

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN

INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

**BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S *JASMINE*: A STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY FORMATION**

**RITESH L. REVADIWALA**

Lecturer in English, K. D. Polytechnic, Patan  
North Gujarat

Email: [r.ritesh2@gmail.com](mailto:r.ritesh2@gmail.com)

doi: [doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.7219.436](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.7219.436)



RITESH L. REVADIWALA

**ABSTRACT**

Identity is a multi-layered dynamic process rather than an inborn trait. Identities are partly inherited and partly formed. Identity is the interaction between self and society. It can be interpreted with respect to culture, religious freedom, tradition, economic opportunities and better life styles. Identity is formed beyond control; some may have multiple identities or split identity. Bharati Mukherjee's personal experiences of marginalization and racial discrimination, finds its reflection in her fictions. Her struggle to form her identity first in Canada as an expatriate and then in the United States as an immigrant author can be observed in the principal characters of her fictions. *Jasmine* in her novel *Jasmine* is the perfect example of an individual's struggle for identity formation in different hostile conditions. *Jasmine* attempts to reinvent and recreate herself by erasing her formal identities but she does not realise that she cannot run away from her past because it is an integral part of her identity. She finally realise that to form her identity, she does not need to erase her past identities but to accept them as a part of her fragmented identity.

**Key Words:** Identity, Culture, Assimilation, Identity Formation, Expatriate, Acculturation

**Introduction**

Bharati Mukherjee is a prominent contemporary Indian author who is born in India and settled in the United States. Bharati Mukherjee's experiences in India, Canada and America have left an indelible mark in her sensibility as a person and also as an artist. Mukherjee writes from the female perspective and female characters have central position in her novels. She portrays the transformation of her women characters when they pass through the process of immigration. Her women characters' deal with the problems of alienation, displacement, Identity crisis and nostalgia for homeland. She writes about the lives of Third World women who are liberated from the

shackles of conservative patriarchal society. Mukherjee's own experiences of cultural shock and racial discrimination in Canada, her transformation from exile to immigrant in America's multiculturalism, her sabbatical trip to India and her assimilation in America find reflection in the psyche of principal characters in her works written during this respective period.

**Discussion**

Identity formation can be interpreted from racial perspective, sexual perspective, minority perspective and cultural perspective. Identity formation describes the conscious process of reinspectng one's feelings, thoughts, behaviours and ways of relating to others who may or may not

share similar cultural values and habits. Identity formation is a process which reflects upon our purpose in life, our place in the community, and also our attitude towards life and death. It also depicts one's attitude to deal with ambiguity and uncertainty in life. It is a process that establishes a single identity which links the core of a person and the core of his communal culture together. It is believed that identity of a person grows and is developed or disturbed in a complex connection of self and society.

The concept of identity has been defined by various philosophers, thinkers and researchers from their own perspectives. The classical conceptions of identity are permanence among change or unity in diversity. According to John Locke the notion of identity originates in a comparison of a person or thing, existing at a determinate place and time, with the same existing at another place and time. David Hume proposes that the most significant aspect of identity is time; the idea of identity originates when invariableness is accredited to a person or an object on being observed by a variation in place and time. Most of the Philosophers agreed with Hume's description that identity is the sameness of someone or something. In Eriksonian terms personal identity is "the self-sameness and continuity of one's sameness and continuity".<sup>1</sup> Thus, in philosophy, identity is something that makes an object recognizable and definable, in terms of owning a set of features or qualities that differentiate it from objects of a different type. Or, in common man's terms, identity is whatever makes someone or something the same or different.

In Psychological terms, when an individual find himself in a privileged position to satisfy his needs and is able to play consistent roles in his community, his identity is thought to have been established. Identity, its awareness and quest, however, are no longer limited to the individual level, and identity crisis can affect a group, an institution, a class, a profession or even a nation. The quest for identity refers to the spiritual journey of the modern man who has lost his social and spiritual moorings and who is anxious to seek his roots. Stressing the need for roots, Iyengar said; "Only a tree that has deep roots into the soil could

put forth sufficient foliage and yield abundant fruit."<sup>2</sup>

When this sense of rootedness, this sense of belonging, gets disrupted for one reason or the other one suffers from identity crisis. This is the case with people who are in a special kind of perplexity. People with a colonial consciousness, for example, are particularly inclined to this problem. The present-day diasporic life forms multiple identities, and a person forms his personal identity out of these interrelated identities. The most difficult questions that an immigrant asks himself but cannot answer easily are: Where do I really belong? Have I snapped my roots? Does the new place own me? Do I really own the new place? Am I trapped in the new situation and are the roads that lead back frozen, blocked and lost to me now?

The identity of a person is often constructed in terms of ethnicity and culture. But the identity of a person or diaspora is determined in terms of periphery – centre relationship or tradition-modernity paradigm. For a diasporic person, identity is neither static nor fixed; it keeps on changing with time. Such a person is aware of his/her life of the past and the present so that he/she can conceptualize his/her identities in the chronological frame of time. As Satendra Nandan writes; "Diasporic identities constantly produce and reproduce themselves through transformation and differences."<sup>3</sup>

**Bharati Mukherjee:** Bharati Mukherjee is a prominent contemporary Indian author who occupies an outstanding position among Indian novelists writing in English and belongs to the group of writers who have left their native land and made their homes in a foreign country. She has been widely known as a 'voice' of expatriate-immigrant sensibility. Her novels explore the problems of assimilation into alien culture and identity crisis of women in diaspora in the United States, Canada, and India. The novels and short stories of Bharati Mukherjee are self-actualizing. Search for the meaning of self and quest for identity and roots are main characteristics of her women characters who are caught in the dilemma of tradition and modernity

**Jasmine:** *Jasmine* (1989) is one of the most popular novels of Bharati Mukherjee. It is a novel of expatriation and assimilation both of physical and psychological levels. In this novel, Bharati Mukherjee fictionalizes the process of Americanization by portraying a young Indian woman's experiences of suffering and success in her effort to forge a new identity for herself. Jasmine is characterized by an inclination in which sense of being exiled is overwhelmed by a quest to settle down, and discover home for herself.

*Jasmine* is the story of a girl from rural India who migrates from India in "search of a new identity and life". In her long journey through different cities and continents, Jasmine undergoes multiple transformations to proclaim her place in the American society. At each stage of her life she forms a new identity for herself and is known by a different name. Fortunately, she gets confirmations for her changing identity in each stages of her life. Instead of rejecting the changes in her names and identities, she tries to develop a good relationship with those identities. Jasmine fights hard to establish her identity and finally she realizes that self-independence is not to be an American or Indian but to be at peace with herself.

'Jasmine' is Mukherjee's model of an 'assimilated immigrant'. Mukherjee herself has experienced the excitement of an 'immigrant' existence. An 'immigrant' according to Mukherjee changes his or her identity as many times as required to get assimilated in mainstream culture. So, an immigrant's movement is from the peripheries of the dominant culture to the centre. The movement from being an 'expatriate' to becoming an 'immigrant' is very complicated and tough. 'Immigrant' experience demands pain and suffering. The immigrant has to detach himself from his old identity and emotional feelings for his culture and home. The ultimate purpose of an 'immigrant' is 'to belong' in an immigrant locale.

The life of Jyoti-Jasmine-Jazzy-Jase-Jane is a fictional rendering of an 'assimilated immigrant.' Jyoti is born in such a gender-biased society in a small town of Hasnapur in India, where the birth of a girl child is viewed as the consequence of a woman's

past sins. Jyoti wonders, "if I had been a boy, my birth in a bountiful year, would have marked me as lucky, a child with a special destiny to fulfil."<sup>4</sup> Jyoti's family belongs to a patriarchal society and her life is controlled and guided by her brothers and father. The transformation of Jyoti's identity begins after her marriage with Prakash Vih, a progressive-minded and bright young man, who wants to transform her from a humble village girl to a modern city woman.

"He 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. He said; 'You are small and sweet and heady, my Jasmine. You'll quicken the whole world with your perfume'. Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttle between identities."<sup>5</sup>

Mukherjee depicts that the identity formation of an individual is a very complex process. It is dependent not solely upon the action of an individual, but also upon the social and cultural environment. The new name Jasmine represents a new idea of herself. She is no longer the small humble village girl, but is forced into a new role of a modern city woman. Her renaming is an indication of her initial migration away from Indian values. Jyoti and Jasmine are two distinct selves, yet Jasmine feels herself inhabiting both identities. Prakash wants them to be able to achieve something better than what their lives can offer in India. But he is killed by a religious fanatic just before they set out for America. This tragic incident shattered Jasmine's dream and made her grief-stricken and frustrated. Despite the tragic death of her husband, Jasmine wants to accomplish her husband's dreams. She casts aside the gloom of widowhood and leaves India for the United States on a forged passport. This step from Jyoti to Jasmine can be observed as her first step away from the idea of a traditional Indian wife and into a more international Western woman. She sets off for America as an illegal immigrant to Florida. Her illegal transmigration begins with the thoughts that they are the deportees, strange pilgrims who are visiting outlandish shrines in old army trucks where they are roughly handled and brought to the waiting rooms where custom guards ask for their bribe. They are

dressed in their outdated national costumes. "We ask only one thing, to be allowed to land: to pass through: to continue."

Jasmine leaves India to survive against the forces of destiny but unfortunately her American journey begins on a sad note. The aim of her American journey is to take her husband's suitcase to the campus of the engineering school in Florida, set a ritual fire to it and commit sati. After a hazardous journey in a shipper called Gulf Shuttle, she reaches the Florida Coast as an illegal immigrant. The first day in America was not pleasing for Jasmine. It ends in violence for Jasmine because she gets raped by Half-Face, the captain of the ship. Donning the image of the goddess Kali, Jasmine kills Half-face, the evil incarnate. After murdering Half-Face, Jasmine closes the door and sets a fire and burns her husband's suitcase with her stained clothes with blood of Half-Face. This act symbolizes Jasmine's decision to burn her deforming past and survive in the alien land. Jasmine becomes a new woman without the hangover of two thousand years of history. Simultaneously she gets ready to imbibe the two-hundred-year history of the New World. As Jaspal Kaur Singh notes in this connection,

When Jasmine burns her clothes in the trash bin, Mukherjee seems to suggest that Jasmine can symbolically trash the old traditions and, hence, her traditional identity"<sup>6</sup>

This incident brought out Jasmine's inward quest – to unfold her true self and identity. It is the birth of new Jasmine and death of her old self. Jasmine is reborn not by killing herself but by killing Half-Face. After committing murder, she felt that there was nothing left of her former self in her body, it was just the shell. Jasmine's murdering of Half-Face is a type of self-assertion. Her decision to kill herself first, is a decision of a submissive traditional Indian woman who lives only for her husband but her killing the Half-Face is provoked by her will to live to continue her life. "In killing Half-Face," writes Samir Dayal, "she experiences an epistemic violence that is also a life-affirming transformation."<sup>7</sup> Once she makes a bonfire with the souvenirs of her past, her fervent desire is to live. Jasmine is set on the

path of liberation and she looks ahead to the future. She does not have any nostalgia for the past. She is physically and mentally ready for her next transformation and re-incarnation.

Lillian Gordon is the next facilitator in Jasmine's transformation. She exhorts "Let the past make you worry, by all means. But do not let it deform you". Like Prakash, who transforms her into a city girl, Lillian Gordon transforms her into Jazzy, an American girl. She literally initiates Jasmine's assimilation into American way of life and culture. She teaches her the tactics to survive in the concrete jungles of America. Mrs. Gordon educates her, liberates her from her past memories and strengthens her will to survive. Jasmine begins to accept and adopt the ways of American life and culture.

Walk American, she exhorted me, and she showed me how. I worked hard on the walk and deportment. Within a week she said I lost my shy side... I checked myself in the mirror, shocked with the transformation. Jazzy in a T- shirt, tight cords and running shoes.<sup>8</sup>

Jasmine's journey is very eventful and it is clear how she openly changes her identity and appearance according to the situation. Mukherjee also depicts how the immigrants are forced to change themselves very drastically to be able to begin their new lives. Jasmine has no longer remained Jasmine from India, but "Jazzy in a t-shirt... and running shoes." She does not only have a new appearance, but has an entirely different identity. Her new name, Jazzy, is given to her by Lillian and Jasmine only has to follow along. She accepts an identity that someone else thrusts upon her and does not oppose it, as it is the only things that she can do to survive in an alien land. Gathering new strength from Lillian's advice, Jasmine goes to meet Prof. Vadhera with a hope that his instrumentality in gaining Prakash's admission into the Engineering College would make him pay sympathetic attention to her plan for sacrificing herself. When she comes to know that Prof. Vadhera is earning his livelihood not as an academician but as a 'trader in human hair', She feels disappointment and frustration. She

leaves their house and starts living on her own. This decision shows that self-actualization is developing in Jasmine and it may be on account of her acculturation to the American way of thinking and dressing.

Taylor is the next transformer in the life of Jasmine. She is employed as a caretaker for Duff, the adopted daughter of Taylor and Wylie Hayes, an American family. Taylor calls her 'Jase'. In Taylor's apartment, Jasmine internalizes the cultural codes of the New World and blossoms into 'Jase' an American. Jasmine begins falling in love with Taylor and the idea of herself as Jase.

This is the best period of Jasmin's stay in the States. She Starts loving herself as Jase, a courageous American woman who is capable of anything. She begins seeing herself as worth something and begins enjoying her new life. Jasmine appears to be very happy with her new identity: "For every Jasmine the reliable caregiver there is a Jase, the prowling adventurer. I thrilled to the tug of opposing forces." She sees her life as an adventure where anything is possible. She enjoys the woman that she has made by Taylor: "I liked everything he said or did. I liked the name he gave me: Jase. Jase was a woman who bought herself spangled heels and silk chartreuse pants."<sup>9</sup>

Jasmine changes herself frequently to fit the image of an American woman. She starts getting rooted and assimilated. It appears as if there was no sign of the old Jyoti or the old Jasmine left in her, and she has been able to "rebirth" herself. The dragging between these two opposite forces i.e. the Indian and the American does not upset her but it makes her excited. Jasmine is pleased to assimilate herself into the new culture. The experiences in the foreign country taught her to live with ease and confidence, in spite of her unstable identity. When Wylie, Taylor's wife, leaves him for another man, Jasmine feels, that she has found her place. In a very short time, Jasmine drastically replaces her old identity with a new one. It is very easy for her to step into this ready-made identity. At this point Jasmine's identity formation appears very successful but if examined carefully, one can see that she is replacing her former identity and ignoring her past

life in order to be happy with her life. Jasmine's conscious efforts in "murdering" her former identity is an attempt to forget her past and her former self. This is a point in which one can observe Jasmine's bicultural identity emerging.

The next transformation of Jase to Jane is brought about by Sukhwinder Singh indirectly. If Sukhwinder Singh had not seen Jasmine in Central Park she would not have left Manhattan but after this encounter, she is filled with traumatic experiences. The past creeps in her memory, she loses her sense of self-expression and being unable to live with embarrassment of conflicting identities, she escapes to Iowa. Her main reason for running away is her fear for the safety of Taylor and Duff. "She runs away for life, not escaping from life."<sup>10</sup>

Bud Ripplemeyer is the next agent in the assimilative process of Jasmine. Bud offers her a home and transforms her into Jane Ripplemeyer. She becomes pregnant to Bud and seems to be living the American life. She thinks that Bud is in love with the American part of her, and does not need to know who she used to be. It appears that Jasmine wants to replace her traditional and cultural background with American ways and values. Jasmine wants to be normal American wife and does not want to bring her colorful past in its way. She becomes Jane Ripplemeyer in Iowa. "Bud calls me Jane. ... But Plain Jane is all I want to be. Plain Jane is a role, like any other."<sup>11</sup>

Jasmine willingly accepts her new identity as Jane because she feels that the name Jane makes her fit into the American society. She is not genuinely transformed into what she pretends to be, and she needs to actively avoid her past as her appearance is already foreign enough in the small town. In Iowa, she is able to settle down and even though Bud becomes crippled and almost dies, she stays by his side and takes care of him. An immigrant's life is in fact a series of reincarnations. He lives through several lives in a single life-time. This truth describes the condition of Bharati Mukherjee and Jasmine. As Mukherjee confides:

I have been murdered and reborn at least three times, the very correct young woman I was trained to be, and was very happy



being, is very different from the politicized, shrill, civil right activist I was in Canada, and from the urgent writer that I have become in the last few years in the United States.<sup>12</sup>

This statement has a marked similarity with Jasmine's outcry: "There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself. We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves – in the images of dreams."<sup>13</sup>

It appears that through the character of Jasmine, Mukherjee wants to convey the message that if one wants to assimilate oneself to culture of the new land, one should forget one's past. This notion finds ample support from Jasmine's statement: "Once we start letting go – let go just one thing, like ...not wearing a tika on the forehead – the rest goes on its own down a sinkhole."<sup>14</sup>

Throughout her life, Jasmine does not consciously realize that she cannot run away from her former identities, all her former self still lives within her. She does not understand that she cannot murder her past identities, and rather they are what her hybrid identity consists of. Though Jasmine has been able to reinvent and recreate her new identity and change herself according to the situation, she has not been able to join her identities together to form a more coherent identity. She shuttles between her past Indian identity and present American identity. Her dilemma between her identities is created from her belief that she always needs to be one person at a time. She has not yet realized that hybrid identity is a fluid one and she does not need to choose between one or the other. Jasmine's final decision to leave Bud and go with Taylor shows her desire to reach the limitless possibilities of the human spirit. As Kumar notes that "in deserting Bud and choosing Taylor, Jasmine does not exchange between men, but she changes her whole world."<sup>15</sup>

Throughout her life in America, Jasmine has been fascinated with the American ways of life and in response to it very quick in abandoning her former selves. Since her arrival in the USA, she has been serving her duty toward others, but now she thinks of her love and herself. Her two remarks, "The moment I have dreamed a thousand times

finally arrives and I am not choosing between two men. I am caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness, a care-givers life is a good life a worthy life."<sup>16</sup> Finally, she accepts her identity as a caretaker which clearly reflects her courageous nature. She has experienced worst part of her life in America and now she wants to make her place in Taylor's life. She does not feel guilty for her decision as she desires – "I want to do the right thing. I don't want to be a terrible person".

Jasmine is an adventurer and it is clear that her hybrid identity needs to constantly change and it can never stay still for too long. She is a woman who is ready to see ahead, to ingratiate the best that future holds in store for her. She has no moral scruples and never feels guilty of her decision:

It isn't guilt that I feel. It is relief. I realize, I have already stopped thinking of myself as Jane. Adventure, risk, transformation: the frontier is pushing indoors through uncaulked windows. Watch me reposition the stars, I whisper to the astrologer who floats cross-legged above my kitchen stove.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, it can be said that at last Jasmine is out of bonds and has gained her true self. She understands that she has changed her identity into something different, away from Jane Ripplemeyer. As McLeod states about Jasmin's hybrid identity: "her hybrid identity "remains perpetually in motion" and certainly there are feelings of "displacement, fragmentation and discontinuity" in the character of Jasmine."<sup>18</sup>

Through her transformation, acculturation and assimilation, Jasmine has empowered herself. Thus, Jasmine's transformation from Jyoti-Jasmine-Jazzy-Jase-Jane liberates her from the deforming past, empowers her and gives her a voice. She not only voices her own individual longings and aspirations but also becomes the master voice of hordes of immigrants who reach the shores of America virtually every day.

In her attempt to resolve the crisis of identity through nomenclature – from Jyoti to Jasmine, to Jase and to Jane – coupled with changes

in geographical contours – from Hasnanur to Jullundhar, to Florida, Manhattan, Iowa – Jasmine tries all external alternatives but at the end of the novel, when she moves away with Taylor, Jasmine is very much the same one as she was at the earlier stages of her life. Had she been purely guided by the American culture and values; she should have abandoned Bud at the time of his disability but she abandons him after Du's departure and Taylor's proposal which reflects that she still believes in Indian cultural values. As Indira Bhatt states:

Even Jyoti to Jasmine, to Jase and Jane may appear to be real transformation of the personality of the protagonist; from Hasnapur to Jullundhar to Florida, Manhattan, Iowa may appear to be moving from old world values to the brave new world. But the person we see at the end of the novel moving away with Taylor, is very much the same person we encounter at the earlier stages in the novel.<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusion

Throughout her life, jasmine moves from one place to another and from one person to another in search of her identity, but she has not realized that she cannot change herself entirely or let others decide on her identity for her. She needs to change and evolve her identity herself in order to change and adapt to a changing environment. She also realizes at the end of the novel that her identity will remain forever in motion and that it is not necessary for her to kill her former selves. All her former selves will always remain part of her identity. She finally, accepts her hybrid identity and realizes that her identity that her fragmented identity is not her weakness, it is her strength. She finally realizes that her cultural, hybrid identity is forever evolving and unstable. Jasmine understands that the true identity of a person does not lie in being an Indian or an American but it lies in the inner spirit of the person to be at peace with her.

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