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Social Darwinism in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

Abbiramy.N¹

II MA Eng Lit

Sri Ramakrishna College of Arts & Science (Autonomous)

E-mail ID: abbiramyneelasrikandan@gmail.com

Dr. Balamurugan C²

Assistant Professor of English

Sri Ramakrishna College of Arts & Science (Autonomous)

E-mail ID: balamurugan@srcas.ac.in

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Abstract

The research project analyses Bharati Mukherjee's novel, *Jasmine*, through the paradigm of Survival of the Fittest. The protagonist, Jasmine, exemplifies the concept of adaptability and resilience as she navigates the complexities of cultural identity, migration, and personal transformation. This study examines how her journey from rural India to urban America illustrates her capacity to evolve and survive in diverse environments. This exploration reveals that her survival is not merely physical, but also emotional and psychological. Her ability to redefine herself, challenge traditional norms, and forge new identities underscores the human capacity for resilience and self-reinvention.

Key words: cultural identity, migration, emotional, psychological survival and resilience.

Introduction:

Jasmine is a novel written by Bharati Mukherjee, notable Indo-American novelist and short-story writer. Published in 1989, it is the diasporic author's third novel. The novel grew from one of Mukherjee's short stories by the title *Jasmine* from her collection, *The Middlemen and Other Stories*. The novel tells the story of its protagonist Jasmine's (Jyoti) journey from Hasnapur to America. The novel deals with the identity crisis and immigrant experience in America. The narration of the novel shifts between her present life at Iowa and her past life at Hasnapur village in India.



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The plot of the novel begins when Jyoti is seven years old and receives a prophecy from a fakir that she would become a widow at a young age. She resists the fakir's prophecy. At fourteen, she marries Prakash. He wants her to learn English and immigrate to America with him, where they can own a business together. He is admitted to a university in Florida. As a celebratory gift, he brings her to a sari store in the bazaar. But, he is killed with a bomb detonated by Khalsa Lions. Determined to make a pilgrimage to that University so she can burn his suit there as a funeral pyre, she undertakes a trip to USA. The objectives of the research are analysis of the protagonist's survival in America even amidst hunger, illness, rape and constant threat of death. The research also analyses the ability of women to live independently

"Survival of the fittest" is a phrase coined by Herbert Spencer in his 1864 book "Principles of Biology," and later popularized by Charles Darwin in his Social Darwinism Theory. Survival of the fittest states that in a given environment, individuals with traits that are better suited to their surroundings are more likely to survive, reproduce, and pass those traits on to their offspring. Conversely, individuals with traits that are less suited to their environment are more likely to perish or fail to reproduce. This process leads to the evolution of species over time, as the traits that confer a survival advantage become more common in the population.

It is misunderstood as implying that the strongest or most aggressive individuals will always survive. However, in reality, the concept encompasses a broader range of traits, including intelligence, adaptability, and cooperation, which can also confer a survival advantage. In the context of Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine*, survival is a theme that influences the protagonist's journey. "Survival of the fittest" concept can be extended beyond mere physical survival to encompass psychological and emotional survival during adversity.

In the novel, Jasmine is surrounded by numerous difficulties. First, she becomes a widow around fifteen years of age. Widows are seen as a cursed life in typical Indian villages. Jasmine lives with her mother who also becomes a widow. Then, she decides to go to America to fulfil the wish of her late husband. But, she is raped by Half-Face on the very first day of her arrival in America. The protagonist kills him on the first day of her life in America, expressing her courage and strong will to survive even after such an unfortunate incident.

The heroine's life in various cities of America comes with new obstacles which she overcomes boldly. Jasmine's journey into different identities and roles begin. Lillian Gordon rescues her and later on Prakash's professor Devinder Vadhera provides shelter for her. Her determination to strive and assert her place in the American society persuades her to accept the job of an 'au pair' with the Hayes's and later on becomes the common-law wife of Bud



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Ripplemeyer. Her life is a constant shuttling between identities and her individuality undergoes transformation.

Jasmine undergoes a metamorphosis during her life in America. There occurs a transformation to her entire personality that enables her to come out of the shell being a village girl to a matured and liberated woman. She travels through multiple identities to become an American woman and strives to fit in the American society. From Jyoti to Jane, each of her names has a certain purpose assigned to it, which ought to be fulfilled by her. The struggle for survival can lead characters to question the meaning and purpose of life. She finds her life happy when she works as the care-taker of Duff at Taylor's house.

A drastic change is identified in Jyoti who came to commit Sati on her husband's suit, and the present 'Jase' in the Taylor household. On asserting her willingness to change and be part of America, Jasmine becomes Jase. However, her process of shuttling between identities is not an easy process. It has intense struggle with the self, with tradition, with the wonders and horrors of a new culture accompanied by growing aspirations, hopes and desires. Hayes's treatment of her as the caregiver rather than a domestic worker helps her tremendously in her process of Americanization. Her transformation into Jase is remarkable. Jasmine becomes part of the American way of life by shopping in stores. The character embodies the idea of adaptation and survival.

The protagonist navigates different cultural contexts, from rural India to urban America, and learns to adapt to new environments. Her earlier name Jyoti receded into the past for the new name Jase. She now feels more Americanized, by improving her proficiency in English. Now she becomes a member of the Hayes family. She accepts that her genuine transformation occurred at Taylor's house. The protagonist was happy with her life in Wylie's house as Duff's caretaker. Moreover, she also fell in love with Taylor. She prayed to God to continue being Duff's caretaker so that she could always be with Taylor and never go away from him. Jasmine just liked the way Taylor was. She liked his smile, speech and his jovial nature.

The character happens to meet the man who killed her husband at a public park in New York. She confesses everything to Taylor- Her marriage, bombing and the murder of her husband. She also informs him about her forged passport and tells him that she is leaving New York for Iowa despite his attempt to prevent her from leaving New York. She leaves her role as caregiver and moves to Iowa. Mobility has been a characteristic trait of human societies.



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She gets a job at a bank and wins the heart of the banker, Bud Rippelmeyer. There she assumes a new identity, and her name changes to Jane.

The heroine becomes a stepmother to Du, a sixteen-year-old Vietnam War victim adopted by Bud, and becomes pregnant with Bud's child through artificial insemination. Bud renames her Jane and her Americanization is complete. She accepts her new name without hesitation. The more she drifts away from her native culture, the more American she becomes. She becomes yet another new individual in Iowa where she enjoys her new liberated self-hood and her new role allows for ambition, curiosity, talent and sexuality.

Jane is taking another step towards becoming an American woman. She has created an identity that is not her own—an identity that was given to her. Jasmine thus becomes a part of American society. Her changing names reflect her rebirths and reincarnations. Her journey serves as a metaphor for the ever-moving, regenerating process of life itself. This journey becomes a tale of moral courage, a search for self-awareness and self-assertion. She feels that she has chosen the life of an immigrant in America.

The protagonist chooses America, 'the land of several identities.' She examines the shifting and multiple identities that have become a part of her life in America. There is a constant flux of identities for Jasmine. She had physical and psychological issues as a result of her displaced existence as a migrant who battles with hybridized identities in order to thrive in the new society. For every new set of consciousness, she creates a new identity. Her preceding identities are not completely erased, but re-originate in vital situations and thus intensifies the conflict between different selves.

Violence strikes Jasmine after Bud is shot that leaves him crippled. Taylor reappears in her life and persuades her to leave Bud. Jasmine is pregnant with Bud's child, yet she leaves him and accepts Taylor without any guilt, and travels to California in search of adventure. Her act of leaving Bud shows her desire to belong to American society with a man who accepts her for who she is. She travels through the ups and downs of life and undergoes several identity transformations. It is true that her mind has suffered various pains, denials and an array of sufferings.

Survival is an implicit theme of *Jasmine*. The novel explores physical, psychological and emotional struggles of Jasmine, a young widow who migrates from Hasnapur village to America to fulfil the dream of her late husband Prakash and to also escape from the feudal



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society. With a forged visa and passport she lands on American soil. Raped on her arrival, she becomes the murderer of her rapist on the first day in America. Social Darwinism is a theory that applies the concept of "Survival of the fittest" to human societies. Jyoti proves herself as an example of this notion.

Jyoti continues to survive though she was raped by a man. Such an unfortunate incident in a girl's life pushes her into a severe trauma and some ladies also end up committing suicide. She displays courage, will power and resilience which serves as an inspiration to female readers. Survival stories involve conflict, creating tension and driving the plot forward. It also celebrates the human capacity for resilience, hope and the will to live even in the face of overwhelming odds. Instances from the novel that illustrate Jasmine as an embodiment of "Survival of the fittest":

- Jasmine's decision to leave her village, Hasnapur, after her husband's death, showcases her ability to adapt to changing circumstances and seek better opportunities.
- Her transformation from a traditional Indian wife to a modern American woman demonstrates her capacity to evolve and fit into new environments.
- The heroine's relationship with Bud, a disabled Vietnam War veteran, highlights her ability to find resources and support in unexpected places.
- Her experiences with racism and xenophobia in America illustrate her resilience and ability to navigate hostile environments.
- The character's decision to start new in Iowa, taking on a new identity as Jane Ripplemeyer, showcases her resourcefulness and determination to survive.
- The protagonist's ability to embrace uncertainty and risks to ensure her survival throughout the novel

Identity is concerned with the self-esteem of an individual, a gender, a community, a class, a race or sex or a nation. Identity is having the power to redefine the terms of cultural practices and customs to fit one's own experience. One's inability to find proper identity results in rootlessness which ultimately leads to alienation. Alienation is one of the greatest problems confronting modern people. Its corrosive impact is seen in the form of the



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conspicuous absence of a meaning in life. The problem of alienation is intimately related to the quest for one's identity.

Indian woman's identity is usually connected to and defined by the societal and cultural norms of a practicable familial structure. This identity is defined within the parameters of their social relationship to men. Generally, Indian women are believed to have no identity of their own. However, Jasmine breaks such stereotypes and boldly decides to go to America alone to fulfil the last wish of her husband Prakash. Her ability to overcome all the obstacles in her path is a demonstration of her strength and resilience in a competitive environment. Hence, she emerges as a survivor and her life as an immigrant in America is a success.

Jasmine challenges society's patriarchal norms, which deny women the right to speak for themselves. She is represented as a post-modern woman who rebels against social standards. She goes through a number of changes to adapt to the new host culture. She has a plethora of opportunities to develop and widen her horizons by immersing herself in a new culture. Learning a new culture's language is one way to integrate. To adapt to the American life, she assumes new identities in different phases of her life: from Jasmine to Jane and Jase.

Hope emerges as a vital psychological component in survival situations. Maintaining a sense of hope can motivate individuals to persevere through dire circumstances. Hope is a cognitive process that involves setting realistic goals, developing strategies to achieve those goals, and maintaining the belief that one can succeed. Research has shown that individuals with a hopeful outlook are more likely to engage in adaptive coping strategies, which can enhance their overall resilience and increase their chances of survival.

In survival scenarios, hope can manifest in various ways, such as envisioning a positive outcome, finding meaning in suffering, or drawing strength from memories of loved ones. This perspective can be a powerful motivator, encouraging individuals to take necessary actions. The interplay between hope and resilience creates a psychological framework that supports individuals in survival.

Hope is an innate quality that drives human survival and growth. From a child's first steps to planting seeds for the future, hope sustains us through challenges. Yet, in today's competitive world, the rising prevalence of unemployment and its associated pressures often lead young individuals to despair. Hope empowers individuals to adapt and overcome



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obstacles, reminding readers of its significance in achieving resilience and fulfillment. As the protagonist's journey suggests, holding on to hope can lead to unexpected opportunities and personal growth, even in the face of adversity.

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