

**Bharati Mukherjees *Jasmine*:
Making Connections Between Asian and Asian American Literature**

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The heroine of Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* experiences "the tug of opposing forces" as she travels from India to America. This conflict sets up a constant pattern of "Hope and pain. Pain and hope." Jasmine embarks on a symbolic as well as a literal journey that explores both the physical and spiritual dimensions of her experience. Mukherjee contrasts the paradoxical pattern of social limitations and spiritual freedom in India with the social freedom and spiritual limitations of life in the New World. There is an ironic tension between the Eastern concept of fate and human destiny, and the heroines need to exert herself and shape the pattern of her life in the West. Bharati Mukherjees narrative is both an Indian mystical journey and an American story of self-making.

Jasmine, the narrator of her own story, records the stages of her movement toward self-definition. Having been steeped in Indian mysticism, she sees life as a journey toward union with a higher power. To get entangled in lifes possessions is to forget that life on earth is all "maya," all illusion, and that true seeking, ones real mission in life, is to be in touch with the higher reality beyond birth and death. Even as Jasmine challenges that concept, she succumbs to its power. Throughout the novel, we see the conflict between being persuaded to accept ones fate and exerting the individual will to defy it.

Jasmine travels to the New World, but, even as she absorbs its energy and vitality, she maintains her traditional world-view. Mukherjee weaves her narrative within the parameters of Indian mysticism and fatalism challenged by American materialism and optimism. Jasmines roots, like the fragrant flower she is named after, are embedded deep within Indian soil in Hasnapur, a village in India, yet she uproots herself and leaves for the promised land. As she points out, "There are two kinds of people in this world--those who leave and those who stay." She leaves, from her perspective, with a strong sense of mission; she has a goal, but as a woman alone in a foreign land, her "mission" quickly evaporates and she drifts from one random experience to the next. Even so, from being a fragrant flower that had blossomed in a quiet village, she turns into a tornado destroying much in her path. In the last paragraph of the novel, Jasmine reflects, "Time will tell if I am a

tornado, rubble-maker, arising from nowhere and disappearing into a cloud" (214). It is an ironic commentary on an ending in which she chooses between "the promise of America and old-world dutifulness." The promise with its "reckless hope" is everything; the concept of duty, what she calls a "worthy life," is dismissed. The reader is left sitting with Jasmine in a world of arrivals and departures. In the New World, structures are quickly built and discarded; the grasp of tradition is timeless. As the heroine observes,

In America, nothing lasts. I can say that now and it doesn't shock me, but I think it was the hardest lesson of all to learn. We arrive so eager to learn, to adjust, to participate, only to find the monuments are plastic, agreements are annulled. Nothing is forever, nothing is so terrible, or so wonderful, that it won't disintegrate. (160)

When Wylie announces her decision to leave her husband of eight years and go off with Stuart, Jasmine questions, "She wasn't happy? She looked happy, sounded happy, acted happy. Then what did happy mean? Her only chance? Happiness was so narrow a door, so selective?" (161).

Mukherjee's narrative wanders between worlds bridging time, containing time past in time present, visualizing time future. The experience of reading the novel is that of holding connected and contradictory layers of consciousness simultaneously. On Jasmine's life as a child sitting under a banyan tree listening to an astrologer predict her future, Mukherjee constructs the glitter of Karen Ripplemeyers two-storeyed mansion in Iowa in which she takes calls on her Suicide Hotline. Life and death in different worlds are inextricably entwined. After all, what the heroine lives, she becomes; what the heroine dreams, she also "becomes." The novel begins with a reflection on the past:

Lifetimes ago, under a banyan tree in the village of Hasnapur, an astrologer cupped his ear to his satellite to the stars and foretold my widowhood and exile. I was only seven then, fast and venturesome, scabrous-armed from leaves and thorns.

"No!" I shouted. "You're a crazy old man. You don't know what my future holds!"

"Suit yourself," the astrologer cackled. "What is to happen will happen." Then he chucked me hard on the head.

I fell. My teeth cut into my tongue. A twig sticking out of the bundle of firewood I'd scavenged punched a star-shaped wound into my forehead. I lay still. The astrologer reentered his trance. I was nothing, a speck in the solar system. Bad times were on their way. I was helpless, doomed. The star bled.

"I don't believe you," I whispered.

The astrologer folded up his tattered mat and pushed his feet into rubber sandals. "Fate is Fate. When Behulas bridegroom was fated to die of snakebite on their wedding night, did building a steel fortress prevent his death? A magic snake will penetrate solid walls when necessary." (1)

When Jasmine's sisters see the bleeding star on her forehead, they cry out, "Now your face is scarred for life. How will the family ever find you a husband?" "It's not a scar," she replies, "it's my third eye," referring to the stories her mother recited in which the holiest sages developed an extra eye right in the middle of their

foreheads. She reflects, "Through that eye they peered into invisible worlds"(3). Years later, as Jasmine recalls the seers prophecy, she bemoans her fate. After her husband's death, socially excluded and a widow in permanent mourning, Jasmine enters "the widows hut" cut off from the world of the living, exerting herself. To live in her feudal society is to be persuaded to conform to traditional lifestyles. In her case, it is to conform to the accepted pattern of widowhood: "My mother kept company only with other widows, bent old women of public humility and secret bitterness. I felt myself dead in their company, with my long hair and schoolgirl clothes, I wanted to scream, Feudalism! I am a widow in the war of feudalisms" (87-88).

A social outcast, Jasmine visits *swamis* in mountains and *ashrams* only to fall deeper into the passive peace that comes of acceptance of one's fate. One day a holy man tells her that one's highest mission is to create new life. He offers prayer. Suddenly it comes to her that her husband, Prakash, and she "had created life. Prakash had taken Jyoti and created Jasmine, and Jasmine would complete the mission of Prakash . . . A vision had formed." There were "thousands of useless rupees in our account. He had his Florida acceptance and his American visa." Her brothers are astounded by her plan: "A village girl, going alone to America, without a job, husband, or papers? I must be mad! Certainly, I was. I told them I had sworn it before God. A matter of duty and honor. I dared not tell my mother" (88).

From persuasion to exertion, with tremendous will power, she battles fate by exerting her will to live symbolized by her decision to leave for America. Yet, on being raped her first day in America, she cries out, "The pitcher is broken. Lord Yama, who had wanted me, who had courted me, and whom I flirted with on the long trip over, had now deserted me" (107). Thus she is drawn back into the net of persuasion and consequent helplessness. Overwhelmed by human helplessness in the vast design of the universe, and consoled by Indian mysticism, she philosophizes, "My body was merely a shell, soon to be discarded . . . if he had only killed me" (108). But she finds a negative pattern of thought suddenly being replaced with the need to exert herself, to live, and "suddenly, death was being denied." And so her life's journey continues.

In coming to America, as she flees from her past, she seeks to grasp a dream of her future. But with her she also carries the scar on her forehead, as she does her consciousness of the power of fate. Instead of acceptance, she defies fate and survives widowhood and exile. What, from the astrologers' point of view, had been absolute conditions, widowhood and exile, become positive challenges for Jasmine. In meeting the challenges of living in exile, her personality is transformed. Jasmine reflects on this transformation: "Taylor didn't want to change me. He didn't want to scour and sanitize the foreignness. My being different from Wylie or Kate didn't scare him. I changed because I wanted to." She reflects that to "bunker oneself inside nostalgia, to sheath the heart in a bulletproof vest, was to be a coward." Thus on Claremont Avenue, in the Hayeses' big, clean, brightly lit apartment, she blooms

from "a diffident alien . . . into adventurous Jase" (165). Adventurous Jase is indeed the new name she takes on to represent her transforming self.

Mukherjee plays with two contradictory images of women in Indian literature: images of strength, of women as goddesses; and images of weakness associated with women's limited spaces within traditional social structures. Heroines in Indian literature convey an inner strength. Unlike them, Jasmine is a hollow shell. She carries the shell, but has no real understanding of the mission that takes her to America; neither is she able to articulate the inner significance of her mission. She is a weak echo of Kalidass's *Shakuntala* or Rabindranath Tagore's *Chitra*. *Shakuntala*, like *Jasmine*, is named after a flower rich in connotative meaning. A child of nature, *Shakuntala* lives in the forest and symbolizes one who is close to the divine. In Kalidass's play, connected images of nature form a pattern of harmony.

In *Jasmine*, nature imagery that symbolizes the destructive power of nature as a fragrant flower takes on the energy of a tornado. Mukherjee explores opposing forces of nature that can transform a beautiful flower into a tornado. Whereas *Jasmine* battles fate, *Shakuntala* submits to it and bears her suffering. The sage Durvasas had placed a curse on her that her lover would forget her. Though she is rejected by her lover, the King, in herself she is free. Hers is not a passive but an active suffering since she loves King Dushyanta. She suffers and endures till King Dushyanta, helped by divine power, comes to her and they are joyfully re-united. Her endurance is based on the strength of her devotion. A sensuous woman, *Shakuntala* is close to the divine. She waters plants without hope for a reward; as a mother, she also nurtures her son, Bharata, as she does her plants and finds fulfilment in doing her duty without hope for a reward.

In *Jasmine*, there are many references to woman and divinity, and indeed the setting of the novel is Hastinapur, an echo of the famous landmark in Sanskrit literature--Hastinapur. Mukherjee, by providing this setting so closely associated with the action of the *Mahabharata*, invites the reader to draw philosophical as well as literary parallels between the two works. It is the kingdom of Hastinapur that is at stake in the conflict between the Kauravs and the Pandavs in the *Mahabharata*, an epic about love and war. Vyasa, who is a character in his own story, tells yet another story within the larger story of the exiled Pandavs. One day, as he sits in the forest with the exiled Pandavs, Vyasa looks at their faces in the firelight and says, "I shall tell you how love won over Death himself." He tells the story about the beautiful Savitri, the daughter of King Aswapati: "Many men came to her father's court to marry her, but she desired none of them for they were every one graceless and idle and vain, and puffed up with pride, and stiff with empty conceit" (113). Then Savitri tells her father, "I will myself go out in my golden . . . chariot, and I will not return till I have found my husband." She meets "Satyavan . . . who is loyal and kind, is as handsome as the moon, and has the power and energy of the sun . . ." but she soon learns that a year from that day, he would die. Her father persuades her to change her mind: "Do not marry into unhappiness," but she responds, "Twice I will not choose. Whether his life be short or long, I have taken

him as my husband in my heart." When Satyavans father asks King Ashwapati, "How will she bear living in the forest?" he replies, "She and I both know that happiness and sorrow come and go their ways wherever we may be. I bow to you in friendship. Do not disregard me; do not destroy my hope" (113). "With love and a happy marriage the year of Satyavans life passes quickly by, and Savitri counts off the days till one remains." After he dies she meets Yama, the god of death, and is willing to sacrifice everything for her love. Her powerful expression of love is only matched by lord Yamas recognition of such power. He asks her, "How much is your life worth without Satyavan?" And she replies, "Nothing, Lord." "Will you give me half your days on Earth?" he asks, and she replies, " Yes, you may have them . . . " "The death lord holds up his silver noose, and it is empty" (117). Savitri thus wins back her husband, Satyavan, through the power of love.

Unlike Savitri, Shakuntala, or Chitra, Jasmine is an exile. She leaves the philosophical and social patterns of a familiar world in India to shape new patterns for herself. Hers is a conflict between two worlds, and the essence of her struggle is both to survive and to fulfil herself. She thus operates at both the real and ideal planes. Taken one step further, the Indian village girl, Indian goddess, or Indian princess (depending on how she sees herself, and how others see her), becomes a character in a larger story of America--one among many cultures that clash, connect, transform, and are transformed to complete yet another image of American womanhood.

As the heroine asserts, "We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams" (25). Mukherjee creates a dynamic, changing, developing heroine; she is a blend of Old World and New Woman. However, at one level, Jasmine is a weak echo of the strong, long-suffering, sensuous, and vibrant heroines of Asian literature such as Savitri, Shakuntala, Chitra, and Draupadi, with their divine centers and consciousness of the ever-present connections between the divine and the human. At another level, Jasmine goes outside Shakuntala and Chitras spiritual and social circles. She is caught in her struggle to connect East and West, to construct the impossible bridge, a space where the ideal can exist within the real. She disappoints the reader by making the easier choice at the end of the novel when she leaves the crippled Bud, whose child she is carrying, for Taylor who drives up in a cloud of dust and departs with her. However, in her consciousness of pain, her courage lies in her awareness of what she has rejected.

Bharati Mukherjees *Jasmine* speaks to the exile. It belongs to the tradition of the literature of Immigration to America. It is a travellers narrative and the movement is upward and onward. If life is seen as a journey in Indian mysticism, Mukherjee uses the structural device to create yet another story about the immigrants arrival in America. For Jasmine, there is no going back; the only home is the one she creates for herself. She stands on a uniquely constructed bridge connecting the painful past with an optimistic vision of the future. Wandering between two worlds, she realizes the American Dream with all its dangers as well as its possibilities.

Works Cited

Buck, William. *Mahabharata*. Trans. Vyasa. New York: Meridian, 1987.

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