

## Re-creating Family: A Study of Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

**Dr. Y.L. Srinivas**

Associate Professor

Department of English

University College for Women, Koti  
Hyderabad.

### Abstract

*The predicament of the writers of the Indian Diaspora, especially those settled in America, is to strike a balance between new homes and lost locations. This anxiety at a psychological level finds manifestation very often in their works. Bharathi Mukerjee's novel Jasmine exemplifies this predicament and demonstrates how one can find a fine balance. This article analyses how Jasmine, the protagonist, re-creates her own family after neutralizing a slew of challenges that fate casts at her.*

**Keywords:** Location, Memory, Home and Family, Diaspora, Anxiety, Choice, Democratization of Family

### Introduction

Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* appearing nearly twenty-five years after her *Wife* marks a total change in Mukherjee's attitude towards life, female identity, migration and quest for self. It is the story of a widowed Punjabi peasant reinventing herself in America. It is important to relocate Mukherjee in terms of her cultural and literary allegiance at the time of writing *Jasmine* in order to gain proper perspective for a critical understanding of this important classic of female exile. In an interview given to *The Massachusetts Review* in 1988, a year before the publication of *Jasmine*, Mukherjee said: "I see myself as an American writer in the tradition of American writers whose parents or grandparents had passed through Ellis Island." This statement of Bharati Mukherjee understandably triggered a long drawn and heated critical debate: Can a writer obliterate his/her past, just because of his or her geographical mobility? Is it possible to make clean breaks and transitions in terms of cultural belonging? Can a writer, despite the explicit and expressed anxiety to belong to a particular tradition, erase the conscious or the unconscious impact of his/her family background? What are the parameters of the categorization of a writer? There has been indeed a great deal of

discussion on each of the above questions. However, any amount of discussion is inadequate given the scope that these questions generate with changing situations. Further, continued discussion in literature brings to the fore new perspectives.

In this respect it is pertinent to examine the observations of Malashri Lal:

Mukherjee's long narratives, *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Wife and Jasmine* use Indian female protagonists; her successful prose emanates from sentiments about India – *Days and Nights in Calcutta*, 'The Management of Grief', *An Invisible Woman*. The pre-history conditions the immigrant perspective, and, because Mukherjee has in some measure become a 'propagandist on behalf of a new community' (Adi Jussawalla's words), her writing often displays remarkable vigour as well as exaggerated ferocity. (144-45)

There are some critics who think that Bharati Mukherjee shows unwarranted anxiety in terms of identifying herself with the host culture. Her anxiety, they argue, has its roots in the anxiety of an immigrant about being absorbed into the main stream. As Rajul Bhargava observes:

The expatriate writer occupies a marginal or a borderline position, he sits on the periphery of the past, causing the future to take shape. If he recedes into the past, his works would have the value only of a memoir, a travelogue or perhaps of an autobiography – all being limiting since they are subjective, personalized. If, on the other hand, the writer chooses to completely assimilate himself into the new culture, he ceases to capture the sympathy of the people in the homeland who, in a way, sustain him, keep him alive (isn't expatriate writing mostly bought/sold 'at home'?) since sympathy in the host culture is a far cry. So the expatriate writer on the borderline of the present does a tight – rope walk, keeping up a stance of double talk, with a show of simultaneity, coalescing the past with the present to recreate a future. (92-93)

When I look at the work of Bharati Mukherjee with a view to understanding the role of family in her novels, I realize that irrespective of the tradition to which she belongs or intends to belong to – American or Indian – she argues in favour of creating a family culture wherein members have healthy and positive reciprocity love and concern and enjoy a fair degree of freedom of expression. It seems to me that Mukherjee argues in favour of a more democratic family culture, which accords freedom and security to each of its members. Thus,

Bharati Mukherjee's novels do not reject family as an institution but underscore the relevance of a liberal family culture, which accommodates the needs of the marginalized within the family system. In a way, she celebrates the institution of family and tries to recreate family in her fiction, making it more flexible and relevant.

Jasmine, Bharati Mukherjee's third novel, is commonly considered a move towards the author's Americanization. In marked contrast to her earlier two novels where one feels the cadence of Indian English, Jasmine uses the American idiom. In his work, Colonial and Post Colonial Fiction - An Anthology Robert Ross points out:

In fact, the Americanization of Mukherjee's diction has become a distinguishing characteristic of her style, and is immediately evident in the short stories and subsequent novels. (300)

Jasmine received elaborate praise for its multicultural presentation of America. Jasmine was constructed from the material of an earlier short story about a girl from Trinidad. Bharati Mukherjee explains in her introduction to *Darkness*.

This is about a very young widow who comes illegally into the United States and makes a new woman of herself. It is actually a kind of continuation from *Jasmine*, one of the short stories in *Middleman* in which this young girl from Trinidad works as an au pair girl. I finished that story but the character wouldn't die. She remained inside my head. So I changed her nationality from Trinidadian to Indian – she's changed physically but the essence of the character is still the same.

Many critics see autobiographical undertones in this text, which describes the transformation of an expatriate into an immigrant. Like a Calcutta girl from a traditional well-to-do Bengali family who transformed herself into an American, Jyoti, a poor Punjabi girl, becomes Jasmine, Jase and Jane quickly. Like *Jasmine*, Mukherjee changed citizenship and cultures with remarkable rapidity. In literature there is always a subtle relationship between the life of the storyteller and the story. Noted critic, Walter Benjamin observes:

The storytelling that thrives for a long time in the milieu of work – the rural, the maritime, and the urban – is itself an artisan form of communication, as it were. It does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again. Thus, traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel. (17)

The novel broadly falls into two parts, tracing two phases in the life of the protagonist: the life of Jyoti and Jasmine in India, and the experience of Jasmine, Jase and Jane in America. In both the phases of her life, Jasmine makes an earnest effort to achieve independence and strives for success. This approach to life marks her out from the common Indian peasant women who generally lead their lives with a sense of resignation accepting all that goes wrong as their destiny. Jasmine is determined, goal-driven and is not easily put off by the obstacles that come her way. Given the class and gender based discrimination and restrictions within which she grows, it is indeed heroic for a woman to take her destiny into her own hands. Jasmine's yearning for autonomy from her early childhood, marks the beginning of her struggle for self actualization or the realization or concretization of an ardently cherished ideal. Bharati Mukherjee demonstrates finest innovative techniques in showing the mutations of her heroine's identity in its meandering course through the terrains of Hasnupar, Jalandhar, Florida and Columbia and to the road of California.

Jasmine lends itself to a critical scrutiny for its representation of intra and inter-family relations. The novel interrogates the very foundations of Indian and western family systems. What emerges from this study is an alternative family whose motto is individual happiness and freedom and whose foundations are rooted in more democratic and liberal traditions, which ensure scope for individual excellence. In the course of working towards the construction of a happy family where the individual can freely endeavour for his/her success, Bharati Mukherjee redeems the institution of family from the constraints of tradition, orthodoxy and patriarchal authority and proposes an alternative family, which combines the notions of individual liberty and familial love.

The depiction of the institution of family throughout the course of the novel reflects this unstated objective of the writer. It is interesting and relevant here to note that Mukherjee doesn't completely reject everything Indian, nor does she completely endorse everything American which in effect demonstrates her vision of evolving an alternative family culture which is neither Indian nor American but combines the best of the both. Firstly, the Indian family system despite its values and valorization of familial bonds is glorified beyond proportions. However, those who oppose the power structures perpetrated by the family system view it as inimical to individual freedom and happiness. The challenges before Bharati Mukherjee while dealing with the institution of the family are clear: she has to make a judicial analysis of the Indian family system for which she needs to demolish what is

glorified beyond proportion and appreciate what is relevant and useful in it. The subjugation of women in the Indian family tradition is amply demonstrated in the novel. The behaviour of Dida is a classic example of how a woman becomes enemy of another woman due to sheer ignorance. Both the women fail to realize that they have become pawns in the patriarchal constructs of tradition and family.

From the very beginning of the novel, Bharati Mukherjee has delineated Jyoti as a rebel against blind beliefs and superstitions. Jyoti marries Prakash against the popular belief that the suitability horoscopes be checked before arranging an alliance. The response of Jyoti when Dida comments that all her suffering is due to violation of traditional norms reflects the author's own stance in the matter:

If you had married the widower in Ludhiana that was all arranged. If you had checked the boy's horoscope and not married like a Christian in some government office.... If you had waited for a man I picked none of this would have happened (Jyoti's husband Prakash killed by the terrorists). I am told you called him by his proper name. It is very clear. You were in the sari shop to buy something you could not afford to celebrate a separation from you husband and his desertion of India to make money abroad. God was displeased. God sent that Sardarji boy to do that terrible thing.

Jasmine's unorthodoxy blazes forth: "Dida, I said, if God sent Sukhi to kill my husband and then I renounce God, I spit on him." (Jasmine 98)

Another aspect of Indian family relations, which is often glorified, is the bond between siblings. In fact one of the main reasons, which strengthen the resolve of Jasmine to go to America, is the family atmosphere after the death of Prakash. Her sense of loss becomes more intense as her own sisters do not support her emotionally. Brothers of course do whatever they can including organizing a forged passport. Primarily the pathetic atmosphere of the house peopled by widows, offers no scope for recovery to Jasmine. "A houseful of widows, that's what my son's house has become! She wailed. House of sorrows! House of ill Fortune!" (Jasmine 98)

Jasmine refuses to reconcile herself to living in this atmosphere for the rest of her life. The force of Jasmine's desires propels her explosively into a larger, more dangerous, and ultimately more life-giving world. In America, Jasmine feels stifled by the family atmosphere of the Professor.

Professorji and his family put me up for five months – and it could have been fine years, given the elasticity of the Indian family – just because I was the helpless widow of his favorite student. I was also efficient and uncomplaining, but they would have tolerated a clumsy whiner just as easily. (Jasmine 142)

Jasmine is determined to make the best of what America can afford her, and in order to do so she must keep moving, transforming herself until she becomes a self-confident immigrant totally in control of herself. When she becomes the caregiver at Taylor's place, she experiences more liberal family atmosphere where husband and wife share each and every job on equal terms. She feels deeply impressed with Taylor due to his attitude towards life. This becomes evident when Taylor proposes.

This was a man I had observed for over two years, who had been unfailingly kind, never condescending, always proud of my achievements. (Jasmine 186)

It is this freedom to live life on her own terms that Jasmine longed for all along. This is what she had hoped to find in America and she is quick to seize the opportunity when it comes her way. This is not to suggest that Bharati Mukherjee accepts everything American. She also highlights the negative aspects of American culture and American life. Jasmine's quest for success in America in fact begins on a violent note. She is raped by Captain Half Face who Jasmine kills. Later, when Jasmine is on her way to the Professor's house, the driver of the taxi reveals the sordid aspect of the American life.

The driver said, "In Kabul I was a doctor. We have to be here living like dogs because they have taken everything from us." (Jasmine 140)

Bharati Mukherjee vividly describes the plight of the immigrants who live under pathetic conditions.... We are refugees and mercenaries and guest workers; you see us sleeping in airport lounges; you watch us unwrapping the last of our native, foods, unrolling our prayer rugs, reading our holy books, taking out for the hundredth time and, aerogramme promising a job or place to sleep, a newspaper in our language, a photo of happier times, a passport a visa, a laissez, passer. (Jasmine 66)

Further, during the course of her stay in America, Jasmine realizes the essential spirit of American life.

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 for me 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. (Jasmine 181)

Finally, when Jasmine has to make a choice between Bud and Taylor what tilts the balance in favour of Taylor is the liberal and democratic family experience which she has at Taylor's place. Bud and his mother reflect in their attitude a sort of racial arrogance, which hurts the self-respect of Jane. On the contrary, Taylor is always proud of Jasmine's achievements. Moreover, Bud and his mother resent her past.

Malashri Lal thinks that Bharati Mukherjee schematically moves "her immigrant heroine through more and more unconventional definitions of 'family' in order to push the idea of American individualism" (154).

However, Bharati Mukherjee's attempt is not to assert the value of one tradition at the expense of the other. Perhaps, she makes an attempt to underscore the need to come out of the framework of rigid family traditions and evolve a new tradition which accommodates individual aspirations.

Wife and Jasmine present conceptual graduation in Bharati Mukherjee's thinking. While Dimple finds herself in a conflict situation in terms of family relations, Jasmine gains acceptability all over. Jasmine with her preparedness to adjust and understand while carefully guarding her self-respect turns out to be Bharati Mukherjee's ideal. Jasmine assimilates in herself the best familial values of the Indian and the Western. Mukherjee highlights Jasmine's readiness for transformation, which she maintains is essential for one to be a successful immigrant.

Among other things, Jasmine also recreates family from the wrecks of her past, this new family she reconstructs is supported by values of individual freedom, happiness and equality of genders. What Dimple fails to realize, Jasmine manages to achieve and that's how she becomes a successful woman, a self-confident immigrant and a happy individual.

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