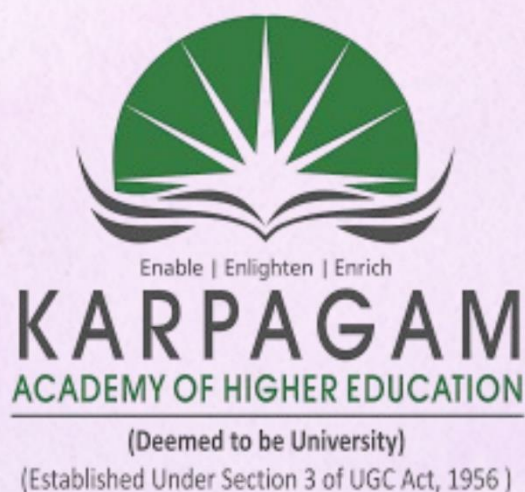


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Department of English

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Crossing Borders: Exploring the Diversities of English Language & Literature

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Identity in Exile: An Exploration of Diasporic Identity in Jasmine

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ABSTRACT

The term 'feminism' appears to allude to a strong sense of female identity and an interest in feminine issues. It is a theoretical study aimed at analyzing societal power structures, male dominance, social behaviors, and social institutions that contribute to women's marginalization. Bharati Mukherjee, an Indian-born American writer, is one of the most notable authors from the Indian Diaspora. Her contribution to Indian English writing has earned her a place in the international literary scene. The term Diaspora refers to the forced or voluntary separation of religious or ethnic groups from their established homeland.

Mukherjee's literary oeuvre is mostly concerned with the traumas and agonies that people in the Indian Diaspora suffer while pursuing their goals. She concentrates primarily on her diasporic female characters, their quest for identification, their painful experiences, and their eventual emergence as self-assured individuals free of the bonds forced on them. As a result, the purpose of this dissertation is to investigate the series of transformations that Jasmine, the protagonist of Bharati Mukherjee's novel, goes through as an illegal immigrant to America, as well as her regeneration following several transformations with disintegration.

The term 'feminism' is defined in the dictionary as the promotion of women's rights based on gender equality, as well as organized activity in support of women's rights and interests. Defining feminism, then, is a risky undertaking. The argument that women must not only be considered "equal" in dignity and worth, but also "equal" in their ability to participate in every institution of human society at all levels, is central to feminism. Until the 1960s, feminism was considered a subclass of liberalism and socialism. The rise of radical feminism, however, changed this; they asserted that gender imbalance was crucial in politics, something ideologies did not embrace at the time.

Feminist activists advocate for women's rights in areas such as contract law, property ownership, and voting, as well as physical integrity, autonomy, and reproductive rights. Feminist efforts have transformed civilizations, particularly in the West, by obtaining women's suffrage, gender neutrality in English, equal pay for women, reproductive rights (including access to contraception and abortion), and the freedom to contract and own property. Feminists have battled to keep women and girls safe from domestic violence, sexual harassment, and assault.

They have also pushed for workplace rights such as maternity leave, as well as against gender discrimination. Feminism is primarily concerned with women's issues, but because it wants gender equality, the author Bell Hooks and other feminists have claimed that men's liberation is an essential component of feminism, and that men are also hurt by sexism and gender norms. The term "diaspora" describes the forced or voluntary dispersal of religious or ethnic groups from their established homeland. This term was first applied to the Jewish exile to Babylonia and their subsequent dispersion. Today, though, it refers to any sizable group of people from a specific nation or region who reside outside of their home nation and who share some characteristics that give them a shared ethnic identity and, as a result, a strong sense of community.

It is impossible to dispute the Indian Diaspora's contribution to global literature. The diasporic writers fall into a separate group; they are primarily from the west, specifically England, Canada, and the United States of America, but they are of Indian descent. Many of these writers from the diaspora have expressed their creative urges and established Indian English fiction as a unique force. The main topics covered by diasporic writers are the phenomenon of Indian migration to the United States and other countries, their status there, and their conflicting feelings of alienation and longing for their mother country.

One of the well-known writers of the Indian Diaspora is the American author Bharati Mukherjee, who was born in India. She has made a respectable name for herself in the international literary community through her contributions to Indian English literature. Her excellent writing puts her in the same league with notable writers from the diaspora, such as Yashmine Gunratne, Bernard Malamud, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, and Jhumpa Lahiri. The main theme of Mukherjee's literary work is the traumas and sufferings that members of the Indian Diaspora endure while trying to realize their ambitions.

Her diasporic female characters, their identity struggles, terrible experiences, and eventual emergence as independent, self-assured people freed from the bonds placed upon them, are the core subjects of her writing. Therefore, the purpose of this essay is to examine the changes that Jasmine, the main character in Bharati Mukherjee's book, goes through as an undocumented immigrant to America, as well as her recovery following several changes that result in disintegration.

Her most notable pieces celebrate her acceptance of America as well as her pride in her Indian ancestry. Because of the way she portrays immigrant experiences—especially those of the South Asian Diaspora in North America—her writing has received a great deal of attention. She uses her personal experiences to illustrate how American society is evolving in her works.

She describes herself as unhyphenated American and not the hyphenated Indian-American title: "I maintain that I am an American writer of Indian origin, not because I'm ashamed of my past, not because I'm betraying or distorting my past, but because

my whole adult life has been lived here, and I write about the people who are immigrants going through the process of making a home here” (Carb, The Massachusetts Review 29.4: 645)

Published in 1989, the novel *Jasmine* replicates Mukherjee’s celebratory tone of violent refashioning of identity through radical negotiations in the dominant culture. *Jasmine* weaves the story of an illiterate Punjabi girl who comes to America to self-immolate herself in the name of her dead husband. She is raped the day she lands in the United States and finds herself totally ostracized in an all-white neighborhood. However, through her chanced encounters with good-intentioned people in America, she completely transforms herself from an ignorant, helpless immigrant to a confident working woman, an unwed mother, a reckless lover, and in the end, “greedy with wants and reckless from hope” (*Jasmine* 214). She denies the material comforts of her domestic life and succumbs to the mysterious calling of adventure by eloping with her former lover.

In *Jasmine*, journey is a metaphor that advocates the ever-moving, regenerating process of life itself. In India, as Jyoti, Jasmine is seen against the backdrop of the rigid and patriarchal Indian society. In America, her self-awareness is reflected in the relationships with Bud, Taylor, and Du. However, her first husband Prakash initiates her transformation from traditional Jyoti to self-assured emancipated American woman, Jane.

Jasmine was born in a rural village, Hasnapur. She tells the story as a twenty-four year old pregnant widow, living in Iowa with her crippled lover, Bud Ripplemeyer. Jasmine juxtaposes in her memory each of her identities- as Jyoti, Jasmine, Kali, Jazzy, Jase and Jane, implying that she evokes and revises her past in articulating her identities. The author depicts this transformation and regeneration as a positive and optimistic journey. Jasmine creates a new world consisting of new ideas and values, constantly unmasking her past. She tries to establish a new cultural identity by integrating new desires, skills and habits. This regeneration is defined more significantly in the changes in her attitude.

Jyoti, the protagonist of *Jasmine* being “the fifth daughter, seventh of nine children” (39) is literally strangled to death by her grandmother is a survivor and fighter from the beginning. Jasmine survives the infanticide only to become a rebellious child who stands apart from other traditional women in words and actions. From the very beginning Bharati Mukherjee has delineated Jyoti as a rebel against blind beliefs and superstitions. Breaking from the usual tradition she chooses Prakash Vih, an educated, intelligent young man, who renames and reshapes her Jasmine. The renaming is to continue every time she becomes a new woman. He supports her and nurtures her spirits instead of suppressing them.

Jasmine appears to be jubilant sharing the ambition of her husband, intent to go to America, a land of her dreams and opportunities. But the fate snatches her husband from her when she had just started her life, leaving her shattered and heartbroken at the age of seventeen. Prakash is killed in a bomb blast on the eve of their departure to America. Grief stricken after his death, Jasmine hears his voice exhorting her from every corner of her room: “There is no dying, there is only an ascending or a descending, a moving on to other Planes. Don’t crawl back to Hasnapur and feudalism. That Jyoti is dead”. (86)

So, instead of succumbing to fate and leading a life of widowhood she decides to set off for America, of course with the help of her brothers. “Prakash had taken Jyoti and created Jasmine, and Jasmine would complete the mission of Prakash” (63). Mukherjee here sets her free from the claustrophobic and culturally absurd native place. She sets off for America with forged documents. Thus begins her journey of transformation with disintegration and regeneration in the alien land. As an attractive young girl, who arrives alone and unescorted on alien shores, Jasmine come across a series of shattering incidents during the adventurous journey. She meets Half-Face, the captain of the trawler in which she crosses over to Florida. Half-Face had “lost an eye and ear and most of his cheek in a paddy field in Vietnam.”(104). She is brutally raped by Half-Face in a motel. She disintegrates and becomes heart-broken at this incident and decides to commit suicide but at another moment American outlook redeems her and is enlivened with the spirit to survive through eliminating the American evil and is mad to emerge like Indian goddess Kali to slit the throat of her rapist as a symbol of complete eradication of evil of consumerist culture. Jasmine’s full transformation, from the victim into a vengeful Goddess, seems to be reinforced by imagining herself as the reincarnation of Kali.

Her Indian identity leaves her at this point; the desire to fulfill a mission which had seen her through the difficult passages to America is abandoned. The body becomes a mere shell, soon to be discarded and what she discards is her Indian psyche and is reborn in America as Jase and Jane. Shuttling between the past and the present, the first-person narrative reaches its turning point. She is reborn several times. Hence Jasmine’s transformation of identity occurs not only through construction, but also by the destruction of her existing self.

Lillian Gordan, the first among Jasmine’s many rescuers, introduces Jasmine to the first concept of American life. Lillian bestows upon her the nick name ‘Jazzy’, a symbol of her entrance into and acceptance of American culture which she welcomes gladly. While staying with Lillian; she begins her process of assimilation by learning how to become American. Then, Jasmine lodges with Prakash’s Professor, Mr. Vadhera. But she feels uncomfortable in Professor ji’s house which they

have converted into a Punjabi ghetto. She wants to get away from the traditional 'Indianness' and Bharati Mukherjee brings out this contrast between tradition and modernity through the contrast between Professorji's wife Nirmala and the protagonist, Jasmine: Nirmala only takes, Jasmine not only takes and but also gives. Jasmine in a state of utmost frustration because of the Indian ghetto in Flushing, Language in India decides to run away from another claustrophobic atmosphere at Prof. Vadehra to join the lonely and empty people of American consumerist society and culture.

Jasmine moves to Manhattan, New York to join a glamorous and emancipated couple, Taylor and Wylie Hayes and their adopted daughter Duff as a Caregiver. Jasmine is renamed as Jase by Taylor and starts her transformations into a sophisticated American woman. Jasmine transforms but this time the change is not from a reaction, but rather from her very own yearning for personal change. In becoming Jase, Jasmine gets increasingly comfortable with her sexuality which she always tried to repress earlier, more so, after her traumatic experience.

Though Jasmine creates a new identity for every new situation, her former identities are never completely erased. They emerge in specific moments and aggravate the tension which results in disintegration, thereby causing Jasmine to create another more dominant identity, different from all those that came before. Jasmine enters a personal continuum of time where events swing backwards and forwards from place to place and from childhood to adult, from despair to hope, compassion and love. The inescapability of memory, and the boundless nature of time is stressed here and Jasmine finds her life distorted by the different consciousness through which now she experiences the world. She loses even her sense of self-expression. Unable to live with this plethora of conflicting identities she flees to Baden County, Iowa to give her life a new beginning. She prepared herself physically and psychologically for another transformation of identity.

Bharati Mukherjee, through this affirmative novel, presents Jasmine as a Phoenix who rises from her ashes. Jasmine can face all challenges, whether it is killing a mad dog in Hasnapur, or travelling round the world as an illegal immigrant, being repeatedly raped, without suffering any bad consequences she calmly takes on a new name for each role. In this novel the womanhood has been depicted not as an incarnation of weakness but as a personification of strength.

Bharati Mukherjee has carved out the assimilation of Third World immigrants into the American 'melting pot' which is enriched by those, she describes as pioneers. Jasmine is one of these pioneers, a survivor with courage. The protagonists of her first two novels Tara and Dimple are completely dislocated both in India and in America, whereas Jasmine survives and reinstates herself to a new life. Finally she makes an outcry like her author, who defiantly announces to her American readers, "I am one of you" and in this assertion she has declared herself as an American in the

immigrant tradition. The exuberance of immigration, which comes with the acquisition of Americanness and the immigrant Indianness as a sort of fluid identities to be celebrated, does not come easily.

In *Jasmine*, the protagonist's struggle symbolizes the restless search of a rootless person irked by a depressing sense of isolation all around. Her journey through life leads Jasmine through many transformations in various locations. In her 'Land of Opportunity', Jasmine is thrown from one state of insecurity to another and she lets go all her hold on things which she would have held dear in India. She realizes that she has become a drifter moving in a world of uncertainties: "I feel at times like a stone hurtling through diaphanous mist, unable to grab hold, unable to slow myself, yet unwilling to abandon the ride I'm on. Down and down I go, where I'll stop, God only knows (139). Bharati Mukherjee ends the book on a novel note, and re-emphasizes the complex and alternating nature of identity of a woman in exile, "Then there nothing I can do. Time will tell if I am tornado, rubble maker, arising from nowhere and disappearing into a cloud. I am out the door and in the potholed and rutted driveway, scrambling ahead of Taylor, greedy with wants and reckless hope (241).

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