

# BHARATHI MUKHERJEE'S JASMINE- A BIRD'S OVER VIEW

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## **ANWERES**

Jasmine, the title character and narrator of Bharati Mukherjee's novel, was born approximately 1965 in a rural Indian village called Hasnpur. She tells her story as a twenty-four-year-old pregnant widow, living in Iowa with her crippled lover, Bud Ripplemeyer. It takes two months in Iowa to relate the most recently developing events. But during that time, Jasmine also relates biographical events that span the distance between her Punjabi birth and her American adult life. These past biographical events inform the action set in Iowa. Her odyssey encompasses five distinct settings, two murders, at least one rape, a maiming, a suicide, and three love affairs. Throughout the course of the novel, the title character's identity, along with her name, changes and changes again: from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jazzy to Jassy to Jase to Jane. In chronological order, Jasmine moves from Hasnpur, Punjab, to Fowlers Key, Florida (near Tampa), to Flushing, New York city, to Manhattan, to Baden, Iowa, and finally is off to California as the novel ends.

### Opening Chapter:

The novel's opening phrase, "Lifetimes ago..." sets in motion the major motif, or theme, the recreation of one's self. Jasmine is seven years old. Under a banyan tree in Hasnpur, an astrologer forecasts her eventual widowhood and exile. Given the traditional Hindu belief in the accuracy of such astrological forecasts, this is a grave moment in the young girl's life. It foreshadows her first husband's death and even her move to the isolated Iowa farm town of Baden.

Life in Iowa:

The action shifts, at the end of the first chapter, into the most recent past tense. This clues the reader into the narrative strategy of the novel. The twenty-four-year-old Jasmine currently lives in Baden, Iowa. The next four chapters provide details about her current situation. It is late May during a dry season, which is significant because the farm community relies on good harvests. She is pregnant. Bud, her partner, became wheelchair-bound some time after the onset of their relationship. Bud wants Jasmine to marry him. The neighbor boy, Darrel Lutz, struggles to run his family's farm, which he inherited after his father's sudden death a year before. Darrel entertains the idea of selling off the farm to golf-course developers, but Bud, the town's banker and thus a powerful figure to the independent farmers, forbids it. Bud has close, though sometimes strained, ties with all the farmers. Though change technological, social, and sexual seems inevitable, Bud resists it. Du, Jasmine and Bud's adopted Vietnamese teenaged son, represents this change. He comes from an entirely different culture than his sons-of-farmers classmates.

Jasmine describes her introduction to Bud and their courtship, introduces her would-be mother-in-law, Mother Ripplemeyer, and Bud's ex-wife Karin. She hints at sexual tension between her and Du, and her and Darrel. When Jasmine makes love to the wheelchair-bound Bud, it illustrates the reversal of sexual power in her new life. Desire and control remain closely related throughout the novel. Du's glimpse of the lovemaking adds another dimension to the sexual politics: there are those in control, those who are helpless, and those bystanders waiting to become part of the action. This resonates with ideas later chronicled about Indian notions of love and marriage.

In these early chapters, the narrator, Jasmine, alludes to more distant events. These hints at important people and events: her childhood friend Vilma, her Manhattan employers Taylor and Wylie, their child and her charge Duff. These allusions begin to create the more complicated and full circumstances of the story, but remain sketchy until later, when the narrator gives each their own full treatment.

The state of exile, a sense of loss, the pain of separation and disorientation makes Bharati Mukherjee's novel „Jasmine“ a quest for identity in an alien land. Jasmine, the protagonist of the novel, undergoes several transformations during her journey of life in America, from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jane, and often experiences a deep sense of estrangement resulting in a fluid state of identity. This journey becomes a tale of moral courage, a search for self-awareness and self-

assertion. Uprooted from her native land India, Jyoti does her best to introduce herself into the new and alien society as an immigrant; the culmination finally indicated in Jasmine's pregnancy with the child of a white man - Bud.

Jasmine changes herself constantly, ferrying between multiple identities in different spaces and at different times. Jasmine shows the most predictable crusade towards Americanization and its obvious uncertainty and without feeling infuriated she survives to make a new start in the host country.

Geographically, the story begins in India and takes off from Europe to America, where it bounces back and forth from Florida through New York to proceed to Iowa, then finally lands in California. The novelist deliberately transports her in time and space again and again so as to bring in a sense of instability into the novel. Born in Hasnapur in India, Jyoti has the distinction of being the most beautiful and clever in the family. She is seen against the backdrop of the rigid and patriarchal Indian society in which her life is controlled and dominated by her father and brothers who regard female as follows, "village girls are cattle; whichever way you lead them, that is the way they will go" (Jas- 46)

However, Jyoti seeks a modern and educated husband who keeps no faith in dowries and traditions, and thus finds a US based modern-thinking man, Prakash. Prakash encourages Jyoti to study English, and symbolically gives Jyoti a new name Jasmine, and a new life. "He wanted to break down the Jyoti as 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....Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttled between identities" (Jas- 77).

Here starts her transformation from a village girl under the shell of her father and brothers to a wife of an American traditional husband who gives her all liberties. Jasmine's happiness is short-lived. She is widowed and returns to India to her family. She has to now choose between the rigid traditions of her family and perform Sati, or continue to live the life of Jasmine in America. Jasmine sways between the past and the present attempting to come to terms with the two worlds, one of "nativity" and the other as an "immigrant". Hailing from an oppressive and a rural family in India, Jyoti comes to America in search of a more fruitful life and to realize the dreams of her husband, Prakash. Jasmine sets off on an agonizing trip as an illegal immigrant to Florida, and thus begins her symbolic trip of transformations, displacement, and a search for identity.

Jasmine undergoes her next transformation from a dutiful traditional Indian wife Jasmine to Jane when she meets the intellectual Taylor and then moves on to become Bud's Jane. It seems likely that as Jasmine leaves for California with Taylor and Duff, her identity continues to transform. The author depicts this transformation and transition as a positive and an optimistic journey. Jasmine creates a new world consisting of new ideas and values, constantly unmasking her past to establish a new cultural identity by incorporating new desires, skills, and habits. This transition is defined not only in the changes in her attitude, but more significantly in her relationship with men.

### **Jasmine and Nayan Tara:**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni also deals with this sort of transformation in her *The Mistress of Spices* that portrays the character of a woman who is vibrant, eager for life, hungry with desires but masquerading as an old and bent creature. Like Bharati Mukherjee's *Jyoti-Jasmine-Jane* in *Jasmine* (1989), the character changes from Nayan Tara to Bhagyavati to Tilottama and finally to Maya and she does so in order to arrive at a final definition of her selfhood.

At every step, Tilo (Tilottama) revolts against her fate and the path drawn for her. Her transformation from Nayan Tara to Bhagyavati has its own pressures and trauma. She is born in an Indian village only to be rejected as a dowry less, undesirable female child, a curse to the family. She describes her birth in the following manner: "The midwife cried out at the veiny cowl over my face, and the fortune teller in the rainy-filled evening shook his head sorrowfully at my father. They named me Nayan Tara, Star of the Eye, but my parents' faces were heavy with fallen hope at another girl child and this one colored like mud." (*Mistress of Spices*, 122) Not only the renovation from Jyoti – Jasmine- Jane; Nayan Tara- Bhagyavati- Tilottama- Maya is similar but their intension is also to clear the problem of identity crisis that Indians try to cope with in a foreign land.

### **Ability to Adopt**

In New York, Jasmine clearly recognizes her ability to adapt: "I wanted to become a person they thought they saw: humorous, intelligent, refined, and affectionate. Not illegal, not murderer not widowed, raped, destitute, fearful." (*Jas-* 171) The abilities to adjust to the requirements of a changing environment and to cut the past loose are Jasmine's survival skills. They allow her to deal with the ethics and culture of two dissimilar worlds and her occurrence with different

identities of Jyoti and Jasmine, where Jasmine feels hanging between the traditional and modern world and controlled and independent love, offered by her Indian husband, Prakash.

Jasmine then meets Lillian Gordon, staying with whom begins her process of assimilation by learning how to become American. Lillian bestows upon her the nickname „Jazzy“, a symbol of her entrance into and acceptance of American culture which she welcomes gladly. After that she moves in with a traditional Indian family in Hushing, New York. Jasmine soon finds herself stifled by the inertia of this home for it was completely isolated from everything American. Considering it to be a stasis in her progression towards a new life, she tries to separate herself from all that is Indian and forget her past completely.

### **Yet Another Identity – Au Pair:**

She proceeds with her migratory pattern and moves to New York City, to become the au pair for an American family. With Taylor, his wife Wylie and their daughter Duff, she creates yet another identity upon a new perception of herself. But though Jasmine creates a new identity for every new situation, her former identities are never completely erased. They emerge in specific moments in the text and exacerbate the tension, thereby causing Jasmine to create another more dominant identity, different from all those that came before. While living with the Hayes, Jasmine begins to master the English language, empowering herself to further appropriate American culture. Taylor begins to call her „Jase“ suggesting that again she does not have an agency in the creation of her new self since Taylor constructs it for her. Also, for the first time in the Hayes household, Jasmine becomes aware of her racial identity because Taylor and his friends understood that she was from South Asia and tried to associate her with that community.

### **Foreignness is Never Lost:**

Though Jasmine is attached to Taylor’s family and become his Jase, her foreignness never forgets to peer in her activities. But Taylor doesn’t bother about that and we can know from Jase’s words, “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.” (Jas- 185) Before long Taylor gets romantically involved with Jasmine and embraces her different ethnicity. 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. But the relationship between Taylor and Jasmine ends abruptly when the past creeps upon her once

again manifested in the form of Sukhwinder, the murderer of her husband in the disguise of a Hot dog vendor.

### **Inescapability of Memory:**

The inescapability of memory, and the boundless nature of time and space is stressed once again and Jasmine finds her life distorted by the different consciousness through which she now experiences the world. She loses even her sense of self expression. Unable to live with this plethora of conflicting identities she decided to leave New York for the sake of Taylor and Duff and move towards Baden County, Iowa to give her life a new beginning. Taylor, the man of New York commented on Jase's decision, "Iowa? You can't go to Iowa- Iowa's flat" (Jas- 189).

### **Yet Another Name is Given! Jyoti versus Jane:**

In Baden she meets Bud Wipplemeyer, an American banker who instantly falls in love with her. They eventually marry and Bud renames Jasmine „Jane“yet another sign of her evolution. Bud encourages Jasmine to freely change roles from caregiver to temptress whenever she feels the desire to and views her sexuality through the lenses of his own oriental fantasy. This instead of demeaning Jasmine serves to instill her with a sexual confidence and she thrives on it. Her racial identity also morphs in Baden, for here her difference is recognized but not comprehended or openly acknowledged. The community attempts to see her as familiar instead of alien. This new perception of her race is an essential portion of her identity as Jane because now she feels assimilated and in fact becomes the typical American she always wanted to be.

John K Hoppe says: "Jasmine's postcolonial, ethnic characters are post-American, carving out new spaces for themselves from among a constellation of available cultural narratives, never remaining bound by any one, and always fluidly negotiating the boundaries of their past, present, and futures". (Mukherjee, Bharati. Jas, 56). Jase becomes Jane of Bud Ripplemeyer and they both lived together as husband and wife without an official marriage which is rare in Jyoti's culture but quite common in Jane's culture. Jane and Bud adopted Du, a seventeen year old Vietnamese boy, as an orphan when he was fourteen. In this novel he represents his own condition of dislocation and isolation from his motherland, Vietnam to a new where he comes from an entirely different culture than his sons-of-farmers classmates. Du and his friend Scott enjoy watching Monster Truck Rallies on TV, and Jane remembers that his first question to them was whether or not the family had a television.

### **Escapism from Burden:**

Escapism from burdens, complications and contradictions of continuity is well depicted by the character of Jane Ripplemeyer who hardly sends out or receives any mail because she wants to disconnect herself from continuity, that is, from her past which implies carrying the burden of history. Jane carries her own inherent, whereas Du, the Vietnamese American is not as she. He has twice born, as Jane says, “my transformation has been genetic; Du’s was hyphenated” (Jas-222).

### **Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase and Jane – Caught Between Cultures:**

Mukherjee has explored her theme with its many nuances. The transformation of Jasmine from a semi-educated Punjabi rustic to an American is not psychologically convincing. Perhaps Bharati Mukherjee’s purpose of bringing to the contemporary American fiction the reality of the experiences of the floating elements in American society, the immigrant who are trying to establish themselves, is fulfilled. It is not easy to overcome the “aloofness of expatriation” or disunite oneself from the roots and tradition of the culture that one comes from. No doubt the liberated Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase and Jane, who make a life time for every name, look like a possibility for every enthusiastic immigrant.

Thus, caught between the two cultures of the east and west, past and present, old and new, Jasmine constantly "shuttles" in search of a concrete identity. 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 is nothing I can do. Time will tell if I am a 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 from hope (Jas- 241).

Jasmine implies these words and moves to California with Taylor, which symbolically represents the uncertain of what the future will bring but nevertheless confident in her decision to leave. This sense of movement further reinforces the notion that her identity is forever evolving, she cannot remain in a stable life because disruption and change are the means of her survival. The surrounding environments influence her formation of her identities and she navigates between temporal and spatial locations, her perception of herself changes, thereby resulting in a multiplicity of consciousness. These create a tension within her and she feels the need to reconcile these conflicting perceptions so that they do not wage a psychological war inside her. Thereby we see her reinvent her identity completely.

Bharati Mukherjee was chiefly considered as an expatriate novelist, short story writer, non-fictional writer and journalist and has been widely acknowledged as a voice of Expatriate-immigrant sensibility. The novel *Jasmine* written by her was published in the year 1989. In the same year Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* also received international attention for his novel when a fatwa (or death threat) was issued against him. The fatwa essentially proclaimed it a righteous act for any Muslim to murder Rushdie. Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven*, Jill Ker Conway's *The Road to Coorain*, Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Condition*, Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place*, and Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* were all published around this time. Each of these writers is considered to be a contributor to the genre of postcolonial literature. Although there is considerable debate over the term "postcolonial," in a very general sense, it is the time following the establishment of independence in a (former) colony, such as India. The sheer extent and duration of the European empire and its disintegration after the Second World War have led to widespread interest in postcolonial literature. Partly because of the abundance of such postcolonial works, some critics suggested *Jasmine* was part of a fad.

Mukherjee's time as a student at the University of Iowa's acclaimed Masters of Fine Arts Program at the Writer's Workshop, almost certainly informed the setting of *Jasmine*. She studied there in 1961 and took her MFA in 1963. She stayed on to earn a Ph.D. in English and comparative literature in 1969. Though Iowa City is a small College town, the state is 95 percent farm land. In the 1980s, when *Jasmine* is set, many family farmers on the outskirts of Iowa City faced the same dilemma as Darrel Lutz, a character in *Jasmine*. The hard life of farming coupled with tough times economically persuaded many farmers to sell out to large corporate farms or to non-agricultural corporations. Other farmers struggled on determined to save the farm their fathers and grandfathers had built up, as well as to preserve this unique way of life.

It is the story of Punjabi peasant girl reinventing herself in the Western world. It suggests the idea of mixing the eastern and the western culture, as seen in the life of the young Hindu woman who leaves India for the U.S. after her husband's murder. One of the focuses of this chapter is to examine the shifting images of woman protagonist *Jasmine* and her struggle towards transformation. Mukherjee has depicted her character in search of America citizenship who wishes to drift towards American materialism.

Bharati Mukherjee sketches similarities of two cultures and admits that, "I am in fact writing about America more than about dark-complexioned immigrants. My focus is on the country on



how it is changing minute by minute. My stories explore the encounter between the mainstream American culture and the new one formed by the migrant stream. “I am really writing about the joining of two cultures. Many expatriate writers are destroyed by their duality. I personally feel nourished by it” (2). The protagonist Jasmine reinvents herself in the Western world. The notion of mingling the cultures of the East and West is depicted by the life of Jasmine.

Bharati Mukherjee says “Jasmine contains the shape of my life and my desires. But no incident is at all autobiographical”. Jasmine may not be the replica of Bharati Mukherji’s life, but she could not resist pouring in certain elements of real life in the novel. The novel begins with opening sentence and discusses the importance of the words “lifetime ago”. It is related to the theme of re-creation of self. This theme plays vital role. The village astrologer under a banyan tree foretells Jasmine’s widowhood and exiled life. Astrologer’s prediction becomes true in the life of Jasmine.

From the beginning, Jyoti rebels against her cultural inscriptions. A seer foretells her future, pronouncing “my widowhood and exile.....I was nothing, a speck in the solar system...I was helpless, doomed” (2-3). In response he whispers, ‘I don’t believe you’. She is only seven years old at that time. She could not comprehend astrologer’s predication, when she boldly challenged the astrologer’s prophesy. His anger soars. In order to escape the anger of the astrologer, she runs and fell. She received a star like wound on her forehead. Her sister was worried because the wound may hinder the prospect of her marriage. But Jasmine is not worried and said it was her ‘third eye’. She proclaimed herself a ‘sage’, rewriting her history from passive object to empowered seer. Jasmine has uprooted herself from her original culture. She absorbs into the new culture.

Jasmine married Prakash after two weeks of their first meeting. Their marriage was love and registered. Guests were uninvited, dowry less marriage. It is the matter of shock to whole town; Vimala criticized such breaking of traditions, ‘once you let one tradition go, all other traditions crumble’. Her husband, Prakash called her by the name Jasmine. Jasmine says, “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” (77)

Identities of Jyoti and Jasmine are different, though they are one. When she was transformed from Jyoti to Jasmine, her philosophy of life is cheered. Jasmine rebels against the system, whenever she finds herself different from it. Jyoti thought her husband was an engineer not just of electricity but of all machinery in the world. He has a plan to open a big shop one day. His immense enjoyment is indefinable when he secured admission in Florida.

Suddenly Prakash was killed in the Bomb blast. After the demise of her husband, she continues to live in her identity as Jasmine. She was unwilling to assume the role of Jyoti which was restricted life. She determined to fulfill her husband's mission to visit Florida. Her mother and grandmother dissuaded her. But Jasmine rebelled. Her brother assisted her to go to U.S.A. by arranging the forged documents. Jasmine always lived in past and present worlds.

During her journey, she carried her sandal Ganapathi in her purse. She finds her brother's fake visa which worked well. She knows little Hindi. She manages the captain who was willing to resort any illegal thing provided he should be paid bribe. Another passenger from Kingsland, from Jamaica appraises Jasmine not to trust the captain who is a man of evil actions.

Jasmine's first sight of America is painted. Her heavy suitcase contains all her late husband's belongings. There was no one to receive her. The captain came forward to assist her and led her to his room. She discussed that she came on her own free will. He reminded her that he was a gentle man. But contrary to gentleness, he kissed her. Jasmine tried to distract him to save herself by informing him that her husband is an electronic wizard. The captain distrusted her. But captain is admitting to sexual intercourse with her. He informs her, if she satisfies his lust he will take care of her. But she pleaded that she had recently been widowed and unwilling to have sex with him. The captain found this is more amusing and finally had his way with her, and raped her. After the rape she is filled with shame "I determined to clean my body as it never been cleaned, with the small wrapped bar of soap, and to purify my soul with all the prayers I could remember". Yet Jasmine finds that she cannot escape her bad experience.

Jasmine attempted to kill herself but she decided that her mission was not fulfilled so she continues her existence. "I had planned it also perfectly. To layout the suit case to fill it with twigs and paper to light it, then to lie upon it in the white colored cotton saree"(118). She persistently stabbed the captain who raped her with the small knife of Jamaican. Finally the evil

captain was dead. C.Sengupta views that “and as she it she becomes kali personified, the deity of avenging fury-death incarnate and the killing becomes so easy”. Then she calmly bathed herself, took up her suitcase and began her new life in America by walking boldly out of the motel leaving the dead man in the room. She set out to face the world and country of her dreams. Her nature of courage transforms her into a new age woman of contemporary society. “My body was merely the shell’ soon to be discarded. Then I could be reborn debts and sins all paid for” (122). She feels that her body is a lifeless shell which needs to be washed off her sin. “Abandoning the past like a baggage, she feels light and reborn. With the first steaks of dawn, my first full American day, I walked out the front drive of the motel to the highway and began my journey travelling light” (121). Jasmine’s adventurous journey of life commences to fulfill the dreams of her husband in alien country.

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