



Rewriting the Immigrant Self: The Bildungsroman Trajectory in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

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Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* (1989) as a reimagined immigrant Bildungsroman, tracing the protagonist's journey of self-formation across cultures. We first review traditional bildungsroman conventions - a narrative of psychological and moral growth often initiated by loss - and show how diasporic writers adapt these to depict "multiple identity" trajectories caused by migration. Postcolonial theories (e.g. Bhabha's hybridity, Hall's fluid identity) guide our analysis of *Jasmine*'s transformative odyssey. Through close textual reading, we identify *Jasmine*'s stages: Jyoti's constrained childhood in India, the traumatic rupture of Prakash's murder, *Jasmine*'s reinvention across transnational spaces, and her negotiation of new roles in America. We argue that *Jasmine* embodies a hybrid, agentive self: she continuously "shuttles between identities", actively redefining herself rather than passively absorbing American labels. In doing so, Mukherjee subverts the linear bildungsroman, portraying growth as cyclical, non-linear, and rooted in feminist agency. Keywords: immigrant Bildungsroman; identity; hybridity; diaspora; gender; Bharati Mukherjee.

Keywords

Immigrant Bildungsroman; Identity; Hybridity; Diaspora; Feminism; Bharati Mukherjee

1. Introduction

Over the past decades, the area of postcolonial studies has been overwhelmed by the immigrant fiction due to the global movement of the population and the desire to find a new home in the new territory. These narratives are usually enjoyable to borrow the European Bildungsroman model of coming of age but twist it to reflect the realities of diaspora. The critics mention that immigrant protagonists have to negotiate several identities to cope with dual worlds. One of the most prominent representatives of the genre was Bharati Mukherjee, an Indian-born author who was immigrated to the U.S. in the 1960s. As Sakumary notices, Mukherjee takes pride in the concept of assimilation and portrays immigration as a conscious divorce with the old world of hopelessness and defeat. *Jasmine* (1989) is a particularly interesting example of the object of the study of identity: Al-Sarrani emphasizes that the main heroine is a strong immigrant female who does not allow herself to be marginalized by America but is the one who takes initiatives.

The question in this paper is as follows: How does *Jasmine* work as an immigrant Bildungsroman? Differently put, what does Mukherjee map out the growth and moral development of the protagonist in the circumstances of migration and diaspora? We start (Section 2) by identifying the characteristics of the classical Bildungsroman - a young search caused by loss, which results in maturity and socialization - and then demonstrate how postcolonial theory and the study of the diaspora transform these characteristics (e.g. by emphasizing the issue of cultural displacement, mixed identities). The up-and-down stage of the journey of *Jasmine* is followed in Section 3: the life of traditional Jyoti in India, the shattering and trauma of the emigration, the transnational boundaries, and the construction of the new life in America. Part 4 focuses on the ways in which *Jasmine* undermines the conventional coming-of-age story by its focus on the cyclic life of rebirth and female agency. A short comparison (Section 5) puts *Jasmine* in a context with other diasporic bildungsromane, and the conclusion (Section 6) talks about how Mukherjee has broadened the definition of the genre.

2. Theoretical Framework of the Immigrant Bildungsroman.

A classical Bildungsroman is the story that follows the moral and psychological progression of a sensitive young person as he or she grows to maturity. Britannica calls it a novel of maturation or formation, following how and why the protagonist develops in the manner he or she does, morally and psychologically. The beginning of such novels can be a personal loss or crisis (it may even be the death of a parent) that thrusts the hero into a quest to seek answers or fulfillment. At the end, the protagonist will have normally assimilated into society under new conditions.

In diasporic situations, though, the coming-of-age story is complicated by the issue of cultural displacement. To the immigrant protagonists, two worlds literally alternate as they carry several roles and selves. According to Sukumary, migrants bring with them their names, jobs, personalities among other identities in their quest to fit in the new nation. According to Ali Salami and Farnoosh Pirayesh, moving causes individuals to lose their identity and create it anew as it is constantly negotiated both in the inside and outside. To put it another way, fragmentation and re-formation of selfness is predetermined by the immigrant Bildungsroman.

This is enlightened by the postcolonial theorists. Homi Bhabha believes that identity is produced at a Third Space of enunciation, that is, an in-between space of dissolution of fixed cultural purity. In the case of Bhabha, the global migrant subject is in this hyphenated space generating hybrid identities. This ambivalent space, in which the hierarchical purity of cultures cannot hold in such a way, is, as one of the summaries remarks, the creation of cultural identity. The productive possibilities of such a place also resides in the fact that it goes beyond the diversity of cultures and towards an idea of the hybridity of culture. Stuart Hall also always puts a stress on identity, which is a question of becoming as much as it is being: identities are never unified and in late modern times, they are more fragmented and fractured. Hall challenges us not to think of cultural identities as fixed essences but as processes: one is at once engaged in a narrative of a past, and headed toward a future that is open to change.

Those theories reveal why the story of Jasmine needs a new form of Bildungsroman. Her journey is a process of negotiation between new and old worlds, as opposed to a one-dimensional, linear journey. Hybridity and fluid identity as the conception by Hall will inform our analysis on how Jasmine portrays growth as constant transformation, reinvention and comingling of cultural forces.

3. Jasmine Journey: Phases of the Bildungsroman of the Immigrants.

Jasmine starts off as a girl, Jyoti, in rural Punjab under the oppressive patriarchal customs. Even the manner of her birth is characterized by violence: the analysis, launched by creative, reveals, Jyoti, the fifth daughter, seventh out of nine children, is literally being strangled by her grandmother in the effort to get rid of the family of an unwanted girl. Jyoti, remarkably, manages to survive and since that point, she is portrayed as a naturally strong person a survivor and fighter by her very birth. But Jyoti is also a rigidly bound youth in her early years. She has to conform to village conventions in Hasnapur. Despite being bright and curious, even her teacher encourages her to pursue education to which her family persuades her to get

married instead of seeking knowledge. She is made to suppress her brilliance and ambitions all in the disguise of bashful femaleness.

Jyoti is widowed early and has to put up with her role. She disembowels herself when an astrologer tells her that she will be sent into exile (the scar is star-shaped, which she refers to as her third eye) as a protest against the prophecy. She does not subtly disown herself as an obedient widow, she proclaims it herself, I wanted to break with all Indian, all Jyoti-like. The first significant change that Jyoti undergoes is her transformation into a married woman to Prakash Viji a modern and educated urbanite. Prakash gives her a life that is not inside the feudal village boundaries and even changes her name. As Jyoti retrospectively remembers what he said: To start anew, he changed my name: Jasmine. He said, You are little and sweet and heady, my Jasmine'; The conversion is observed even by the young bride herself: Jyoti, Jasmine: I switched between identities. Such renaming is symbolic in nature - it takes Jyoti to America and marks the start of the process of self-reinvention. Therefore, in India Jasmine sets the beginning of the identity of the heroine. Jyoti is grounded in the village life, weighted down by patriarchal tradition, but uneasy and rebellious. The first traumas and changing of her name pre-empt the changes in store: the former silent girl will become a woman who will make her own decisions.

This violent death of Prakash becomes the turning point in the life of Jyoti (now Jasmine). Just before Sikh extremists are to carry out their plan of emigrating on them, Prakash is assassinated, leaving his widow alone and desperate. Jasmine gets out of her ground all at once: the anchor and the origin of her new life is lost. After that, she resolves to implement the dream of Prakash by herself. She recounts the day when she had vowed before God, that she would take her to Florida to burn the suit of Prakash in the college compound as some sort of votive. Jasmine in that manner ceremoniously kills her past before embarking on her journey.

The murder of Prakash is a paradoxical experience as it impacts the development of Jasmine. Instead of breaking her, this hardens her heart. According to critic Samir Dayal this is a baptism within the blood of Prakash a cleansing that forces Jasmine out of being a passive village girl to becoming a strong migrant seeker. In struggling with this loss, Jasmine takes total control over the future. She applies to a forged passport and quits India on her own and goes to America as a disguised rebellion to the "doom which had been once prophesied to Jyoti. The burning of the suit (a conventional thing she comically imagines to be

Sati) of Prakash and her promise to fulfill his aspiration marks the death of one person, the dutiful widow, and the irreparable birth of another.

This scene of departure accomplishes the transformation between Jyoti and Jasmine. It is also a classical Bildungsroman breakup: the hero is forced out of his home following a disastrous occurrence. But in the case of Jasmine this loss does not put her on a straight path but rather it takes her into an unforeseen cross cultural journey whereby her self is going to be put to test and rematerialize. Next we have her transit and arrival.

Jasmine has a liminal ordeal in the ocean journey and initial days in America. She is on the ship to Florida with the brooding Half-Face, who is a half-English half-Vietnamese man and whom she thought would provide her shelter. Nonetheless, Half-Face is a traitor: he not only rapes Jasmine but also brutally removes one of her eyes and half an ear. Jasmine almost commits suicide upon arrival overpowered with pain and anger. Rather, she goes out of her way to avenge on her rapist by murdering him in a very violent manner. There is even symbolism in this gory act. According to critics, Jasmine turns goddess-like like Kali in the subsequent after-effect: she is dipped with the blood of Half-Face and breaks her shackles to the past. In a rebellious shriek she cries, we kill who we were that we may be born anew in the image of [our] dream. Here she performs the last death of former identities the blind, trampled Jyoti and only Jasmine comes out of it.

Jasmine is rescued by an American woman, Lillian Gordon, cleansed, dressed and renamed: Jazzy. This point highlights the trend: as the level of the new rebirth, Jasmine transforms into a new name. Though she is known to the outside world as Jazzy, she is an inwardly different feeling that she still remains the same core I. (As AL-Sarrani notes, Jasmine is constant in her use of pronoun I to depict her single identity, making a point to dissociate herself with all given names.) The plain Punjabi widow becomes a different person physically and culturally under the care of Lillian. Jazzy puts on American clothes and adopts American habits, even Jazzy cannot believe the metamorphosis she goes through: I looked in the mirror, and I was shocked at my transformation... Jazzy in his T-shirt, skinny cords and running shoes. I did not know whether with the Hasnapuri sidle I should also be deserted with Hasnapuri modesty. It is that reflection that neither Jyoti nor Jasmine, but Jazzy in new skin, is as outwardly reinvented as every identity change.

Soon Jazzy takes the job of an au pair at the Vadhera family where she becomes a mute wife one more time. She desires greater freedom, and so she then takes up the job of a nanny to the daughter of Taylor Hayes in Manhattan. Taylor refers to her as a tender Jase. As the names of the characters change (Jasmine, Jazzy, Jase), Jasmine tries on other identities: a bride, a nanny, a self-sufficient employee. Taylor later remarks how she contributed to the self-fashioning of Jasmine: Taylor did not want to transform me... I changed because I wanted to". In fact, Sukumary observes that the life of Jasmine can be described as a process of Jasmine in pursuit of multiple identities with an intention of establishing her identity in the American society. Her next partner (Bud) is not as sophisticated and isolated as the urban cosmopolitan New York life under Taylor. In both of those environments Jasmine manages to maneuver new cultural demands, whether it is the high society club lunches, the small-town Midwest, Jasmine will always curve her ways and keep her own self-possession intact.

Renaming is going on Janice is given by Taylor, the name of a colleague of his, Lillian Ripplemeyer (the ex-wife of Bud), who offers Jasmine a new identity as Jane Ripplemeyer, a high-browed lady of leisure, to enable her to take care of Bud. Even Jasmine gets married as common-law wife of Bud, as Jane. In her narration, however, Jasmine confers every identity forced upon her as not in her heart. This is how she gives her names in one scene, Jane, Jasmine, Jyoti floated like ghosts. She then informs Bud bluntly, that Bud addresses her, Jane (p. 26), and separates herself with that character. And, also, she mentions that Lillian referred to me as Jazzy and Taylor referred to me as Jase and they were all labels assigned to them, just like that. The obstinately clear way in which she refers to herself in the first person as her real self and does not wholly belong to any one self underlines the fact that Jasmine is undergoing change on the naming level and not the annihilation of an integrated self.

Via these transnational experiences - the home of Lillian, the temple Vadhera, Taylor penthouse, Iowa farm, Jasmine is continuously bargaining with the American landscape. She takes menial jobs, learns how to drive, she even studies nursing school part-time in the process, and works towards the American Dream. At this stage, maturation is not as concerned with morality as it is with life and survival. However, there are internal transformations: every new role adds to the Jasmine confidence and complexity. This phase can be encapsulated by Sukumary as a metamorphosis to a mature and a liberated Jasmine. Therefore, through her American experience, the initially docile Jyoti has acquired worldly wisdom, independence and a mottled cultural reserve.

At this stage, Jasmine is a cosmopolitan character who is a crossbreed of numerous worlds. The variety of experiences that she has created comes out in her relationships in America. She is taught professional skills and social graces with Taylor and his family in New York; Taylor calls her his new beloved of his day-mother Duff Jase, urging her to go beyond serving. The philanthropic and liberal family Jasmine lives with under Taylor assists her in seeing a future rather than merely surviving. By comparison, her life with Bud in Iowa faces her with the Americana country life and family weight. In this case Jasmine adopts the name Jane Ripplemeyer and experiences some financial security (and even bank account in her own name). But the stable, traditional Midwestern life that Bud lives is suffocating to her stifling soul. In these two settings, Jasmine can see the freedoms and limitations of white American middle-class women and further develop her sexual and opportunity consciousness. By doing so, she is commenting on both worlds the cosmopolitan New York club world and the conservatism of the Midwest against her own dreams.

Notably, Jasmine does not give up totally to the roles that other people give her. She still has her inner compass even after learning and embracing the traditions of the United States. After long enough, she is forced to proceed and leave Bud after she comes to the realization that she and Jane Ripplemeyer are not identical. As she assists Taylor to reclaim his life in Iowa and makes a decision to live his life, she finally makes her choices herself. This can be summarized in a commentary made by Taylor (as well as one that Jasmine makes): To gypsy oneself in nostalgia was to be onward. That is, attachment to the old identities or roles would prevent her development; she had to shed them and advance to her own conditions.

Throughout these stages, Jasmine is an agency-demonstrating character. She is not an inactive target of destiny or a puppet of America. Instead, as highlighted by Al-Sarrani, Jasmine is opposing the conscious and unconscious marginalization, and even changes the lives of some of the Americans she encounters. She actively invents her new identity at every turn instead of being completely defined by other people. As an illustration, even when Taylor baptizes her Jase, she takes pleasure in molding that image (buying spangled heels and chartreuse pants, as she fantasizes). And when Bud requests her to kill his pain with him, she declines them, and claims that her future will be determined by her and not a desperate man.

Theoretically speaking, Jasmine is the hybrid subject that is discussed by the writers Bhabha and Hall. According to Salami and Pirayesh, Jasmine manages to balance between two cultures and bargains with them and turns out to be a hybrid, reinventing herself in the process. She is literally the one who switches identities, between Jyoti, Jasmine, Jazzy, Jase, Jane, but, what is important is that the core

personality is the same in every rebirth. Beneath the name changes, no confusion of the inner being of Jasmine. She can change externally, but her consciousness - her values, desires, will to live is unique and self-determined. This is reflective of Stuart Hall who believes that identity is part of a future as much as it is part of the past and at any rate is a process of becoming. The persistence of the I that goes through changing social costumes by Jasmine proves that Mukherjee depicts the identity as dynamic but self-governing.

Notably, gender colors the journey of Jasmine. Mukherjee provides Jasmine with the traditional male perks of movement and choice: she is alone, she is a property owner, she is an executive. Meanwhile Jasmine does not accept unchanging conceptions of home. Lillian Gordon provides her with a safe, middle-class existence but Jasmine runs away to have her way. In both environments, Jasmine dictates her fate be it by burning Prakash suit in Florida, ending an oppressing marriage in Iowa, or following Taylor on his letters as her heart pumps. In this way, Jasmine pieces together the bildungsroman by making feminine self-assertion central in the context of the immigrants. This dissidence is confirmed by Jasmine herself: she states even on her deathbed that she will stay and live on her own terms, refusing the aging prophecy of the old astrologer that she would be cast into exile.

4. Jasmine is a Subversive Immigrant Bildungsroman.

Conventionally, Bildungsroman ends with socialization or getting married and a secure future. This is the path that is complicated by Mukherjee in her novel. Jasmine is not linear, it is episodic and cyclic because the main character recreates her life every time that it is destroyed. No happy-ending of complacency maturity. Rather, Mukherjee demonstrates the identity as a continuous reinvention. Like Jasmine is pondering, her existence may be, as a giant long-playing record with millions of tracks, and each of them whole circle, indicating unlimited reincarnations of self. The novel does not believe in a certain destination: the last decision made by Jasmine, as she leaves Bud to continue his journey with Taylor is another loop of choice that recurs in her path.

Moreover, Jasmine questions fixed conceptions of what home is. The protagonist keeps on reminding herself and other people that home is where she chooses it to be. She does not quite feel at home in Hasnapur and Iowa and New York; her home is her own independence. This reverses the nostalgic nostalgia, which is common in migrant narratives. Jasmine does not miss the homeland to obtain her identity back, she burns the marks of it (she literally burns the suit of Prakash) and moves on. By doing this,

Mukherjee reinvents the diasporic story by presenting home as a movable object instead of being a static one.

Gender, too, recreates the bildungsroman conventions in this case. A male hero could slowly earn a social standing, but Jasmine does not have an easy time earning it, having to resort to violence and perseverance. As an illustration, her killing of Half-Face and her flight that ensues are extreme rites of passage that a male protagonist in a classical bildungsroman may never go through. However, these are crucial to the assertion on the part of Jasmine: her growth is shaped by the feminist opposition against patriarchal violence. Jasmine is not just assimilated, she actively conquers every test at her own level. In a few words Mukherjee reinvents the genre by making a diasporic woman the main character and demonstrating that development can be achieved based on dislocation, re-invention, and self-invention.

5. Comparative Insight

It is possible to juxtapose Jasmine to other coming of age stories by other immigrants to draw out its peculiarities. As an example, *The Namesake* (2003) by Jhumpa Lahiri focuses on the identity conflict of the second-generation Gogol Ganguli, although the metamorphosis in this story is less dramatic and far more internalized (transforming Gogol into Nikhil by changing his name, but not his identity) than in *Jasmine*. Whereas the focus on the continuity of the generations and nostalgia of the culture is declared in the novel by Lahiri, *Jasmine* stresses the choice and active reinvention. In a similar way, the stories of mother-daughter experiences of immigrant life by Amy Tan (1989) are intertwined with the stories of immigrant life, however, Tan has a tendency to describe assimilation as a phenomenon that adds emotional distance. Instead, Mukherjee tends to portray America in a positive light as the land of a new beginning; Jasmine is a woman who is more than happy to take up new personalities as opposed to mourning the former ones. In *Woman Warrior* (1976) by Maxine Hong Kingston, the Chinese-American female protagonist is fighting against her cultural identity, and yet, the narrator of this story learns to accept the ghost of her grandmother and the mythical characters. The changes which Jasmine experiences are more like the performances, as she changes her names with every new work, dress, and even nationality. These parallels reveal the fact that the heroine of Mukherjee is moving in the same direction constantly; its bildungsroman is characterized by the cyclic aspect, almost cinematic organization, and the lack of one, definite identity.

6. Conclusion

The story of Jasmine displays the contemporary, shifting identity of immigrants. The novel by Mukherjee proves that development does not have to be linear and comprehensive; instead, the identity of Jasmine is between two cultures and in a constant process of change. Her refusal to be identified as any single label Jyoti, Jasmine, Jazzy, Jase, Jane demonstrates the action of the identity as process suggested by Stuart Hall. Jasmine combines the Indian and American lessons to create a hybrid self that has the border of cultures in the Third Space of Homi Bhabha. In this way Mukherjee restates the Bildungsroman in the context of diasporic subjects: Jasmine is no longer a narrative of coming to a verifiable adulthood, but one of endless self-construction.

Conclusively, Jasmine suggests that the bildungsroman of the immigrant is an agency-reinvention one. The heroine is not forced to wait and passively accept a destiny but she actively frames and forms her path in all of its violent crucible-like steps. According to Sukumary, the life of Jasmine entails but not under her control, the continuous movement between identities. This novel by Mukherjee makes us view identity as fluid and willful. Jasmine makes us reconsider the coming-of-age as a genre in the wider framework of postcolonial literature: in the case of migrants, the development usually involves the abandonment of the ghosts (both literally and figuratively) and the creation of a new identity according to one own rules. This has big consequences to the diaspora studies implying that the protagonists of the immigrants write their bildungsroman using their hybrid pens that continually re-write their pasts to new futures.

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