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A Study on the Character 'Jasmine' as a Protagonist in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

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ABSTRACT



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Bharati Mukherjee is one of the accomplished diasporic writers. Her writing focuses mainly on women's suppression, struggle to overcome the problems and attempt to attain identification. Bharati Mukherjee also depicts the cultural conflicts between the East and the West. When a person enters into a new culture from the old one, the conflict arises between the two cultures in the alien land. This paper explores how the female character, Jasmine is portrayed as protagonist in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*. Bharati Mukherjee portrays Indian woman as protagonist in all her novels and the character takes brave decision to emigrate which is the first major step of heroism. The character is portrayed with the capable of facing adventures and creates own happiness and identity, unyielding by conventionality. In *Jasmine* (1989), Mukherjee tries to unravel the complicated layers of cross-cultural clashes through a series of adventures in which the protagonist undertakes during her odyssey from Punjab to California via Florida, New York and Iowa. The novel depicts the successful and adventurous story of a poor peasant Punjabi girl, Jyoti, who challenges her most hostile fate. This paper deals with how the protagonist fights against the superstitions and feudal traditions to find a dignified and independent existence in *Jasmine*. The novel shows the protagonist's zeal which makes her to rise against all the odds that encroaches during her journey. In alien land only Jasmine finds her identity and meaning of her life. *Jasmine* is one of the most celebrated and powerful novels of Bharati Mukherjee which represents a powerful woman who refuses to live by others. Key Words: Protagonist, Diaspora, Oppression, Challenges, Cross-cultural, Identity

"Heroes are never perfect, but they're brave, they're authentic, they're courageous, determined, discreet and they have got grit - Wade Davis"

Jasmine is the story of a young woman from Punjab, India who experiences with identity crisis and cultural conflict in both the third and first world. (Developed countries of the world is called first world and underdeveloped countries and poor countries of the world come under the "third world") Jasmine is a woman, considered as the

protagonist and finds real identity in her journey. The theme of *Jasmine* is about an Indian immigrant who comes across the new world and the experience of her gradual transformation absorbs thoroughly in the new culture. When the quest of survival comes, the human beings prefer to survive and for the survival migration is considered as the better solution.

Jasmine struggles to live and never descends to a status of hopeless and becomes a passive victim till the end of the novel. Though she

has to lose many people and make numerous sacrifices on this journey, she never gives up. In a way, she becomes victorious even in her most difficult times. She never accepts her defeat in her quest for a dignified life.

Jasmine is born as Jyoti in an Indian village named Hasnapur in Punjab. She is "the fifth daughter, the seventh of nine children" (*Jasmine* 39). Generally in the third world countries like India, the birth of a girl child is neither welcomed nor celebrated.

In fact, it is considered a sin for a woman to bear a girl child. Therefore Jasmine tells:

If I had been a boy, my birth in a bountiful year would have marked me as lucky, a child with a special destiny to fulfil. But daughters were curses. A daughter had to be married off before she could even enter heaven, and dowries beggared families for generations. Gods with infinite memories visited the girl children on women who needed to be punished for sins committed in other incarnations. My mother's past must have been heavy with wrongs. (*Jasmine* 39)

When Jasmine was seven, she was told by a fortune teller that she would become a widow at the age of seventeen and also talked about her journey to an alien land. Jasmine didn't accept with the statement of what he said. She disagrees strongly with him and tells fortune teller:

"You're a crazy old man. You don't know what my future holds!" (*Jasmine* 3). The fortune teller gets angry, hits her and she gets wounded on her forehead. Her sisters are worried about and thought it would lessen her marriage prospects. But Jasmine gives surprising interpretation to the scar. She considers the wound to be her third eye which she thinks that will help her to see her future. She has faith in her bright future and believes that she will not accept her fate as such without struggling for a better and honourable life:

It's not a scar," I shouted, "It's my third eye."
In the stories that our mother recited, the holiest sages developed an extra eye right in the middles of their foreheads. Through that eye they peered out into invisible

worlds. "Now I'm a sage. (*Jasmine* 5)

Jyoti's brothers feel proud of her intelligence. She always tells that she wanted to become a doctor, but Jyoti is never allowed to have primary education because of the secondary position of women in the society. When she attains the marriage age, her grandmother selects an old man as a bride groom, but she boldly rejects the proposal. It shows rebellious nature of Jasmine. Her marriage also has taken place in an unconventional method, against the will and wish of her elders. She falls in love with the voice of a Christian guy named Prakash and marries him in the Registrar office. This clearly reflects heroic adventurous nature of Jyoti, because a Hindu girl marrying Christian is not accepted by the society. Generally the couple receives ill-treatment not only from their kith and kin but also from the society. Her marriage is an exemplary for her rebellious nature.

Her name is changed as Jasmine after marriage. Prakash, Jasmine's husband is a modern man who feels strongly that there is no room for feudalism in modern India. Jyoti always thinks that he is not just an engineer of electricity but of all the machinery in the world seen and unseen. He encourages reading and writing English to understand technical subjects. She becomes a confident woman to make her husband confident and happy. He works hard and saves money to fulfil his long cherished dream to go to America to pursue technical course under the guidance of his teacher Dr.Vadhera. Now the young couple makes arrangements to go to America to start a new life with a new hope. Unfortunately, her husband is killed in Khalistan riots when he protects her. In fact, she is targeted by a Sikh, because she is not following traditions and customs of Hindu. But all her hopes and dreams are being shattered with the sudden murder of Prakash. This is terrible and unexpected incident comes as a shock to her.

Now, Jasmine wants to go back Hasanpur and lead a life as a wretched widow. Jasmine is against the age old dogmas and decides to achieve long cherished dream of her husband to go to America. Her decision may sound ridiculous and impossible to the society but to a woman like Jasmine it is possible and meaningful too. With the

help of her brothers she arranges all illegal documents to go to an alien land. Though the transformation of Jyoti has already started with her husband in India, but this visit to an alien land puts her on a path for the total changes in her life. Her bold choice of going to an alien land all alone knowing well about the unimaginable and unexpected troubles once again specifies heroic attitude of the protagonist Jasmine.

On her journey, she is accompanied by a Half – face, the captain of the shrimper who traps and brutally rapes her. She pleads him to leave and begs to show pity on her who is after all a widow from the third world. But half-face is deaf to the request of Jasmine. Immediately, she decides to kill herself, but she recalls the words of her mother that they are put on this Earth for some purpose. At this moment, she becomes a Kali, gathers all her strength and kills him. This experience teaches her to become a rebel to survive. Again this is a courageous decision of Jasmine which a normal and traditional village girl does not think to attempt. Jasmine has come cross a monster to establish her heroic credentials. After the murder, Jasmine vows to start her own life in America, a life separate from India and native identity of her past. This brutal incident does not weaken her, but gives a fresh starting and a new birth for her ‘incarnation’ in America.

After this ferocious incident Jasmine meets Lillian Gordon, she calls Jasmine as Jazzy. ‘Jazzy’, a symbol of her entrance into and acceptance of American culture which she welcomes gladly. She trains Jasmine to be an American which is a process of assimilation. After gaining a certain degree of self-confidence she moves from Florida to New York, to meet her husband’s teacher and mentor Dr. Vadhera. But she feels suffocated in their company because of their Indianess (following traditions and customs very rigidly) in maintenance. America has so many surprises for Jasmine in its “Pandora box.” She does not want to lead a life as widow in New York and longs to live on her own. She says, “I wanted to distance myself from everything Indian, Everything Jyoti-like” (*Jasmine* 145.) She deserts the Vadheras and sets forth for another adventure.

Jasmine is seen in an apartment on Claremont Avenue as a care taker to Duff an adopted daughter of Taylor. She slowly establishes herself in America. Her new identity as Jase in Taylor’s House is an evidence for more confident woman. She is extremely happy in Taylor’s company and prays that her job would last forever. Taylor also helps her to get a job as a Punjabi reader in a University. Jase has availed each and every opportunity to become a successful and independent woman. But wherever a person lives, he or she cannot escape from the fate or destiny.

The sudden appearance of Sukhiwinder, who has killed Prakash panics her. She does not want Taylor’s family to be offended in any way by Prakash. She leaves Taylor and starts her new life as an unwedded wife of Bud Ripple Mayer. She glides a new role as Jane. She thinks that she has a husband for her each and every new identity. Generally, for a woman who has come from the Third world country like India is not possible to lead such kind of life. But Jasmine has repositioned the stars and has become the creator of her own destiny with courage and strong will power. She “takes her life into her own hands and makes herself an American, very much like her creator” (Tondon 134). All through the novel, Jasmine faces massive situations which bring out the brutality and intellectual disturbance in her. She not only faces physical brutality, but also faces mental viciousness that naturally forces her to be as a different human being in different stage of her life. The development Jasmine from one phase of advancement to the other phase of life is described as an audacious personality. Women’s life and the preference they make are in due course produced by their altering situations. Jasmine experiences a diversity of passage from the world of Rural Indian Punjabi. “Hard times don’t create heroes. It is during the hard times when the ‘hero’ within us is revealed”- Bob Riley. It is rightly applicable to Jasmine, because conditions and circumstances have brought the courageous and heroic quality of Jasmine. Thus, it can be said Jasmine as protagonist of the novel.

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