

# Changing Status of Immigrant Women in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

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## Abstract

Women have higher social, economic, political, and overall status than they had in ancient times and the Middle Ages. They were perceived as the only way to satiate men's physical craving's and ensure their progeny. In the social sphere, they observed purdah, were never permitted to choose their partners, and had limited freedom for education. Women were completely denied access to education; husbands were given the status of god for women; polygyny was accepted; and women were prohibited from making sacrifices, praying, and reading religious texts. At the moment, women have significantly more social and legal rights, as well as greater independence, voice and participation in public life. However, it is also true that they are still subjected to exploitation, harassment, humiliation, and discrimination. Ignoring all these, nowadays women are stepping forward and often becoming prominent in the fields of politics, literature, education, and religion, and they are shining in the world.

**Keywords:** Women, Status, Immigrant, Freedom, Change.

Diane Mariechild states "A woman is the full circle within her is the power to create, nurture and transform". In the present novel, *Jasmine* begins with Jasmine who tells a story from her childhood about an astrologer who predicts her future as a widow living in exile. Here in India, she is known as Jyoti. She has a teacher named Masterji who teaches her English. Masterji urges Jyoti to continue with her education instead of getting married. She meets Prakash after his father's death. They marry and move in together. It is her first move from her patriarchal house to her husband's house. Even after being married, the memories of the banyan tree and the prediction of the astrologer haunt her. Prakash wanted her to become a modern wife who could call him by his first name. He explains-"Only in feudal societies is the woman still a vassal... "Hasnapur is feudal." In Hasnapur wives used only pronouns to address their husbands" (*Jasmine* 77). He encourages her to study English and gives her all liberties and also gives her a new identity as Jasmine. "He wanted to break down the Jyoti 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" (77).

Prakash was studying for his diploma exams while doing his job, and Jasmine runs a ladies' group raffle and sells detergent to make money. Prakash receives a letter from Professor Vadhera, who encourages Prakash to study in America. He makes plans to move to Florida, and while shopping for sarees, Prakash loses his life in a bomb attack set off by the same man named Sukhwinder who had debated on religion and nation with him. At first, she felt dead and was willing to perform the tradition

of Sati, but the soul of Prakash exorcised her from every corner of the grief-darkened room. “Think Vijn-Wife! There is no dying, there is only an ascending or a descending, a moving on to other planes. Don’t crawl back to Hasnapur and feudalism. That Jyoti is dead”(Jasmine 96). Then she thinks that Prakash had taken Jyoti and created Jasmine, and Jasmine would complete Prakash's mission. So as "a matter of duty and honour," she continues with Prakash's plan to move to Florida, travelling by plane, train, and ship. She has faith in God, as she explains before starting her journey. “I keep my sandalwood Ganpati hidden in my purse, a god with an elephant trunk to uproot anything in my path”(102).

Half-Face, the captain of the ship, drives Jasmine to a motel when they arrive on land. He then sexually assaults her. She tries to kill herself but instead changes herself into the goddess Kali and kills Half-Face. It is her first encounter with America, which is a kind of regeneration through violence. As said by Barack Obama that “change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the one’s we’ve been waiting for. We are the change that we seek.” Jyoti comes to understand what evil is and remembers the behaviour of Prakash, who was so concerned for her. She burns Prakash’s suit that she carried with her from India in his memory and leaves the motel. And then she meets Mrs. Lillian Gordon, who teaches her the American way of living and calls Jasmine ‘Jazzy’. She encourages her to continue her plans and helps her go to New York to meet Professor Vadhera. For five months, Jasmine lives with Professor Vadhera, whom she calls Professor Ji. She finds that Indian conscience is alive in Vadhera’s apartment; they have collections of Bollywood movie cassettes, Punjabi newspapers, Hindi film magazines, and also Indian food stores. While enjoying all these, Jazzy comes to know that Professor Ji is not a real professor, but he is an importer and sorter of human hair and was also planning to sell her hair for three thousand dollars. She became depressed –“He was buying my silence for his shame, and I felt the shame as well.”(Jasmine 153)

Then again, she takes a new route to New York and begins working for Wylie and Taylor Hayes. She moves with them to Manhattan to take care of their adopted daughter, Duff, and becomes a day mummy for her. She used to tell her the stories of Nachiketias and Yama. Taylor calls her ‘Jase’. Wylie falls out of love with Taylor and falls for Stuart. Wylie leaves Taylor, but Jase continues to take care of Duff. She falls in love with Taylor, and he proposes that she be with him always, as he also loves her. But one day, while the two of them were at the park with Duff, Jase spotted Sukhwinder, the man who killed Prakash. She was filled with fear that Sukkhi could harm Taylor or Duff to get her. So she decides to move and thinks about her multiple identities“How many more shapes are in me, How many more selves, How many more husbands?” (215)

She flees from New York to Iowa. She meets 53-year-old banker Bud Ripplemayer here, whom Harlan Kroener shot two years ago as a result of some financial difficulties. This incident made him handicapped. Later on, Harlan kills himself. Bud gives Jase a new name, Jane. They both adopt a son, Du, who is also an immigrant; that’s why Jane has more attachment to him. Before Bud met her, he was married to Karin. That’s why Karin hates Jane for taking her husband from her, but they maintain a platonic relationship. Meanwhile, Jane became pregnant, so Bud insisted her to get married. She receives a letter from Taylor, letting her know that he and Duff are on their way to find Jase. Du figures out that Jane is in love with another man besides Bud. Du announces that he is going to live with his sister, and he leaves with his friend John. She views Du’s choice as a betrayal because she imagines him to be Prakash’s son. “Blood is thick, I think. Du, my adopted son, is a mystery, but the prospect of losing him is like a miscarriage” (Jasmine 221).

Jane tells Bud that Du went to visit his sister and will be back before school starts. Bud begs for Jane to tell him she loves him, but she doesn't respond. Du has decided to stay in California. While Jane is working in the kitchen, she sees a car pull up in the driveway, and Taylor and Duff get out of the car. Taylor tries to convince Jase to come with him to California. She is in conflict, thinking of Bud, who will lose everything if she leaves. She thinks-“I have had a husband for each of the women I have been. Prakash for Jasmine, Taylor for Jase, Bud for Jane, Half- face for Kali” (197). Jasmine stops thinking of herself as Jane and follows Taylor and Duff to the car, whispering, ‘Watch me re-position the stars’, to the astrologer who foretold her widowhood and exile. This is the first time she thought for herself. “I am not choosing between men. I am caught between the promise of America and old- world dutifulness. A caregiver's life is a good life, a worthy life. What I am to do” (240)?

This paper focuses mainly on the changing status of immigrant Jasmine, who migrated several times to a new place in search of a new identity. It is also a fact that the immigrant person is treated badly everywhere, as the people of the host country think of the immigrant as one of their competitors. So they try to impose their own culture on them, and unwillingly, the immigrant person has to change himself for his own survival. Just like Jasmine learns the American way of living. She feels herself torn between two worlds, one of ‘native’ and the other as a ‘host’. Thus caught between the two cultures of the east and the west, the past and the present, she constantly shuffles in search of a concrete identity and imagines that - “In the white lamplight, ghosts float toward me. Jane, Jasmine, Jyoti” (21).

As here, it seems that Jasmine's first move or change came in the form of marriage with Prakash. It is a normal movement performed by all women. The second change that is addressed here is the refusal of the sati tradition after the death of Prakash. She believes in completing her husband's dream for the sake of her honour. She is criticised by everyone but ignores them all. The third change is in the form of Goddess Kali, which shows that in odd circumstances, whenever a man tries to do something wrong, women should protect themselves and, without thinking anything, attack fearlessly for their safety. As an immigrant, she faced many changes, some of which were in the form of a motherly figure.

Jasmine proves what GD Anderson states- “Feminism isn't about making women stronger. Women are already strong; it's about changing the way the world perceives that strength”. Through exploring the journey of a woman and her many identities, the influence of language, form, imperialism, and postcolonialism becomes evident. The concept of Orientalism is seen here as referring to the ‘orient’ in reference to and opposition to the ‘occident’, the east, and the west. Throughout the novel, the concept of binarism creates two constructs of East and West, producing racial and ethnic identities and differences. The binary opposition between East and West is reflected, and the relationship between India and America is explored.

Thus, the protagonist repositions herself in her adopted country by deciding to remain a caretaker for Duff, which gives her peace of mind. She does not allow her troubles and struggles to obstruct her progress in life. She doesn't feel hopeless. Though she has to lose many people and make numerous sacrifices on this journey, she never gives up. Jasmine was born as Jyoti in an Indian village named Hasnapur in Punjab. She was “the fifth daughter, the seventh of nine children” (Jasmine 39). The word fifth here signifies the attitude of people in many places towards a girl child; it is obvious that her birth is neither welcomed nor celebrated. In fact, it is considered a sin for a woman to bear a girl child. Therefore Jasmine herself says-

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 (39).

Her struggle to live a life against patriarchal society starts from her birth itself and continues till the end. She does not believe in compromising and continues to move ahead bravely in every oddity that crosses her path towards attaining her identity. Jasmine transforms completely from an Indian village girl, whose grandmother wants to marry her at the age of eleven, into an American woman who finally thinks for herself. By taking the decision to go to America alone and by deciding to stay there even after being raped and numerous other setbacks, she proves the prevalent myth wrong that, "Village girls are like cattle; whichever way you lead them, that is the way they will go" (46). When she had to choose between Taylor and Bud, she did not sacrifice her happiness just because Bud needed her care. She boldly asserts herself, even at this difficult time. The path that takes Jasmine to this place was chosen by her alone. Many times she found herself struggling with her Indian values and morals and flapping between tradition and modernity. However, she never lets these ambiguities to be an obstacle in her path towards freedom and progress.

The state of exile, a sense of loss, the pain of separation, and turmoil are all present in this novel, which makes it a quest for identity in an alien land. Mukherjee has presented cultural conflicts and made her characters fight in odd circumstances, as Jasmine does.

"A woman with a voice is, by definition, a strong woman". —*Melinda Gates*

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