

Jasmine's transformation



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Immigrants almost inevitably face immense challenges pursuing the American Dream—socially, economically, perhaps even internally. Such struggles are evident in the novel “Jasmine,” Bharati Mukherjee’s richly descriptive and emotionally powerful novel about a young immigrant woman. Mukherjee vividly brings to life the theme of rebirth in “Jasmine” through the use of multiple international settings and characterizations, following a young girl from her Indian childhood through her American twenties as she seeks an identity she truly believes is her own.

Mukherjee introduces the foundation for Jasmine’s metamorphoses within the first few pages, as young Jyoti visits an astrologer in her native India. Told by the old man that her future holds great sadness and turmoil, the seven-year-old protests indignantly – then falls as she runs away and cuts her forehead. The astrologer’s ominous predictions would frighten most children, but Jyoti does not flee in fright; rather, she refuses to believe such a fate awaits her, and instead, creates the hope of a better outcome for herself. Indeed, there is an immediate sense that this young girl’s wisdom exceeds her age. “It’s not a scar,” Jyoti shouts to her taunting sisters, “it’s my third eye” (Mukherjee 5). Jyoti, referencing her mother’s past stories, believed that she would become a sage with her third eye.

Jyoti is a strong girl in a village of weakness where “bad luck dogged dowryless wives, rebellious wives, barren wives. They fell into wells, they got run over by trains, they burned to death heating milk on kerosene stoves” (Mukherjee 41). Jyoti’s mother tried to strangle Jyoti the day she was born, hoping to save her fifth daughter from a desperate life. Having been figuratively reborn during her own birth, Jyoti knows she will survive. Even as

a child, it is clear to Jyoti that she is not like the others in her neighborhood. With her "third eye," she sees two options for a girl in the poverty-stricken, misogynistic Hasnapur: succumb to the surroundings or reinvent a better life. For Jyoti, the former is simply not an option. A better life surely awaits Jyoti when, at the age of fourteen, she marries Prakash, a young man with designs on a new life in America. Prakash lovingly gives Jyoti the more American, progressive-sounding name Jasmine. With this new identity, the young couple anticipates the promise of reinventing their lives; if only the violence of their Indian life had not brought the death of Jasmine's young husband. Still refusing the astrologer's haunting words from her youth, Jasmine realizes she must flee the disillusioned lives of her mother and the old widows; she will become the American wife of her beloved Prakash.

With her focus not on leaving India, but on arriving in America, Jasmine finds herself with a forged passport, feeling she is "the recipient of an organ transplant" (Mukherjee 103). As an illegal immigrant, however, she must accept transportation of any kind, however demeaning and filthy. This dreary, hollow existence, surrounded by other illegal travelers, brings Jasmine to the face of death once more. When attacked and raped by a demonic man—the man who ultimately brought her ashore in America—Jasmine again sees her options, but there is no choice; she must kill the man who had tried to kill Prakash's bride. Knowing that her "body was merely the shell, soon to be discarded" (Mukherjee 121), Jasmine can be reborn. Yet the Florida Jasmine and Prakash envisioned does not resemble the "United States of India" in which she awakes. Believing she had "traveled the world without ever leaving the familiar crops of Punjab" (Mukherjee 128), Jasmine

makes her way up a highway flanked by farmland, trash cans, and snarling, bony dogs. Given new life by a gruff but kind-hearted woman, Jazzy is born and sent to New York City with job prospects and the transforming advice: "Now remember, if you walk and talk American, they'll think you were born here. Most Americans can't imagine anything else" (Mukherjee 134). Her American name and carriage, however, is insufficient preparation for New York, with its beggars and "people like myself" (Mukherjee 140). Visiting an old teacher of Prakash's proves even more unsettling, as she finds herself helplessly drifting back toward India, regressing back to who she once was.

Deeply depressed by this man's life, so similar to Jyoti's, Jazzy knows the time has come for change. Jazzy becomes Jase, the caregiver of the precocious daughter of Taylor and Wylie, a young New York City couple. This fun, lively nickname Taylor gives her suits the former Jazzy perfectly, as she adapts quickly to her new surroundings. Her new life is America! In the high-rise apartment surrounded by vivacious young people, Jase will fit perfectly into this world, with "its ease, its careless confidence and graceful self-absorption" (Mukherjee 171). She thrives amidst this home and family, spending money frivolously and falling in love with Taylor. Jyoti, Jasmine and Jazzy would surely be stunned by such a persona. Whereas Jyoti had "burned herself in a trash-can-funeral pyre behind a boarded-up motel in Florida [and] Jasmine lived for the future" (Mukherjee 176), Jase is a modern American woman who can do as she pleases. When Wylie and Taylor divorce, completing this distinctly non-Indian scene, Taylor, Jase, and little Duff become the family Jasmine and Prakash might have been. Still, despite its bright and love-illuminated apartment, this world is soon too small. India

comes flooding into New York, bringing with it past life, past death—washing over Jase in a shocking torrent. The man who killed Prakash, the man who would no doubt kill the three of them, stole Jase's identity, right there in front of God and everyone. Indeed, Jase believe, “ God's plans have always seemed clearly laid out...I'm going to Iowa” (Mukherjee 189).

Just as Duff began her life in Iowa, Jase decides she, too, will begin life anew in Iowa. Iowa is a fine place for an American named Jane, the pseudo-wife of a banker named Bud. Here, she carries Bud's baby and shares life with their Vietnamese-American son, Du. Thousands of immigrants before Jane might have dreamed about this life, but the Jase's quiet death is deafening to Jane. Jane is the first person to miss who she was. Her life among miles of rolling hills and the farmers who desperately tend the land is stifling, even to the pleasant homemaker Jane has become. Jyoti returns to Jane, as she shares discomfoting stories of this past life with her family. Life in this house on three hundred acres in Iowa becomes Jane's mud hut in India; caring for her paralyzed husband becomes caring for her depressed mother. Only Du's presence keeps Jane present. Du, who almost eerily shares the same quiet brilliance as her beloved Prakash, and whom she believes was the son she and Prakash might have had, is Jane's lifeline. Although from two different worlds, Jane and Du share the same background: they both killed for their survival, and they were both reborn because of their intelligence and strength. The difference between them, though, was that Jane's “ transformation has been genetic; Du's [as a Vietnamese-American] was hyphenated” (Mukherjee 222). The open life in Iowa has closed in on Jane, giving her the new life she needed. California, as it turns out, will be the

America in which Jase will find life again and into which Jase's American baby will be born.

From Jyoti, the young girl in India who defied the doom-filled astrologer, to Jase, the spirited young woman on her way to California with Tyler, Bharati Mukherjee weaves the theme of rebirth through her novel with threads of many hues. Mukherjee's characterizations and settings are heavily laden with description, and the reader might easily believe "Jasmine" is an autobiographical work. This story of an Indian girl's many evolving new lives, each with its own struggles, surely closely reflects the stories of thousands of American immigrants—people fleeing a country in search of a new life. It is this common simplicity, the hope and strength of humans, that helps to make Bharati Mukherjee's "Jasmine" a novel of great merit. While there are certainly great fictional works in the science, fantasy, or mystery genres, Mukherjee has created a main character who, in addition to seeming very "real," is a heroine: a person easily admired for her ability to persevere, to continue toward her goal, even if it means morphing into someone she isn't along the way. Ultimately, "Jasmine" is the universal story of a human's transformation—from Indian to American, from giving care to being cared for, from childhood to adulthood—making this an outstanding human interest story for everyone who has ever been, known, or descended from an immigrant.