

Desiring Whiteness in *Jasmine*

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Abstract

The novel Jasmine is written by Bharati Mukherjee, a South Asian English novelist. The novel revolves round Jasmine, the protagonist, who migrates to America desiring whiteness. My major argument in the research article is that she is obsessed with whiteness to have American identity, to materialize her husband's dream of migrating to the USA, to counter the cultural binding of widowhood prevalent back in her home land, India and to have the privilege of gender equality by shifting to America. The study reflects how on the one hand, Jasmine's journey to America is influenced by transnationalism and globalization; on the other hand, whiteness primarily appears to her as her desire and it also appears to her as identity, threat and negotiation. For the broad theoretical framework, I have used Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks' and Frantz Fanon's theory as theoretical modality to deal with the theory of whiteness. The novel reveals Jasmine, a young Indian girl's journey from her village Hasnapur in India to Iowa in the USA, the land dominated by whites. Her migration to the USA, the assumed land of gender equality and opportunity shows her obsession with whiteness. Her movement from illegal migration to being an immigrant in pursuit of an American identity uncovers her belief of transcending the cultural barriers and taboos of home land. Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks defines whiteness as "a master signifier that establishes a structure of relations, a signifying chain that through a process of inclusions and exclusions constitutes a pattern for organizing human difference" (3). Likewise, Samir Amin argues "Whiteness is entirely related to Europe or the eternal west" (89), which can be a relevant idea to support why Jasmine migrates to the USA. Besides, the non-whites travel from the colonized nations to the west in search of whiteness, while whiteness travels from the west to the east to assert the hegemony over the orient. In this light, France Widdance Twine and Charles Andrew Gallagher further urge "Whiteness as a form of privilege and power travels from western countries to colonies throughout the world" (10). Finally, the write-up focuses on the significance of the study of desiring whiteness of South Asian characters like Jasmine for their migration to the USA.

Keywords: Desiring Whiteness, American identity, Transnationalism, Globalization, Master Signifier, Home land, Host land

Objectives

My article answers the major question why Jasmine migrates to the US despite being an Indian widow. The research article focuses on the protagonist Jasmine's desiring whiteness, which causes her to migrate to her husband's dream nation. Thus, this article studies different reasons for Jasmine to desire whiteness such as to have American identity,

to materialize her husband's dream, to deconstruct the widowhood as a cultural trend in India, and to enjoy the privilege of gender equality in the US.

Introduction

Jasmine, who is the protagonist of the novel *Jasmine* written by Bharati Mukherjee, migrates to the US desiring whiteness. The novel depicts Jasmine's journey from her village Hasnapur at Punjab in India to Iowa in the US. Her journey from South Asia to the US appears to be her difficult odyssey and bildungsroman journey as well. Her strong desire to embrace American identity indicates her desiring whiteness as the US is the nation dominated by white settlers. For South Asian immigrants like Jasmine, whiteness becomes a system of privileges. She undergoes a drastic metamorphosis in the process of her journey from her homeland to the hostland. Her transformation of names reveals how her identity goes on changing in pursuit of whiteness. To relate her transformation regarding her identity to her mission to the US, Chuen-Shin Tai regards it like Jasmine's rebirth and states: "Through Jasmine's transformations, she is reborn many times: Jyoti, Jasmine, Kali, Jazzy, Jase, and Jane. Strikingly, these different names and identities transform Jasmine in variously critical ways: emotionally, physically and especially psychologically" (68). Tai's comment upon Jasmine's changing identity unfolds how a South Asian immigrant's identity goes on changing on her journey from the East to the West.

This research article on the one hand shows how the protagonist Jasmine's odyssey is influenced by transnationalism and globalization; on the other hand, whiteness appears to be her desire, identity, threat and negotiation. Whiteness has emerged as a transformed power for the whites and a great lure for the non-whites, who regard whiteness as a symbol of privileges. The westerners use whiteness like a civilizing machine and non-westerners use it as privileges for bettering their life, so non-westerners like South Asian immigrant, Mukherjee portrayed in *Jasmine* migrate to the west in search of white privileges. In 'Whiteness and White Privilege', Paul R Carr claims: ". . . White power and privilege remain significant concerns within educational, governmental, political, economic, and social structures, which capture different, overlapping, and fundamental concerns that shape contemporary societies globally (Watson, Howard-Wagner & Spanierman, 2014)" (52). As whiteness and white privilege influence people globally, non-westerners migrate to the west in search of whiteness.

Methodology

Regarding research methodology, the qualitative methodology has been used. As for the broad theoretical modality, postcolonial theory has been used and the theoretical idea of desiring whiteness under postcolonial theory has been selected as a theoretical tool. Frantz Fanon's and Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks' theory of desiring whiteness is used to do textual analysis of the novel *Jasmine* so that Jasmine's desiring whiteness can be explored. With the help of theorists Fanon and Seshadri-Crooks, the inductive method is exploited to reveal Jasmine's desire to have privileges of whiteness in the US. Seshadri-Crooks' concepts ". . . whiteness represents complete mastery, self-sufficiency, and jouissance of Oneness" (7) and

“[r]ace has an all-too-present master signifier-whiteness-which offers the illegal enjoyment of absolute wholeness” (7) unfold how whiteness acts a master signifier. So, whiteness as a master signifier provides the structure of immigrants’ desires to enjoy whiteness in a pattern of a signifying chain. Likewise, Fanon reveals non-whites’ strong desire of embracing whiteness. Fanon’s claim: “I marry White culture, White beauty, Whiteness. When my restless hands caress those White breasts, they grasp White Civilization and dignity and make them mine” (81) explores non-whites’ craze for embracing whiteness going to the land such as the US dominated by whites as Jasmine does in *Jasmine*. Apart from the theorists Fanon and Seshadri-Crooks, Stuart Hall as a theorist of Cultural Identity and different critics such as Samir Amin, France Widdance Twine, Charles Andrew Gallagher, Paul R Carr, Chuen-Shin Tai and so on have been selected and used to do the research so that Jasmine’s desiring whiteness can be revealed in the primary text.

Jasmine learnt English with her Masterji in a village school. Her learning English, the language of the colonizers/west indicates her interest in American identity or western identity. Since India was colonized by Britain, India was under a great influence of whites. Their culture and language had an indelible impression on the minds of the Indians. Whoever learnt English were regarded as moderners as English indicates the modernization of Indians. Besides, learning English of non-westerners like Indians was a symbol of their interest in white culture and civilization. In Iowa, Jasmine has reminiscence of her learning English with Masterji in her village:

He had a pile of English books, some from British Council Library, some with USIS stickers. I remember a thin one, *Shane*, about an American village much like Punjab, and *Alice in Wonderland*, which gave me nightmares. The British books were thick with more long words per pages. I remember *Great Expectations* and *Jane Eyre*, both of which I was forced to abandon because they were too difficult. (40-41)

Jasmine’s learning English in her village school with her Masterji reveals how seeds of her American identity were sown in her delicate mind. It shows her interest and inclination towards American culture which was easier to learn than difficult British culture. In one way, it indicates how her psychological Americanization began under the instruction of her Masterji, a Punjabi teacher who “loved things American” (45).

Jasmine revolves round the protagonist Jasmine’s desire for whiteness, which she can embrace migrating to the US and she does, too. Her desiring whiteness strengthens her American/western identity. On the one hand, Jasmine’s migration to the US indicates the ongoing trend of the immigration of the South Indians to the west in search of white privileges, which they can embrace in the west; on the other hand, Jasmine’s interest in American identity reflects Mukherjee’s desire of American/western identity. Literature is a mirror of society. So, Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* reflects her life, too. In ‘Reinventing the self in Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*,’ Radha Devi Sharma states: “Mukherjee is a post-colonial immigrant who immigrated to Canada and later became an American of Indian origin. Her novels often deal with the problems and issues related with the South Asian women,

particularly Indians” (29). Sharma points out Mukherjee’s autobiography which is similar to Jasmine’s life. Like Sharma, in ‘Metamorphosing Jasmine: Identity Sorting in Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*,’ Tai claims: “Mukherjee sees America as the place for her transformation and new cultural possibilities even at the cost of separating from her original identities, almost necessitating an act of felony against her old self. No doubt, Mukherjee is a writer that has lived through the several difficult phases of life as an Asian immigrant similar to her character, Jasmine” (66). Thus, the point that Jasmine is like Mukherjee even supports Jasmine’s desire of American identity.

Likewise, Jasmine’s mission to America is mainly caused by her husband’s American dream, which her husband, Prakash could not materialize and hence she as a dutiful wife undertakes this odyssey to immigrate to America in order to materialize her husband’s dream. Jasmine, at the age of fourteen, marries Prakash, an Americanized electronic engineer. Their marriage firstly takes Jasmine to her husband’s house in the city, changes her name from Jyoti to Jasmine and modernizes her. Besides, with her husband, her English gets used as her husband enables her to have a dream to visit America. Tai’s argument “He deeply implants his big American dream into his young wife” (67) indicates her husband as a major cause for her to be desirous of immigrating to America, the nation dominated by white settlers. After her husband is assassinated by Sikh terrorists, Jasmine migrates to America to fulfill her husband’s dream/mission. Sharma points out: “When Sikh terrorists murder Prakash, Jasmine immigrates to America all alone to fulfill her husband’s mission and wants to perform ‘Sati’ by cremating herself on the pyre of his suit” (33). Along with her husband’s death, his mission does not end, but it starts with Jasmine. How and why Jasmine becomes determined to materialize her husband’s dream becomes obvious from:

Later, I thought, we had created life. Prakash had taken Jyoti and created Jasmine, and Jasmine would complete the mission of Prakash. Vijn & Wife. A vision had formed. There were thousands of useless rupees in our account. He had his Florida acceptance and his American visa. I turned everything over to my brothers, along with my plan. They were stupefied. A village girl, going along to America, without job, husband, or papers? I must be mad! Certainly, I was. I told them I had sworn it before God. A matter of duty and honor. I dared not tell my mother. (97)

Thus, the above critics’ views and Jasmine’s statements reveal that Jasmine is determined to migrate to America to materialize her husband’s dream of migrating to America.

In course of materializing her husband’s dream, her own desiring whiteness becomes obvious. Her immigration to America unfolds her desire of embracing privileges of whiteness besides fulfilling her husband’s dream. Her husband had wanted her to be modern and enjoy freedom, which was almost impossible for her in the then India. So, her movement to the west is justified. Even, Samir Amin’s claim “Whiteness is entirely related to Europe or the “eternal West”” (89) is very contextual here. After her husband’s tragic death, she makes her bildungsroman journey travelling illegally to America. After reaching America and setting her foot on her desired land/America, she feels relieved and tells herself

“My mission, thank God, was nearly over” (111) without guessing about her upcoming tragic rape. In ‘Suspended between Worlds: Jasmine’s Liberal Feminism,’ Maria Chaves Petersen points out: “When she finally gets there, she is chosen by Half-Face to be supposedly helped by him, but is raped. She decides to kill herself but ends up killing him and running away. She is found by Lillian Gordon, a woman who helps illegal immigrants: she teaches Jasmine to walk, look and talk like an American – she calls her “Jazzy”” (126). This is how her Americanization starts in the US despite facing hurdles such as the rape case, which strengthens her, too. Nasheed Jatri also expresses her such views in ‘Jasmine and the Mission to America: The Fires Lighting the Way,’ that “A strong woman, Jasmine navigates in an apparently effortless manner between time, location, memory, desire and self-perception and re-creates herself without disintegrating. Through the horrendous ordeals that she undergoes – assassinations, clandestine immigration, rape, murder, and constant displacements, she retains her stability and emerges unbroken if not unscathed” (59). Thus, Jafri also agrees with Peterson and Mukherjee that Jasmine’s mission of Americanization continues in America despite the fact that she gets raped by half face.

Basically, *Jasmine* revolves round the central character, Jasmine’s identity formation and transformation which takes a radical turn once she gets married to Prakash, the electronic engineer. Firstly, her husband encourages her to enjoy equality and freedom in his house in the city and secondly, he changes her name from Jyoti to Jasmine. Mukherjee’s statements about Jasmine “To break off the past, he gave me a new name : Jasmine. He said : “You are small and sweet and heady, my Jasmine. You’ll quicken the whole world with your perfume” (77) reveal how he breaks the tradition for the sake of providing freedom to his wife, Jasmine, which appears to be like revolution in the then traditional Indian society. In one way, Prakash’s changing her name and her adjustment and negotiation in his house seem to be her training to make her long journey from the east to the west. In ‘Multicultural Subjectivity and Cosmopolitan Identity in Jasmine,’ Altaf Ahmad Ganaie explains: “To accept her husband's renaming her

Jasmine, however, she must adjust her relationship to Indian tradition, modernizing and globalizing her expectations to live up to his vision of Vijn and wife, that mythical corporation that was to take the couple out of India and into the western world” (176). Her struggle along with the change of her names from Jyoti to Jasmine, Jase and Jane indicate how her national identity is changed into transnational and American one. Ganaie’s further claim about Jasmine “At every step Jasmine revolts against her fate and the path drawn for her. The narrative shuttles between past and present, between India of the narrator’s early life and America of her present one” (175) reveal how her identity is changed from the past to present. It also unfolds how her South Indian identity is changed into American one. Regarding her fluidity of identity, Stuart Hall’s views “Cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture. It is not some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental mark. It is not once-and-for-all. It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute

Return” (113) are very applicable to reveal changing aspect of Jasmine’s identity throughout the novel.

Significance

Jasmine’s desiring whiteness is to immigrate to America so that she can counter the cultural tradition of widowhood, which she cannot do in India. She tries to deconstruct the Indian tradition of fatalism from her very childhood in her village though widowhood and exile in the form of fatalism are deeply rooted in the Indian society. Jasmine’s revolt: “. . . foretold my widowhood and exile. I was only seven then, . . . “No” I shouted. “You’re a crazy old man. You don’t know what my future holds” (3) reflects her giving counter to the cultural tradition of widowhood from very childhood. Tai’s claims “Jasmine chooses to regard her third eye as a force allowing her to see her future” (67) and “At all times Jasmine fights to survive and raise herself above all the old blind tradition” (67) indicate Jasmine’s deconstruction of the blind tradition of widowhood and exile in her Indian society. In ‘Bharati Mukherjee’s Struggle against Cultural Balkanization,’ M Luz Gonzalez’s and Juan Ignacio Oliva’s focus on the need of jasmine’s deconstruction of widowhood and exile for her American identity. Oliva’s claim “Mukherjee creates Jasmine’s title character. Jasmine crosses the ocean and transforms her world. In analysing her personality, this character undoubtedly reminds us of Pablo Picasso’s famous quote: “Every act of creation is first an act of destruction,” and Jasmine destroys her past in order to create a future” (80) reflects Jasmine’s need of challenging and discarding blind South Asian tradition to adapt American cultural identity. Likewise, Jasmine’s living with her husband’s Professor Vadhera and his family for five months was like five months as she did not like the way they adhered to Indian traditions blindly without adapting to American cultural tradition. Tai’s arguments “During her sojourn there, the Vadheras’ cultural isolation sparks Jasmine’s assimilation. Unlike the Vadhera family, Jasmine opens her hear to learn to live a new life by becoming an unabashed American” (69) cause him to leave Vadhera family. Jasmine’s experience of living at Vadhera’s “I could not admit that I had accustomed myself to American clothes. American disguised my widowhood. . . . To them, I was a widow who should show a proper modesty of appearance and attitude” (145) reveal that unlike Vadhera’s attachment with blind Indian tradition, she shows her pleasure in American discarding traditional Indian customs and adapting American culture.

Jasmine’s desire for whiteness is to enjoy gender equality in the US. The US/west is the center of whiteness according to Amin (89). Amin seems to agree with Seshadri-Crooks’ theoretical idea of desiring whiteness, according to which whiteness is a master signifier (3) that signifies various things such as liberal democracy, equality, America, Europe, quality education, job opportunities, material prosperity and so on. Whiteness can be connected to M. Jacobson’s view of charm of US citizenship “. . . capacity for industriousness, Christianity, degree of freedom, exercise of independent thought necessary for democratic government, and colour” (73-74). The US citizenship shows norms or privileges of whiteness among which gender equality which South Asian female immigrants like Jasmine are badly in need of it as South Asian society victimizes females due to patriarchal structure

of the society. Why Jasmine prefers America to India becomes clear from Jasmine's view towards India where females face gender inequality such as the mindset of societies about females "Village girls are like cattle" (46). Regarding gender inequality in India, RajibBhaumik argues: "*Jasmine* is a story of the trauma of circumstantial subjugation experienced by a woman in home and expatriation. It too, is a story of a semi-feudal rural India where a mother has to strangle her baby girl just because she will be a dowryless girl in the time of her marriage and also of an astrologer who menacingly sets the destiny of the others" (160). Bhaumik points out a lack of gender equality in India, which causes Jasmine similar to immigrate to America, the nation known for liberalism for females.

But, whiteness also appears as a threat to Jasmine since she gets raped by Half face in America and later the appearance of her husband's murderer in New York gives her a threat, too. However, whiteness mainly appears to be her craze like Fanon's claim "whiteness is like unconscious desire of black immigrants" (8). Due to her intense desire of embracing American identity, she becomes successful in materializing her American dream through assimilation to the mainstream America. She does not think of returning to her home nation, instead she becomes determined to settle with recently divorced Taylor in California in the US. Sharma's statements "Jasmine makes effort to manipulate herself as American and goes through various transformations. She sustains herself in an alien country by her own efforts" (34), and "Jasmine's mobility from one self to another is operated by the necessities of her existence" (36) indicate Jasmine assimilation and negotiation with whiteness which is actually a symbol of American identity for her. Thus, though whiteness appears to be even threat for her, whiteness mainly proves to be her desire, so she immigrates to America through successful assimilation and negotiation.

In this way, my research article deals with the protagonist, Jasmine's odyssey from her village Hasnapur in India to California in the US in search of desiring whiteness. Despite being a South Asian widow, she ventures to desire whiteness in order to have American identity, to materialize her husband's dream which is to migrate to America, to counter the cultural tradition of widowhood in India and to have the privilege of gender equality moving to America which is known as the nation for equality rights.

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