

# Switching Identities: A Quest for Self-Exploration in Mukherjee's Jasmine

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## Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee asserts that immigration has a variety of effects, and she achieves this by emphasizing the generally acknowledged importance of the destination nation. The country and the immigrant establish a bond, allowing the latter to advance as a result of the former rather than being just disrupted or altered by it. The country is transformed as a result of interaction with the outside world, and then it is revived. As a recent arrival from a foreign culture, the notable immigrant clashes with American society and highlights inconsistencies in both its past and present. She views immigration as a two-way process in which locals and newcomers combine and develop via the exchange of cultures.

Bharati Mukherjee's 1990 book *Jasmine* is a book about embracing different cultures. The Indian widow makes a successful endeavour to change her fate and find happiness in the story. The issue of the experience of arriving in a foreign country was addressed delicately by Bharati Mukherjee as well. In the book, an Indian immigrant named Jasmine experiences the new world and gradually changes as she immerses herself in new culture. In contrast to the fiction, Bharati Mukherjee more or less presented culture and modernism. Jyoti, later incarnated as Jasmine, is a traditionalist who loves to dominate women and is particularly nasty to those that resemble her. On the other side, Americans view America as a place of freedom, opportunity, and fulfilment. Each effort is rewarded in this place and where the foundation of the relationship between the male and the woman is one of equality.

**Keywords:** Rebirth, Reincarnation, Immigrant, Identity, Diaspora, Traditionalism, Americanism,

Bharati Mukherjee, an author who writes on diasporic and immigrant experiences, rejects the expatriate label and refers to herself as an Indian-American. She appreciated the diversity of immigration America offered after her dreadful experience of expatriation in Canada. Because immigration results in both physical and psychological changes, according to Bharati, one's biological identity cannot represent their genuine identity in the diaspora age. Her articles explore the tensions between irrationality and reason, reliance and independence, and social and psychedelic identity. She places more trust in the present than the past since it is her present that will ultimately define her future. She seeks to demonstrate via her writings that despite having varying racial origins, we are all unique people. She focuses on the nature of people. She focuses on how people are naturally. She realised that her metamorphosis was a two-way process, affecting both the individual and the national identity. Her women are a strong starting point for study on how neo-colonial Indian women changed from being feminine to female since they are not seen as passive spectators to history's drama or as oppressive victims, but rather as having agency and crafting their own history. Unlike other migration authors who go nuts over the loss and degradation of the home culture, Bharati ardently defends the advantages of shifting to a new region. She urges the immigrants to

free themselves from the bonds of cultural conflict and alienation, and accept and be proud of their newfound American identity. For her, it really simply boils down to attitude and propensity. Everyone may flourish and realise their aspirations in America, a nation of chances. America, in Bharati's opinion, symbolises the process of self-transformation. While Dimple in *Wife* is timid and modest, Jasmine is fearless and vivacious.

Bharti Mukherjee has effectively combined her diverse experiences, history, and life into a new genre of writing known as new immigrant fiction, with the major focus of her works being a portrayal of the plight of Asian immigrants in North America. As a result, it is evident that Mukherjee's themes mostly centre on the phenomena of migration, the status of recent immigrants, their sense of alienation as expatriates, and the Indian woman sojourning abroad and her quest for identity. She made a clear statement in an interview with *The Massachusetts Review* as she said:

“The immigrants in my stories go through extreme transformation in America and at the same time they alter the country’s appearance and psychological make up.”

The story centres on Jyoti's "widowhood" and "exile." Here, Bharati Mukherjee gave her Indian persona wide reign to engage in cultural exchange with Americans. In this exchange, she gives as well as takes. And by doing so, you'll have a fresh viewpoint on the environment in which you live. She forced the main heroine Jasmine to flee the Indian slum and conform to the prevalent American cultural norms.

The Jasmine theme brings together an Indian journey with the modern world. Despite difficulties in their new lives and jobs sometimes leaving them hurt or unhappy, immigrants "do not give up" (183). Jasmine's progressive shift as she imparts a new culture is discussed in the narrative, along with the maturation of other immigrants. Bharati Mukherjee emphasises vividly the superstitions, rituals and traditions ingrained in the Indian ethos at the start of the book.

Bharati Mukherjee's third book, *Jasmine*, was released in 1990. Jasmine, the titular character, is the personification of Americanism. She goes through the trials of being an expat in the USA, but she accepts such trials as a part of the multicultural experience. Jasmine is bold and disobedient. She is a warrior by nature. She rebels against India's traditional feudal system. She was born in the Punjabi village of Hasanpur. Her family was quite traditional and steeped in conventions. Jyoti Vijn was her given name at birth. When her husband Prakash is murdered by a terrorist bomb attack, she loses her spouse at a relatively young age, leaving her a widow. She disobeys the traditional widowhood practices. She rejects being constrained by oppressive traditions and practices. The following words show her free rebellious thoughts: “I felt dead in their company, my long hair and school girl clothes. I wanted to scream “feudalism! I am a widow in the war of feudalism.” (97)

Jyoti, a seven-year-old girl, is featured in the opening pages of the book. She is the seventh of her parents' nine children. She was born in 1965, which was 18 years after the partition between India and Pakistan that scarred the lives and memories of many.

The main character, Jasmine, starts her career in a hamlet in the Indian state of Punjab. An astrologer foretells Jasmine's exile and widowhood when she is seven years old. Jyoti is like an unquenchable fire. She defies the rules and traditions of the old, traditional Punjabi way of life with audacity. She rejects the astrologer's forecasts as being accurate. She wants to become fluent in and knowledgeable about English. She makes the decision to wed an English-speaking man. She lives in a huge city where women are respected and has a desire of becoming a doctor.

At the age of fourteen, Jasmine, who was given the name Jyoti by her parents, marries an intelligent engineering student who educates her and changes her name to Jasmine. He wants to go to the United

States, but a Sikh terrorist bomb destroys him before he can do so. Jyoti had always imagined living in the luxury and freedom of America. She didn't understand that Prakash's ambition was meant for her to realise until after he passed away. She decides she must visit America. Jasmine then departs for the United States in order to fulfil her husband's ambition of immigrating there in his place.

Dida, Jyoti's grandma, chastised her for being a widow. She thought that Jyoti's husband Prakash passed away because Jyoti refused to follow Punjabi customs and rituals and did not consult a horoscope. She said that her spouse was murdered by God's anger. If true, according to Jyoti, she repudiated such a god. Her brazen atheism is evident in these statements.

Prakash, Jyoti's spouse, was a very caring and liberal person. He transformed Jyoti into Jasmine and here on starts her journey of incarnations or rebirths. However, Jyoti inside her dies permanently when Prakash passes away. She makes the decision to start over and live a new life, pursuing both her own and her husband's aspirations. She starts her trek to the West with forged documents. She meets the skipper of a trawler in Amsterdam with the help of a train porter. When she is at a distant motel with Half-face, he rapes her. She kills Half-face as he attempts to rape her once more. As a result, she plays Kali, the monster's murderer. Jasmine stuffs a bag with her dishonoured clothing and burns it. The suitcase represents her load and remorse.

When she arrives in America, she encounters social worker and Quaker Lillian Gordon. She provides her with food and a home. She shows love and compassion to struggling immigrants. She offers Jasmine her daughter's clothing. Jasmine goes through the Americanization process in this instance. She spends a week with Lillian. She calls her Jazzy and teaches the art of being an American in her speech and actions. She advises her:

"Let the past make you careful, for sure. But don't let it hurt you" (131). Jasmine later travels to New York with a letter from Gordon to her daughter looking for a suitable job.

Jasmine then meets Prof. Vadhera, a fantastic teacher. Prakash, the spouse of Jasmine, had studied under Prof. Vadhera. He was a liberal progressive who had liberal beliefs. The Indianness of Prof. Vadhera quickly grew old to Jasmine. She got the shock of her life when she learnt the truth of Professor's true earnings. He was not a professor but dealt in human hair to earn his bread. America, as nonchalant as it be, did not ask him questions about propriety. "He needed to work here, but he didn't have to like it. He had sealed his heart when he'd left home ... he was a ghost hanging on." (153)

She wished to rid herself of her Indianness. Jasmine is introduced to an intellectual couple at Columbia University and this is how Jasmine meets Prof. Taylor. At Hayse's family, she is given the work of "care-giver". Jasmine, in the meantime, has become an American and become more confident in her new found culture. Her English is Americanized. But her Indian culture and cultural instincts always come to her mind. For example, when she finds out that Duff is an adopted child, she responds like an Indian:

I could not imagine a non-genetic child. A child who did not belong to me, or to my husband, struck me as a bad idea. Adoption was not uncommon for me as the idea of remarrying a widow. (170)

As their marriage fails, Taylor, the husband, starts to fall for Jasmine. Another reincarnation, he calls her by the name Jase. After falling in love with Taylor, she was given the new name Jase. For Jyoti, the transformation, thus comes half-circle: "Jyoti was now a sati-goddess. Jasmine lived for future, for Vijn and wife and Jase lived for today. For every Jasmine, the reliable caregiver, there is a Jase, the prowling adventurer." (176)

He made arrangements to secure her employment in the mathematics department. She then received a tutoring position in the Indian language department. At the university, she is respected and is given accolades. When Jasmine relocates to the Midwest, a final rebirth takes place. When she realises a local hotdog seller is her husband's killer, she escapes New York in panic and leaves Taylor. She departs for Iowa anyway out of concern that Sukhavinder Singh might learn her true identity. Her time as Jase ends here.

Her new innings starts as Jane in Iowa. She encounters mother Ripplemeyer in Iowa, who offers her food and a place to stay. Jane loves Iowa because it is so similar to Hasanpur. The farmers here, like Hasanpur, are never arrogant or irritable rather are very modest and well-behaved. Bud Ripplemeyer is both a banker and a farmer. He develops feelings for Jasmine. He becomes her spiritual husband. The Ripplemeyers have adopted Du, a Vietnamese refugee. Jasmine recognises Prakash's vision in him. As Jane Ripplemeyer, she starts residing with Bud.

She becomes a live-in companion to Bud Ripplemeyer, a small-town banker. Jasmine declines to wed him out of concern that she would become a widow, as predicted by her astrologer, and indeed, not long after he and Jasmine started living together, Bud is shot by a distressed farmer facing foreclosure. Bud is in a wheelchair due to have been shot at. She tries to make him feel at ease and confident, but she does not want to wed him. Jane can feel her ever growing love for Bud increasing rapidly. Jasmine attends to his personal needs and moulds herself in whatever role Bud wants her to be. She also makes every effort on her part for sexual intimacy so that the paralyzed lover, Bud does not feel sorry on his physical incapacitation and can feel confident about his manhood. To him, she is a perfect wife who tries to please her husband in every possible way. He is fascinated by her foreign self. He never enquires her about India as he found it scary. He woos her because she is “darkness, mystery, and inscrutability.” She is not weighed down by any moral barriers and does not feel guilty about her actions. She challenges the comedian who foretold her widowhood. She feels empowered as if she has tricked the fate too. She is not a widow now. She lives the life of a happy woman by embracing a different culture from her home country in America. Bud, his mother, an adopted Vietnamese immigrant, and Jasmine, who is expecting, make up the family. Bud has caused her to become pregnant. Bud's life is made happier and more energetic by Jane (Jasmine). She has a husband, a son and carrying a child of her own in her womb. She is consciously freeing herself from her past traditions and her former identity. But she does not forget the memories of the past:

“The past plugs me into instant vitality and wisdom. I rejuvenate him simply by being who I am.” (200)

One can notice the significant changes Jasmine's personality and upbringing undergoes. Jane-Jasmine is now slowly entering American culture. Jasmine understands how quickly things are changing in America. Additionally, relationships are transient. Marriages are often for practical reasons. Understanding the American idea of happiness is challenging. Jasmine had previously murdered Half-Face for raping her, now living with an American out of wedlock and having her baby. Her different roles as an adapter, a rebel and a survivor are clearly surfaced. She realizes that the immigrant must live many lives in one life. Mukherjee herself in one of her interviews stated:

“I have been murdered and reborn at least three times, the very correct woman I was trained to be and was very happy being, is very different from a politicized, shrill, civil rights activist I was in Canada, and from the urgent writer that I have become in the last few years in the United States.” (Iowa, 18)

Jasmine, her protagonist, identifies with her creator. She is also murdered or reborn several times in the novel, like phoenix rising from her own ashes, only to find a new self of hers. Her adaptability and

unflinching desire for self-realisation, make Jasmine such a tough woman, who can endure any adverse situation and circumstances. She exclaims:

“There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself. We murder who we are so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams.” (29)

Though she appears to be the flagbearer of rebellion and revolution, she does not oppose the Indian culture as such. Rather, even after her assimilation into Americanization, she can not evade the Indian womanhood in her. She is against the conservative Indian patriarchal mindset which hinders the journey of Indian women to self-reliance and self-discovery. Talking about her women characters, Mukherjee states:

“The kinds of women I write about ... are those who are adaptable. We’ve all been raised to please, been trained to be adaptable as wives, and that adaptability is working to the women’s advantage when we come over as immigrants.” (Iowa, 19)

Du makes the decision to see his married sister after three years with the Ripplemeyers. He desires to protect his Vietnamese heritage. He's not fully transformed yet. As a Vietnamese American, he is classified.

A recent graduate named Darrel has been affected by Jane (Jasmine). He even starts to love her. He is an impressionable young man. Darrel, who is frustrated, eventually commits suicide.

Jasmine found Du's leaving to be devastating. She believed she had misplaced her son. She recognises Prakash as Du. Du was a hero to Jasmine in her eyes. Jane eventually received three letters from the Taylors. In that American culture lacks enduring ties, the novel's conclusion is pitiful. She is shocked to realise that:

“In America nothing really lasts. I can say that now, and it doesn’t shock me. But I think it was the hardest lesson of all for me to learn. We arrive so eager, to learn, to adjust, to participate, only to find the monuments are plastic, agreements are annulled. Nothing is forever, nothing is so terrible or so wonderful, that it won’t disintegrate.” (81)

Bud is annoyed by the presence of Taylor and his son Duff. Jane must provide for Taylor despite her pregnancy. She can go with him if she wants to. Jane had to decide between living a free life and doing her duty. She makes her choice again. She frees herself from any remorse or moral obligations. She once again feels empowered to experiment with her destiny. She feels invigorated enough to reset her guiding stars. She leaves it to Time to draw the conclusions about her real identity. Finally, she moves to California to live with Du and his sister after leaving Baden. Jasmine and Du are quite similar. They have been close to death. The worst has been overcome, and they have survived. Jasmine declares:

“Like creatures in fairy tales, we’ve shrunk and we’ve swollen and we’ve swallowed the whole cosmos.” (240)

She discovers that she is "greedy with wants and reckless from hope" once more. She then "repositions the stars" and travels to California, of all places. Finally, Jasmine's all-American decisions involve change, restlessness, social mobility, and a new type of non-biological "family", which all are characteristically American. The narrative is optimistically concluded by Mukherjee, who has a positive outlook on Jasmine's future in America.

Bharati Mukherjee demonstrates that achieving one's goals and potential is the key to success. Jasmine can always be remembered as one of Bharati Mukherjee's most powerful books. The author of the work depicts the process of acculturation of an Indian immigrant in a foreign setting. The work explores a variety

of subjects, including multiculturalism, feminism, existentialism, and expatriation among others. Bharati Mukherjee, in contrast to other Diaspora authors, thinks that adapting to a globalised society requires being open to and eager to embrace new concepts, difficulties, and experiences—both positive and negative.

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