

# Circularity and nonlinear narrative in 'jasmine'



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In the 1989 novel *Jasmine*, Bharati Mukherjee tells the story of Jasmine, an American immigrant from India who experiences life through a wide range of identities denoted by different versions of her name. Her different relationships and experiences make readers question what it actually means to be an American. In *Jasmine*, Mukherjee interrogates the American immigrant experience through her emphasis on Hindu ideology, most specifically reincarnation. Despite presenting these Eastern philosophies in juxtaposition with Western philosophies, Mukherjee rejects binary opposition through the novel's form and emphasizing multiplicity of identity in the main character Jasmine.

The nonlinear format of the novel adds to its mythology and reflects that life and death are not viewed as opposites, but as parts of the cycle of reincarnation. Generally, Western novels tend to be written linearly and chronologically. Instead, Mukherjee writes *Jasmine's* story in a circular way rather than a standard linear story, which adds to the Hindu traditions emphasized within the actual content of the novel. The beginning and end of the novel are very different; however, they remain connected through a thread that Mukherjee weaves throughout: the image of the astrologer. The novel opens with Jasmine narrating: "Lifetimes ago, under a banyan tree in the village of Hasnapur, an astrologer [...] foretold my widowhood and exile" (3). While readers know nothing of her life yet, Jasmine puts temporal distance between the person she was then with the person she currently is by beginning with the phrase "Lifetimes ago." It also implies that Jasmine has lived through many lifetimes, which readers find out that she figuratively has lived through many lives. Because she opens the novel with this

encounter with the astrologer, Mukherjee frames the novel immediately, sets up the Hindu themes of fate and reincarnation, and gives cultural context. At the end of the novel, Jasmine narrates: " Watch me reposition the stars, I whisper to the astrologer who floats cross-legged above my kitchen stove," which brings back up the image of the astrologer and ties the end of the novel back to the beginning (240). This gives readers a sense of circularity, both in form and content. Jasmine's narration and commentary on life reinforces the sense of circularity. By depicting the narrative as a circle instead of a line mirrors the motif of reincarnation, which is pervading in every aspect of the novel.

Mukherjee's depiction of Jasmine's cyclical identity transformations emphasizes a nonlinear, non-binary process that challenges Western conventions of thinking about life and death. Despite the fact that reincarnation in Hinduism is seen as a literal birth, death, and rebirth of a person's soul, Mukherjee uses this concept figuratively throughout Jasmine to interrogate the immigrant narrative. When discussing her adopted son Du's immigration experience with his teacher Mr. Skola, Jasmine explains to the reader: " We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams" (29). The use of the word " murder" in conjunction with " rebirth" evokes an immediate life-death-rebirth connection in readers' minds, reminiscent of the Hindu belief of reincarnation. For both Du and Jasmine, immigration is not an overnight experience; it is a constant experience, an evolving experience, and it requires pain (" murder") in order to reach the promises of " dreams." Immigration is an act of death and rebirth; thus, immigration is a figurative reincarnation. Jasmine understands

this and attempts to communicate it. While at lunch with Mary Webb, who asks Jasmine about Hinduism, reincarnation, and past lives, Jasmine tells Mary that she is “sure that [she has] been reborn several times, and that yes, some lives [she] can recall vividly” (126). While Mary believes in a more literal reincarnation of a soul, Jasmine recognizes her own figurative reincarnations she has undergone during her singular life. At the end of the novel, she references the multiplicity of these lives and deaths: “I cry into Taylor’s shoulder, cry through all the lives I’ve given birth to, cry for all my dead” (241). Jasmine recognizes her different past lives, all of one soul, all of one essence.

By giving Jasmine new names at different stages of her life, Mukherjee creates stark differences between Jasmine’s changing identities; Jasmine’s feelings of disconnection to these different identities, or different people as she sees it, reflect her continual cycle of figurative reincarnation. Mukherjee uses Jasmine’s different names to reflect her new identities. Perhaps one of the most drastic changes in Jasmine’s story is when she becomes Jasmine instead of Jyoti. She reflects on this: “[Prakash] 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). Here, Jasmine recognizes that Jasmine and Jyoti are not the same person as she notes that she must “shuttle between identities” as if she is two separate people. She also refers to her old name as “the Jyoti,” which sounds less like a name or a proper noun and more like an object, thing, placeholder. At this point, it is not a name, but a thing of the past that she is completely disconnected from. This disconnection that

Jasmine feels is emphasized through her use of the third person when referring to herself in the past. She does it again with the nickname Jase: “ I whisper the name, Jase, Jase, Jase, as if I am calling someone I once knew” (215). The use of the third person continues here. The phrase “ someone I once knew” emphasizes that to Jasmine, Jase is a separate entity from her current self, just as “ the Jyoti” is separate, and thus displays the same disconnection as before. Jasmine has an awareness of this ongoing disconnection; she narrates: “ Jyoti of Hasnapur was not Jasmine, Duff’s day mummy and Taylor and Wylie’s au pair in Manhattan; that Jasmine isn’t this Jane Ripplemeyer having lunch with Mary Webb at the University Club today” (127). The use of continual third person creates distance and stark differences between identities. The end of a name is a symbolic ending of a life; the beginning of a new name is a rebirth.

In *Jasmine*, Bharati Mukherjee challenges Western modes of understanding through emphasizing a circularity of life: through the novel’s form, content, and Hindu philosophy. She rejects binary opposition though Jasmine’s multiplicity of identity, interrogation of the relationship between life and death. Through her wonderfully rich prose, Mukherjee interrogates the complex experience of an American immigrant in an authentic way.

## **Works Cited**

Mukherjee, Bharati. *Jasmine*. New York: Grove, 1989. Print.