks ways to remake herself. This is a positive trait in Jasmine that eventually makes her successful in life.

Gayatri Spivak is of the opinion that Jasmine does her part of 'being and becoming American' so well [11]. In fact, Jasmine alternates between the desire for remembering and the need for forgetting, with its accompanying pain. Bharati Mukherjee admits that an issue very important to her is '...the finding of a new identity...the painful or exhilarating process of pulling yourself out of the culture that you were born into, and then replanting yourself in another culture' [12]. A successful immigrant mostly has the instinct to change and to adapt and she realizes that they are the keys for survival. Jasmine also transforms and reconstructs herself and as Brinda Bose [11] comments, Jasmine... 'needs to discard her ethnicity too- the only way that she can cope with the freedom of choices thrust upon her, intellectual and sexual ...and to see herself within the construct of a new "American" woman'.

The idea of discarding one's ethnicity in order to become a successful immigrant is quite debatable. Yet, it has to be noted that Jasmine is a willing immigrant and she stands poised to achieve the American Dream, confident that she can freely refashion her life by obeying its dictates. Though it is difficult to generalize, a willing immigrant can refashion himself/herself any number of times to suit the situation h/she is in. Jasmine makes her individual choices, and in America where there is freedom of choice, her transformation cannot be questioned. She is a 'self-willing subject of the West' [13] and therefore can be termed successful.

Jasmine wonders how many 'more selves' are in her [1]. She feels that she can rip herself free of the past as she assimilates with American society. She trails through an array of Americanized names and identities- Jazzy, Jase, Jane and tries to forget her past. E.P Lazure is of the opinion that 'Mukherjee portrays the contours of the character's transited identity that are in constant negotiation and transformation because of the interaction between the past and the present' [14].

Jasmine, however, severs her ties with the past. This blotting out every image of the past seems impossible and this has brought in a lot of criticisms. But in Jasmine's case, 'Experience must be forgotten, or else it will kill' [1]. She lives in the present. Even while leaving Bud and going with Taylor, she thinks of the present; 'pulling down an imaginary shade' [1] over the past, she moves on. Hoppe talks about Mukherjee's characters' case of murdering the past selves thus:

The future they propel themselves toward and even help to shape are not guaranteed to be successful, but they do have the potential for personal, material and spiritual success [15].

Thus, Jasmine becomes capable of living in a world where individuals exist not as unified persons but as many, bound by no borders with infinite possibilities of inventing identities [16].

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Traversing through a series of identity transformations and the associated struggles and the constant re-inventing of her, Jasmine moves forward in life. She becomes part of America by assimilating into the American culture and the American ways of living and there are chances of her donning more identities. It is important to note that Jasmine's transformations aren't forced, as she is a willing immigrant. She severs her ties with her past and India because there is nothing left for her there. Mukherjee has often been criticized for this idea of fleeing the past and severing connections with the homeland to embrace life in America. However, how can swapping identities for the betterment of oneself be called a crime? If the past is replete with bitter experiences and hopelessness, it is not worth holding on to it. The past lies somewhere in the corner of the mind, and as time ticks by, it slowly wanes and new commitments in the present and hopes and aspirations for the future dominate the past experiences. It

is practical to live in the present because the ability to shape the course of one's life can only be exercised in the present. Jasmine is successful because she is ready for transformations and America molds her into a brave and free-spirited lady and she continues her journey reasserting her place as a successful immigrant.

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