



Changing names, changing places: the transformation of female identity through translocation in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

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Abstract

Indian-born writer Bharati Mukherjee's novels feature predominantly Indian women protagonists. Mukherjee's novels address issues of relevance for many immigrant women today—particularly for women who immigrate in search of a better standard of living and quality of life in terms of gender recognition, equality, and integration. The aim of this paper is to examine Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* for engagement with the multiplicity of problems that confront migrant women today; focusing specifically on issues of diaspora, the paper will explore the ways in which the novel addresses the pain of exile, alienation and isolation, and conversely, how this text approaches matters relating to the liberation of women from the oppressive social order of patriarchy and the transformative experience of immigration with the possibility for such transformation being an integral part of the migrant woman's experience. Many critics have commented on these issues in Mukherjee's novels. I propose to explore, in particular, the psychological effects on Mukherjee's women character through an analysis of the symbolic values attached to name changes, how such changes can function as symbolic violence or personal agency depending on who imposes them, and the role of violence in the transformative experiences of the female character.

An Indian-American immigrant author, Bharati Mukherjee's novels feature predominantly Indian women protagonists. Mukherjee's novels address issues of relevance for many immigrant women today—particularly for women who immigrate in search of a better standard of living and quality of life in terms of gender recognition, equality, and integration. The aim of this paper is to examine Bharati Mukherjee's novel, *Jasmine*, for engagement with the multiplicity of problems that confront migrant women today; focusing specifically on issues of diaspora, the thesis will explore the ways in which Mukherjee's novel addresses the pain of exile, alienation and isolation, and conversely, how this text approaches matters relating to the liberation of women from the oppressive social order of patriarchy and the transformative experience of immigration with the possibility for such transformation being an integral part of the migrant woman's experience. Many critics have commented on these issues in Mukherjee's novels. I propose to explore, in particular, the psychological effects on Mukherjee's woman character, *Jasmine*, through an analysis of the symbolic values attached to name changes, how such changes can function as symbolic violence or personal agency depending on who imposes

them, and the role of violence in the transformative experiences of her. The analysis focuses on the rites of passage of migration and integration into the many facets of new societies and draws on the symbolic material of changing names and places as depicted in this novel. Postcolonial, feminist and diasporic theories underpin my reading of this text: postcolonial theory, because it deals with the experience of colonization; feminist theory, because it deals with injustice against women; and diasporic theory, because it deals with the experience of migration. These theories all articulate positions concerning the ways in which a migrant woman is constructed as a subject.

Mukherjee's novel, *Jasmine*, is about the ways in which a woman might negotiate matters of identity and agency within an overarching patriarchal world, where translocation offers, not complete freedom, but freedoms denied under their originary patriarchal structures. Portraying a particular socio-political condition, the novel of Bharati Mukherjee perceptively depicts the problems of Jasmine who migrated to the United States and Canada after the partition between Pakistan and India. This paper argues and examines the status of women migrants in their new countries and the hazards and problems they endure are etched out in a convincing style. Her women characters reinvent themselves in highly sophisticated, cosmopolitan societies, like Canada and America, where they are ostracized and considered menial, second-class citizens.

In particular, I explore how Mukherjee's immigrant, Jasmine, experiences America and Canada through relationships with other characters and, in turn, use these relationships initially to guide her and create her own identity. I explore her evolution as she recognizes and integrates the changes that she needs to make in order to find internal peace in their adopted countries.

Name changes are a common feature of Mukherjee's narratives—not surprising given that marriage features in the lives of her female protagonist. Yet Mukherjee goes beyond the transformations signaled through a change of surname to depict characters transforming their identities through a series of name changes—some of which are imposed upon them, others taken up by the woman herself as she strives for agency in her life.

In Mukherjee's first novel, *The Tiger's daughter*, Tara retains her given and family names but adopts her husband's surname. The husband's name, although used as a key nominal, becomes an adjunct to Tara's former identity, suggesting that Tara's transformative experience involves the complexities and competing demands of two identities—Tara's Indian-maiden identity and her identity as an American wife.

In *Wife*, Mukherjee's second novel, Dimple has her name changed by her in-laws, aborts the fetus growing inside her in an act of aggression directed at herself and the constraints and expectations of her society, and kills her husband. Isolated in America because Indian patriarchy shrinks her access to the wider world, and deeply troubled by the limits imposed on her life in India,

On this point, Mukherjee's more recent novel, *The Holder of the World*, would seem to develop the agential authority of its female protagonist further. Hannah, the novel's protagonist, experiences name changes, but this time these name changes include those made by the protagonist herself.

In *Jasmine*, violence is introduced in connection with female agency. Names changes are also deeply significant as Jasmine eventually succeeds in her violent acts of self defense; men change her name, but she reinvents her identity and would appear to experience positive personal transformation, as depicted in the representation of her subjectivity. Although Jasmine exhibits greater female agency, critics still take issue with this narrative in terms of feminist goals. The violence that develops in Jasmine as a form of self defense is a transformative experiences in moving between America and Canada.

Beginning with an exploration of female identity and subjectivity in Mukherjee's novel that involves an analysis of the ways patriarchy constrains and shapes the lives of the female protagonist, the discussion opens by noting that, although Mukherjee's *Jasmine* moves from the highly codified, organised and ritualised patriarchy of their Indian communities, she does not leave the political structure of patriarchy behind her in India. Rather, it travels with her as an internalised and complex matrix of beliefs, re-enforced through her contact with Indian communities in America, and in the ties that she holds to her family and home.

Jasmine, to varying degrees, encounter a different form of patriarchy in American culture; one that is less overt, perhaps, and more or less submerged in many respects because it is so deeply internalized within American culture. Critics of Mukherjee's work have suggested that her writing fails to recognise this feature of American culture, as itself patriarchal, and that she is effectively sustaining and promulgating American patriarchy as a way of life. Mukherjee has responded by highlighting the different feminist projects faced by Indian and American women.

If we accept Mukherjee's claims then it makes sense that her character, Jasmine, first and foremost, experiences translocation in revelatory terms, and then try to find a new way of life within American society under its form of patriarchy and the freedoms it offers in comparison to the original order under which they were raised. Importantly, this paper does not set out to resolve the question of Mukherjee's feminism in her reading of American culture. It is clear that the novel does not satisfy western feminist ideals, but seem to engage a range of feminist issues nonetheless. The significance is how Jasmine depicts the possibilities for transformation through the Indian woman's diasporic experiences. That her novel utilizes name changes alongside changes of place indicates that identity and place are deeply intertwined in these texts. Mukherjee's novels depicts translocation in terms that speak to the complexly traumatic and positively transformative experience of female subjectivity under diasporic circumstances and that this process is signaled in her novel through the relations of power involved in changing names. The central theme of *Jasmine* is the transformation of female identity through translocation. This paper examines the expression of this central theme and of themes relevant to the experience of transformation through translocation. The paper further elaborates that the symbolic manifestation of the central theme takes place in the protagonists changing their names as an adjunct to their changing places. Mukherjee goes beyond the transformations signalled through a change of surname to depict her character transforming her identity through a series of name changes—some of which are imposed upon her, others taken up by herself as she strives for agency in their lives. Many critics have commented on the transformative elements addressed in Mukherjee novel. Mukherjee explores the possibility for transformation as an integral part of the migrant woman's experience—that is, as a consequence of a major shift in relations of power and constructions of subjectivity. Not surprisingly, acts of material violence also feature in these texts. Thus, the role of violence in the transformative experiences of these female characters will be relevant.

In *Jasmine*, violence is introduced in connection with female agency. Names changes are also deeply significant as Jasmine eventually succeeds in her violent acts of self defense; men change her name, but she reinvents her identity and would appear to experience positive personal transformation, as depicted in the representation of her subjectivity. Although Jasmine exhibits greater agency, critics still take issue with this narrative in terms of feminist goals. Significantly, immigration introduces new experiences that are potentially oppressive and traumatic for these women: the primary desire articulated by the female protagonist in this narrative is to escape racism and the scourge of poverty as she seeks what she perceives to be a better life overseas. Mukherjee's *Jasmine* is representative of the Indian Diaspora and thus experiences immigration in terms that are recognizably diasporic (incorporating the rites of passage of migration and integration into the many facets of new societies).

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From her childhood, Jyoti is a rebel and a non-conformist. She denies her forecast of widowhood and banishment foreseen by the astrologer. Her decision to learn English and her decision to marry Prakash Vijn against the wishes of her grandmother, and her decision to go to America after the murder of her husband are incidents indicating the seeds of change already present in her.

Jyoti from Jullunder weds the modern young Indian, Prakash Vijn, who intends to migrate to the United States of America. He changes her name from Jyoti to 'Jasmine' with vision to modernize her. She experiences a symbolic transformation in India itself. This may be regarded as the first movement towards transformation process she undergoes throughout the novel. She becomes self-willed and illegally migrates to America. Her actual transformation from a loyal Hindu female to a determined woman comes to light following her arrival in America. Her atrocious rape by the captain of the ship, Half-Face, in Florida, she develops into Goddess Kali incarnate, the divine being of revenging fury, and kills the rapist. Jasmine realizes that she is recognized for nothing else except as a sexual being. She is ashamed; fears her sexual attraction because of the way in which Half-Face perceives her. She becomes violent and stabs Half-Face to death. She decides not to commit 'sati' but burns her husband's suit and her dishonoured clothes to reincarnate and face America. The symbolic burning of her dishonoured clothes signifies the birth of a new 'self'. The trauma of her rape results in her identity change. This incident not only breaks her down the most but also gives her the physical power not to commit suicide 'sati' and continue to live her life.

Jasmine's identity is inconsistently shaped through creation and obliterations of her prevailing inner being. Amusingly, that it is after the killing of Half-Face, Jasmine indicates transformation of her inner being. As the novel progresses, it is seen that Jasmine needs disruptions in her existence in order to develop as a matured individual. She experiences numerous changes from Jyoti she becomes Jasmine, Jazzy, Jase and Jane. For each identity of hers, Jasmine has a man. With Taylor, Jasmine becomes Jase emphasises that she changes because she wants to change: "Taylor didn't want to change me...I changed because I wanted to" (Mukherjee, 1987) and with Bud Jasmine describes the conception of Jane as a creation of her wish to transform: "Plain Jane is all I want to be in Baden. In Baden, I am Jane almost" (Mukherjee, 1987). The word "almost" suggests that she has not changed completely as a component of herself that she does not have the control to alter and may be never will. Jasmine changes each time when she is disrupted because it is through destruction she eventually transforms and recreates herself. In the novel it is shown that Jasmine has the capability to construct a uniqueness based on the outlook, wishes and needs of other people as well as the annihilation of her current identity. Her perception of herself changes due to her surrounding environments which determine the evolution of her identities, ensuing in an array of realization.

Each transformation in Jasmine does not necessitate or call for her to abandon one way of lifestyle to replace an earlier one. Instead it permits the chance of practicing modified characteristics of both customs together. Every time Jasmine attains a new self she adapts her cultural past and merges it with present. Jasmine kills Half-Face as goddess Kali. As a self-sacrificing Indian woman, she brings happiness in the lives of Duff and Taylor; she extends love to Du as a devoted Indian mother who takes pride in her motherhood and takes care of Bud as a traditional Indian woman. Jasmine is both a giver and a taker. She makes an effort to gain freedom and happiness. Jasmine's self-reliant and self-perseverance guides her to achieve self-actualization that is the aspiration to become more in addition to what she is and to develop into the whole thing she is competent of accomplishing.

Lillian Gordon, a Quaker woman, initiates Jasmine into the American lifestyle with a new personality, 'Jazzy' in new attire of tight cords, t-shirt, and running shoes and helps to match up and be in harmony with the American lifestyle. Jasmine takes refuge in Devinder Vadhera's home, her husband's professor but discovers a restricted life and leaves to take up a satisfying day-care nanny's job at the Hayes'. A shift comes into her life when Jasmine sights Sukhwinder, her husband's murderer. She leaves this temporary home in fear of Sukhwinder and moves to Iowa. She lives with Bud in Bayden. Towards the end of the novel, pregnant Jasmine with Bud's child leaves Bud in search for her happiness. Jyoti, who longed to live her life to the fullest, the way she wants, but circumstances prevent her to do that, now once again becomes Taylor's Jase. Jasmine shuttles between identities throughout the novel. She lives an Americanized life. She goes through a series of transformation and in her passage of transformation, and in her longing to discover identity, comes out victorious by developing, skills and habits; accommodating new ideas and desires. Jasmine turns up as an independent individual, making wise decisions and taking care for herself. Pursuing her dreams and desires, she undergoes changes. Jyoti experiences transformation through, violence, be it either psychic or physical, which plays a vital part in her transformation. She does things that circumstances force her to do, are shocking. At the end of the novel, Jase is a changed person, not the same Jyoti; she has crossed the oceans, boundaries and geographical borders and she faces challenges that come her way. She changes emotionally, psychologically and physically. She emerges victorious and self-assertive in the process of transformation.

Bharati Mukherje, through this novel, reflects that wish to transform surpasses all the boundaries forced on her by Jasmine's patriarchal society in terms of gender, race and class. Jasmine goes through rebirths to become American. Her traits to be adaptable and willingness to change herself assist her to fit well into American culture. She points out that the essential idea is self-competency, which is crucial for all human. Jasmine possesses both 'Sita' and 'Kali' qualities, complementing the instilled principles. She is a feminist who combines her thoughts and customs to survive in the American society. She retains the best of her own culture and adapts to New World culture with ease. A balance between the two is achieved by her which makes her a complete person. Through Jasmine, Mukherjee emphasises that a survivor is a person who manages to improvise, one who deviates from the rules and not the one who plays by the rules. For Jasmine, identity is not making a choice between ways of lives, but for her it is having the authority to polish the terms of cultural practices and traditions to fit her own understanding. Mukherjee substantiates the supposition of discovering selves by reincarnation. She presents in this novel, populace like Jasmine, who are persistently giving a new meaning to their cultural beliefs and accordingly redefines the past being very clear on what the people seek for from the coming years.

Bharati Mukherjee's Jasmine depicts that the formation of identity is a constant development. Jasmine develops multiple consciousnesses, resulting in a fluid 'self' ceaselessly transforming, evolving and never truly complete. Jasmine realizes that the idea of a remarkable identity is a misleading belief. The actuality of the South Asian diasporic awareness determines multiplicity. Mukherjee gives the Indian immigrant situation a demanding

stance facilitating the emigrants to come out of the cocoons of defence to assert strongly that they belong to the adopted New Land of their choice. She believes in adaptation and assimilation.

Bharati Mukherjee has embodied in her novel a modern woman's fight to describe herself and achieve an identity in cross-cultural catastrophe. This issue is of great importance in the current international world of integration. Mukherjee attempts to submerge intensively into the consciousness of those migrants. This immigrant survives in the clash of conventional Indian values; inborn in her individuality and her attraction for western manner of living preferred by her for professional reasons or for want of greater freedom in a vibrant American society. Mukherjee's focus is on the dilemma of immigrant units and the immigrants' chances of assimilation and dismissal in her adopted land.

The novel *Jasmine* can be basically classed as a story of transformation, reinventions and reincarnation of *Jasmine*, the title character. Mukherjee illustrates this transformation and transition as necessary for an immigrant's positive and optimistic journey in the New World by merging cultural values of her native land and of the New World. Immigration introduces new experiences that are potentially oppressive and traumatic for these women: the primary desire articulated by the female protagonists in this narrative is to escape racism and the scourge of poverty as she seeks what she perceives to be better lives overseas particularly for women who immigrate in search of a better standard of living and quality of life in terms of gender recognition, equality, and integration.

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