

Claiming Identity: The Heroic “I” in Jasmine

Everyday a legion of forces amasses against the individual. He must compete with billions of others for survival, while fighting obstructions of society, family, time, and those inner demons which would gladly grab him from it all and hold him forever in a well of darkness. It is a wonder, with all these antagonists, that anyone is able to survive, let alone thrive, in the world; but for tiny, lonely man to marshal the inner strength to rise up against all the opposing pressures of life, and then to break through the tight-hugging membrane of opposition and declare and affirm proudly, “I am I” – and to live that affirmation – such a bold and clear realization of individuality may be the essence of a victorious life. With her heroine Jasmine, Bharati Mukherjee portrays this triumph of the individual in the face of life’s overwhelming obstacles. This paper examines Jasmine’s triumph over fate, oppressive social conventions, and the tangling bonds of personal relationships.

In Jasmine’s early life in Hasnapur, we immediately see signs that she will assert herself over dominating forces when she boldly takes on fate itself. “Fate is fate,” says the astrologer (4). No one can argue with the dictates of fate, suggests the astrologer: what will be will be. But Jasmine, in her stubborn youth, intuitively knows her rights—she knows she can choose how she reacts to her fate. The bleeding star symbolizes her difficult and indelible fate, and her reaction to the star—not allowing herself to be defined by the mark, but defining the mark on her own terms—is representative of her strong-willed defiance of even the most rigid opposition to will, fate. In addition to the bleeding star, which lets us know who Jasmine is, there is another symbol in the astrologer episode that lets us know what Jasmine is not: “Suddenly my fingers scraped

the soft waterlogged carcass of a small dog. The body was rotten, the eyes had been eaten. The body broke in two, as though the water had been its glue. A stench leaked out of the broken body, and then both pieces quickly sank” (5). This image reeks of passivity. That water is the glue for the corpse shows the dog is totally dependent on its external environment for survival. It sinks as soon as it is touched; it has no inner integrity to hold it together. Passivity, rancidity, brittleness—these are the marks of death, not life; Jasmine is instinctively repulsed by that which totally yields to its fate, and her repulsion propels her toward a more active, assertive, robust vitality instead.

The girl who will become Jasmine, the rugged and uncompromising individual, suffers oppressive social beginnings. She grows up in the Indian Punjab, a flagrantly poor region, where “docile women turned savage for the last muddy bucketful” of water (16), where women are forced to defecate in nature, ogled by perverts from the village (55), and where the general status of females is so low that Jasmine could see her mother’s attempt to kill her in the womb as a kind of mercy (40). But while the other Hasnapuri women seem to accept this sordid, disparaging status, Jasmine does not. She fights to further her education rather than assuring herself the security of a rich marriage with a “once-in-a-lifetime” groom. And when she is ready to marry, with the help of her brothers Jasmine arranges for marriage with Prakash, a man of her own selection.

Perhaps the scene that most encapsulates Jasmine’s unorthodox individuality in Hasnapur is the dog-monster event. When this pink-skinned, red-eyed monster appears before the vulnerable squatting women, they panic and scream. When Jasmine cries for the onlooking men to help, even they keep back. Forced to face the beast alone, Jasmine does not cower: “I took aim and waited for it to leap on me. The staff crushed the dog’s

snout while it was still in mid-leap...My staff was still stuck deep into the snout, its bloody tip poking through an eye socket” (57). No hunter could kill with more precision and skill. This horrendously violent act, executed with absolute control, proves Jasmine uniquely strong, brave, and capable of wielding power when necessary. The fortitude exercised here no doubt prepares her for her vengeance on Half-Face. “All it means is that God doesn’t think you’re ready for salvation,” Dida says (57), “Individual effort counts for nothing.” But while Dida retreats to her ashram and hides behind the traditions that keep women bitterly oppressed, Jasmine’s impaling of the monster is an impaling of the oppressive traditions of old India, empowering her to begin to stake out her own identity.

Throughout the novel, Jasmine moves through a series of differing challenges, each enabling her to realize a more independent identity as she goes; but the most difficult and intriguing conflict is the moral dilemma at the climactic end of the novel. Bud or Taylor? Why does Jasmine make the choice that she does, and is her choice justifiable? It comes down to obligation versus desire. Bud, to Jasmine, has become a ponderous liability. Jasmine’s pregnancy by Bud before his crippling locks her into a moral obligation to stay with him, despite the fact that their relationship of mutual love has fizzled down to patient-caregiver. From her defiance of the astrologer to the murder of Half-Face to her leaving Professorji’s, Jasmine has shown that she will not be made victim of her circumstances; but this is the first case where avoiding her own victimization would victimize an innocent man.

Jasmine's final act is a selfish indulgence. "*Just pull down an imaginary shade,* he whispers, *that's all you need to do*" (239). It is "reckless" and "greedy" (241), and she knows it. But could it be right?

Neither of the alternatives provide neat and tidy endings. If Jasmine had chosen to stay with Bud, she would have lost her hard-fought freedom of self; she would have been sentenced to a menial, unfulfilling life of care-giving. Her child with Bud would have been brought up in an unhappy home, and who knows what kind of wife and mother for Duff Taylor would have found in California? With Jasmine, Taylor, and Duff, a happy family seems likely to result. And Bud and Karin might get back together...

But Jasmine does not care about moral dilemmas. "It isn't guilt that I feel..." (240). "Du and I have seen death up close. We've stowed away on boats like Half-Face's, we've hurtled through time tunnels. We've seen the worst and survived. Like creatures in fairy tales, we've shrunk and we've swollen and we've swallowed the cosmos whole" (240). With what she has been through, Jasmine feels that she has somehow transcended the moral ether; that she is beholden to no one, no society, no fate, nothing. "Watch me reposition the stars," she says (240). As Jasmine flees to a new life with Taylor and Duff in California, a far cry from the degrading mudpuddle of Hasnapur, we witness the apotheosis of Individuality.