

**CULTURAL IDENTITY AND DIASPORIC EXPERIENCE IN BHARATI  
MUKHERJEE'S *JASMINE***

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**ABSTRACT**

The Research Paper attempts to study how the protagonist jasmine try to assimilate herself into foreign culture where she gains new independent individual identity in Bharati Mukherjee's novel, *Jasmine*. Getting uprooted from the native cultural traditions and values, the loss of the indigenous language, being a mere outcast or an unaccommodated alien, together with multiple injuries of the psyche, all account for the theme of 'identity atrophy' in the novel *Jasmine*. The novel deals with the diasporic experience of protagonist and her struggle for cultural identity.

**Keywords:** Cultural, Diaspora, Experiences Immigrant, Self-identity.

In the age of globalization, the issues of diaspora, transnationalism, cultural mongrelization, hybridity and identity crisis continuously enrich the diasporic literatures of the twenty first century. The concept of root, home, nostalgia, memory, alienation and hybrid identity is interlinked with the diasporic phenomenon. The 'Root' implies an original homeland from which the people are dispersed and to which people aspire to return. 'Root' or 'Origin' conveys the idea of one's birthplace or one's native land.

Twenty First century marks its feat with bringing the continents of the world under one roof in the name of Globalization. Travelling across the world, migrating cultures and shifting identities are not as painful as it was during some decades ago. People celebrate their cosmopolitan identities. Diasporic writers like Bharati Mukherjee refer to this stage as self-liberating where the immigrants overcome their cultural dilemmas.

Diaspora is a dispersion of people throughout the world from 'homeland'/ from one's native country and culture to the 'hostland'. 'Diaspora' can be a person migrating for better

outlooks of life and is ready to 'uproot' or 'reroot'. The cause of migration decides the diasporic experience and identity of diaspora as an expatriate or immigrant. The discussion of cultural identity popularizes the post-colonial literature. It attempts to restore the original culture presented by the settlers or the creation of a new culture which combines both the left and the adopted. When a man is uprooted, he mislays the sense of belongingness and suffers from a sense of insecurity or identity crises.

In the novel *Jasmine*, the protagonist struggles to achieve her identity in the society to which she belongs. Jasmine, is not only prototypically Indian but is a woman harboring a desire for independence and respect for success that appears incongruous in her Indian setting of poverty, gender- discrimination and rigid social conventions. Jasmine's yearning for independence from her early childhood marks the beginning of her struggle for self-identity.

The struggles and problems of the Indian immigrant women are portrayed in a crystal clear manner in the novels of Bharati Mukherjee. Like other Eastern immigrants in America, Mukherjee personally experienced the problems of identity crisis and racial partiality which she portrays in her writings. The life of the contemporary American society that are experienced by the Indian immigrants became the most important theme of her novels. It is a very common fact that when a person migrates to an unknown land, becomes an outsider in that country and there he or she has to struggle a lot for survival. The nostalgic memory of native land haunts them. But gradually they adjust themselves to a new land and form an emotional tie with the new place and culture. Their new selves slowly make them detached from their native traditions. As a result, when they return to their native land they find themselves as a foreigner and that foreignness makes them as split persons. The emotional and psychic problems due to cross-cultural clash between the East, West and the problems of search for identity in the society are the vital themes of her novels.

Mukherjee's Writings are stuffed with Indian emotional responses. Her characters find themselves torn between two cultures and they make desperate efforts to bridge the gap between their native culture and the host culture. They try exceedingly hard to bridge this gap but they are not able to completely detach themselves from their native identity, i.e., Indianess. Mukherjee illustrates the uprooted condition of Jasmine, the protagonist in *Jasmine* and exhibits the futility of Jasmine's quest for identity.

Bharati Mukherjee's novels deal with the theme which related to Indian Women particularly the problem of the Indian immigrants mainly, women. She writes about the

struggles and Problems faced by Indian women. The problem of cross cultural crisis and the decisive search for identity is also one of her important themes. In the novel *Jasmine*, Bharati Mukherjee writes how the female protagonist tries to tackle the problem of loss of culture and endeavors to presume a new identity in the U.S. The protagonist Jasmine leaves her country to accomplish her wishes. On reaching the U.S, she begins to search for her self-independence. She struggles hard to achieve it and at last she realizes that self-independence is not to be an Indian or American but to be at peace with herself.

In *Jasmine*, the protagonist moves from one family to another, builds other relationships, acquires other names, finds a shared bond with a Vietnamese refugee and finally leaves the man whose child, she is carrying to go with the man she loves choosing between the 'Indian' duty and the 'Western' pursuit of happiness. *Jasmine* reveals the female experience of women who are self-actualizing. Quest for the definition of self and search for identity are the main features of Indian immigrant women who are caught in the flux of tradition and modernity.

Jasmine is a rebel from the very childhood and at every step she revolts against her fate. Mukherjee has presented a conflict between tradition and modernity in this novel. Jasmine rejects the constraints and traditional values of the patriarchal society in which she was born and accepts the liberal American values. Jyoti (Jasmine) hails from a feudalistic society where girls are considered a 'curse', as proved through this lines: "the bruise around her throat was to spare the agony of a dowry-less marriage" (JAS 35). She further tells "All over our district, bad luck dogged dowry- less wives, rebellious wives and bareen wives. They fell into wells; they got run over by trains, they were burnt to death heating milk on kerosene stoves" (JAS 41).

Mukherjee throws light upon Jasmine, the sensitive woman who lacks a stable sense of personal and cultural identity. The novelists are curious about the survival of her protagonist in the new surroundings. She is concerned about making her picture of Indian life interesting to the readers. Padma in her article "From Acculturation of Self- Actualization: Diasporal Dream in *Jasmine*" observes like this:

Instead of Writing of backwards as an area of darkness, she focuses attention on her characters growing awareness of dark spots in their lives and their Courageous efforts to discover area of light. This search for light, for happiness and fulfillment is subtly linked in her

fiction to her protagonist's struggle for self-actualization. (Padma 163)

Jasmine is an embodiment of old- World dutifulness, ever conscious of her sacred relationship with her husband Prakash. When pushed from one disaster to another, Jasmine emerges not as a tragic character but as one who is determined to change her destiny and explores her identity.

Different locations assign Jasmine's different roles as daughter, wife, and caretaker, beloved and competent professional but at every stage she is conscious to attain an identity of her own, along with her consciousness of her being an Indian Woman. Every time Jasmine changes her name, the change in the name indicates the change in relations. She experiences change as she grows from a traditional village girl to an independent immigrant.

Jasmine is called by eight different names such as Jyoti, Jasmine, Jazzy, Nirmala's cousin (sister), Day Mummy, Jase, Ma and Jane. Virginia D. Lively is right when she calls Jasmine, "the chameleon type of immigrant" in an article called "Three Immigrant Types in Mukherjee's *Jasmine*." Mukherjee has exploited the journey motif to the maximum extent for physically, Jasmine travels from Hasnapur to Baden, Iowa and then to California Frontier. She travels from one state to another and she pushes herself into a new dimension of existence.

Every time Jasmine pushes the frontiers of experience and she is in searching deep into the depth of her soul. She embarks on a spiritual quest, a discovery of herself, a probing of her full potential. As Sumitha Roy in her article, "Jasmine: Exile as Spiritual Quest" observes: "Out of the journey that she undertakes to America to fulfill her mission emerges her inner quest, a process of unfolding of the self" (Roy 205).

Jasmine has survived hideous times that involved rapes and murders, terrifying challenges and unimaginable crises. To change from Jyoti to Jasmine, Jasmine to Jase and Jase to Jane is not an easy process. She is not sentimental about her Indian identity, nor does she suffer from nostalgic longing. Instead, she has used all her strength to forge new alliances in the friendly soil of the adopted homeland. The fusion between the East and the West pleases her and she rejoices that her journey to America has unfolded her affirming self.

The heroine Jasmine has fully assimilated herself to the American family life with adopted child and pregnancy, but she is waiting for her real love which she finds when Taylor comes to her. From her duties towards others, she now thinks of her happiness, her love, herself: "I am not choosing between men. I am caught between the promise of America and

old-world dutifulness” (JAS 240). With the healing touch of people like Lillian Gordon, Kate and Taylor, who treated her as an intelligent, refined, sincere and affectionate person, Jasmine blooms from being a diffident alien with forged documents into adventurous Jase, living only with the present.

The transformation of Jasmine is quite fast but she is unable to slow down the pace as she is unwilling to abandon the ride she is on. Pulling herself out of her native culture is painful but at the same time she feels cowardly to “bunker oneself inside nostalgia” (JS 185). The tugging between the opposing forces does not threaten her, rather it excites her. Surrounded by the other immigrant domestics who hang suspended between the two worlds, Jasmine feels proud that she is getting rooted in the new world.

Jasmine’s migration and transformation into American culture is certainly better in nostalgia on remaining torn between two worlds. Though it is sometimes agonizing and sometimes shocking, the Indian values remain to influence the next generation. Mukherjee tries to say that the immigrants while getting transformed should be able to transform too.

The protagonist Jasmine is an exile in flight from the old-world India and old cultural values. Her sense and sensibilities are actively engaged with the world outside her, leaving no time to reflect on the problems whether life is meaningful, or why one should think of East or West when one can be a singular self as culture and history would shape one. But in creating such a character in attempting to re-locate the character in a desired but alien environment, Mukherjee does not probe the inner consciousness of the protagonist nor she express the deeper struggle the Americans undergo in relating to each other.

Jasmine is neither a rebel nor an opposed subject but a woman with her independent vision, sharing the best both of native tradition and the occult of hi-tech of the west. Each decision of Jasmine is her own independent one. She is struggling throughout her life to stand on her own foot far away from the Indian climate or culture. The protagonist is not a clever speaker but her various changes in life as Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase and Jane indicate the fact that she has acted bodily to fulfill her identity in an alien country at the prospect of adventure and transformation.

The heroine Jasmine feels the transformation of identity from Jyoti to Jasmine, Jasmine to Jazzy and Jazzy to Jase. Though her role as Jazzy does not have much significance, she hopes for the importance of other births. Having become an “immigrant”

and an “American,” she gets rooted in the cross culture and she is not caught between her Indian identity and American environment.

The central character in *Jasmine* understands the unsteady nature of both America and Americans. Jasmine’s experience into Bud Ripplemeyer’s life as a teller in the bank and later as his cohabit, brings about a change in both Bud’s family and in Jasmine’s identity. Jasmine learns much about the life from Du Thien, the adopted son of Bud and Vietnamese immigrant from Saigon. She thinks herself along with Du as they both have immigrant notion.

Jasmine has many names which throw light on the many selves in her. She does not fuse into a recognizable identity as she herself is not sure or aware of whom she is and she is constantly pursuing her true self. As a result of this, there arises a transformation in her psyche. Jasmine passes through physical, mental and emotional agony which affects her entire personality turning into a whole new being. Jasmine’s idea of assimilation implies the metamorphosis of her different identities, none of which can be wiped out.

Mukherjee uses the constant practice of renaming the protagonist to show the conversions of identities: from Jyoti, the village girl in Hasnapur, to Jasmine, the city Woman, to Jazzy, the illegal immigrant, to Jase, the caregiver and to Jane, the lowan Woman who centers the story. In her name Jasmine, the word “J” represents the element of continuity within transformation. In her article which is called “A Sense of Strangeness: The Gender and Cultural identity in Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*” Elizabeth Brofen observes:

The “J” serves as a signifier for the dialectic of a progressive engendering of identities as these bar any already existing identities, putting them under reassurance without consuming them. In doing so, Mukherjee’s novel traces the parameters of the narrative discourse available to the muted subaltern Woman. Jasmine’s dislocated other speaks out of a self-conscious and self-induced effacement in the voice of a resilient and incessantly self-refashioning hybridity. (Brofen 79)

In this process of Jasmine’s transformation, she is seized by a longing to belong. She adopts herself with the American life through her relation with the white person. Her stars are repositioned in the new country with new hopes in accepting her marriage to Taylor. Her floating life resembles the realities of the immigrants, especially illegal ones face at every step. The adjustment and assimilation undergone by the protagonist makes her question her

identity: “How many more shapes are in me? How many more selves? And how many more husbands” (JS 215).

Rechristened as Jasmine joyously sharing the ambition of her husband, she looks forward to go to America, a land of opportunities. Even when this dream gets shattered by the murder of Prakash on the eve of his departure, Jasmine does not regress into being jyoti again. She does not shuttle between identities, instead she decides to go to America and thus fulfill Prakash’s mission and perform ‘sati’ on the grounds of the university where he gained admission to study. But once landed in America, her old self strongly conditioned by the society into which she was born gives birth to new self that denies death and welcomes the prospect of a different life.

Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* deals with the two different problems of expatriates. Expatriation is actually a complex state of mind and emotion which includes a wistful longing for the past, often symbolized by the ancestral home, the pain of exile and homelessness, the struggle to maintain the difference between oneself and new, unfriendly surroundings, an assumption of moral or cultural superiority over the host country and a refusal to accept the identity forced on one by the environment. The expatriate builds a cosset around herself/himself as a refugee from cultural dilemmas and from the experienced hostility or unfriendliness in the new country.

Jasmine has learned to adjust and to survive. She lives in the present, overlooking the past and the future. Throughout the novel, Jasmine has faced the identity crisis common to every Indian immigrant in America. Jasmine is an expatriate in mind and spirit. She share the expatriate characteristic of being ill at ease both in the native culture and in the alien one and also she represent the dilemma faced by the expatriates. It is clear that Mukherjee too sees herself as an expatriate writer in the light of her novel *Jasmine*.

Bharati Mukherjee novel *Jasmine*, reveals a dual cultural shock. Jasmine leaves her respective country. India in search of her dreams this migration or “cultural transplant” leads to a crisis of identity and a final reconciliation to the choice Bharati Mukherjee has deliberately avoided the immigrant writer’s temptation to fall in the trap of glorifying her native country and to belittle and degrade the adopted country. She has presented a fascinating study of the problem of a displaced person in America.

Bharati Mukherjee ‘*Jasmine*’ tries to unravel the complicated layer of cross-cultural reality through a series of adventures which the heroin undertakes during her odyssey from

Punjab to California via Florida, New York and Iowa. Her struggle symbolizes the results quest of a rootless person piqued by a depressing sense of isolation all around.

Hence, Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* is the movement of Jasmine's life towards achieving true identity. Her journey to America is a process of her quest of true self. At every step of her life, Jasmine is a winner, she does not allow her troubles and struggles to frustrate her progress in life and she is finding a place for herself in the society. In other words, she is a true feminist who fights every challenge in life to establish herself in the society. Jasmine realizes 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. Bharati Mukherjee has employed metamorphosis transformations in the life of Jasmine in the process of her search of her true.

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