

Jasmine: Reimagining Identity in a Global Context

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Bharathi Mukherjee's *Jasmine* as a critical exploration of women's identity and empowerment within a globalized context. Through a close reading of the novel, it highlights Mukherjee's feminist stance, emphasizing her commitment to portraying the complexities of female experiences in both traditional and modern settings. The protagonist, Jasmine, embarks on a transformative journey from her rooted Indian identity to navigating the challenges of multiculturalism in America. Despite her apparent control over her life, the pressures of globalization compel her to conform to a standardized identity, complicating her quest for self-fulfillment. Ultimately, this study underscores the tension between individual identity and societal expectations, revealing the challenges faced by women in a rapidly changing world.

Keywords: Bharathi Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, feminist literature, identity, globalization, multiculturalism, women's empowerment, cultural conflict, self-fulfillment.

INTRODUCTION

Bharathi Mukherjee, an acclaimed Indian-born writer, stands out as one of the most prominent voices among immigrant authors in America. Immigrant writers in the U.S. can generally be categorized into two groups: the "Willing Immigrant Writers," who have intentionally settled in America from Europe and Asia, and the "Unwilling Immigrant Writers," whose ancestors were forcibly brought to America through slavery. Mukherjee distinguishes herself from many European writers for a variety of reasons. Having lived in India, Canada, and the United States, she possesses a unique perspective that allows her to explore the complexities of fragmented identities.

Central to Mukherjee's work is the theme of identity politics. Her novels, including *Jasmine*, *Wife*, and *The Holder of the World*, delve into the shifting identities of diasporic women, examining their experiences in contemporary settings across the United States, Canada, and India, as well as historical contexts. Through her fiction, Mukherjee tackles profound questions about the meaning of life, with a particular emphasis on the challenges faced by women. She addresses the struggles of Indian immigrants, especially women, highlighting their unique experiences and the obstacles they confront in their journeys.

Mukherjee also explores the theme of adjustment for Indians in the West, illustrating the difficulties they encounter while seeking a better life and grappling with issues of adaptation and survival. In her narratives, she vividly depicts the cultural clash between Eastern and Western values. When individuals leave their original culture for a new one, they often find themselves caught in a conflict between the two. This cultural transition can lead to significant identity crises, as characters navigate the complexities of their dual existence.

Many of her stories feature young women who have been shaped by patriarchal norms but choose to venture into the unknown, often facing uncertainty and challenges along the way. In the aftermath of these existential crises, new identities emerge, prompting profound questions such as "Who am I?" The exploration of cross-cultural crises and the quest for identity are among Mukherjee's most important themes, resonating deeply with readers.

Moreover, her novels reflect the temperament and mood of contemporary American society as experienced by Indian immigrants. Through her nuanced portrayal of their lives, Mukherjee sheds light on the broader immigrant experience, making her work both relevant and resonant in discussions about identity, culture, and belonging.

Bharathi Mukherjee's female protagonists are often immigrants who grapple with cultural shock while embodying the potential for transformation. They embark on heroic journeys to establish their identities. In *Jasmine*, the protagonist's

quest for self-discovery begins at birth. Born as Jyoti in the village of Hasnapur, Punjab, eighteen years after the Partition Riots, she is seen as an unwanted child—her family’s fifth daughter and the seventh of nine children. Her mother, fearing the burdens of a dowryless marriage, even contemplated killing her at birth to spare her the pain of a dowryless existence. Miraculously, Jyoti survives this attempt on her life, a clear indication of her resilience and capacity to fight for her true self.

Her childhood memories fuel her struggle against fate and her search for identity. At the tender age of seven, an astrologer foretold her widowhood and exile, but Jyoti refused to be disheartened. Instead, she sought to rise above superstition and the limitations imposed by society. Even as a child, she recognized her potential to confront challenges and carve out a strong identity. A pivotal moment occurs when she bravely fights off a dog with a staff, experiencing a surge of power. Her rejection of an arranged marriage, orchestrated by her father and grandmother, and her fascination with the electric switch in Vimla’s house—symbolizing control—demonstrate her confidence in pursuing her potential.

Jyoti learns to navigate “permissible rebellion,” a concept she uses to her advantage. These incidents illustrate her distinctiveness compared to other village girls, who often lack autonomy. She expresses her clarity of purpose by stating, “I know what I don’t want to become.” Her journey leads her in various directions, culminating in a vision of the future that is “greedy with wants and reckless from hope.”

Despite her strength and determination, Jyoti encounters numerous dangers, challenges, and barriers in her quest for identity. While she possesses an innate understanding of power and control, she is also shaped by the societal norms of her upbringing. This cultural conditioning often compels her to disguise her true identity and conform to the expectations fashioned by others. Ultimately, she falls in love with and marries Prakash, a young and ambitious engineer, further complicating her journey toward self-realization.

He wanted Jyoti to shed off her past and make a new kind of woman. To break off the past, he gave me a new name: Jasmine. And this was the beginning of a new journey for her. After getting a new identity, Jasmine also took care of her husband’s driving ambition. She was also aware of her husband’s obsession. She said, “My husband was obsessed with passing exams, doing better, making something more of his life than fate intended.” Then she realized that she too could fight to prove the prediction which had been following her footsteps since her childhood which she had been trying to run away from it. “If we could just get away from India, then all fates would be cancelled. We’d start with new fates, new stars. We could say or be anything we wanted. We’d be on the other side of the earth, out of God’s sight.” Renamed as Jasmine, she was looking forward to going to America with her husband to pursue his further education. She was sharing the ambition of her husband happily. But her husband Prakash was killed by the fundamentalists – the Khalsa terrorists on the eve of their departure. This made Jasmine grief stricken and frustrated. And her dream was shattered. Instead of spending the rest of her life as a helpless widow at Hasnapur, she decided to go to America and commit Sati after reaching the campus of the University where her husband was supposed to study. It was a way of protest to express her anger for shattering her husband’s dreams. This kind of inner will in such kind of situation helped her to fulfill her mission successfully. Then Jasmine went to America on a forged passport. She left India to survive against the forces of destiny but unfortunately her American journey began on a sad note.

She was raped by Half-Face who had “lost an eye and ear and most of his cheek in a paddy field in Vietnam”. Half-Face was the Captain of the ship in which Jasmine reached America. After Half-Face raped she did not kill herself as she felt that her mission was not yet over. She killed Half-Face by becoming Kali personified, the Goddess of Destruction. She also performed a kind of death for her by burning her dishonoured clothes symbolically. It was the death of her old self and the birth of a new self. Jasmine was reborn not by killing herself but by killing Half-Face. Thus she began her journey into America. From that journey of Jasmine to America to fulfill her mission came out her inward quest to unfold her true self and identity. That journey defined “What a girl from a swampy backward could accomplish.” Jasmine was modern girl who faced the challenges of life boldly and struggled hard to survive against all odds. Then Jasmine met Lilian Gordon who entered into her life as a hope. It was Mrs. Gordon who educated her, made her free from her past memories and strengthened her will to survive. She advised Jasmine, “Let the past make you wary, by all means. But do not let it deform you.” Her advice helped Jasmine physically and mentally. With her help, she went to meet Professor Vadhera who helped Prakash in securing admission in an engineering course.

In the beginning, she stayed at Professor Vadhera’s house. But Jasmine was disappointed when she learned that Mr. Vadhera was depended not only on his living on teaching but on trading in human hair. She was not earning by the strict ethnicity in the house that she was to follow as a widow. So she decided to leave that house. This move indicated that self-actualization was developing in her life and it might be due to the acculturation to the American way of thinking and dressing. “With the actualization of the desire for independence the door is shut to the passive resignation extolled by her

grandmother since individual effort means nothing”. That was a protest made by Jasmine not against Indian culture but against its retentiveness. After a short time, Jasmine worked in the house of Tylor and Wylie Hayes in Manhattan as a caregiver to their little daughter Duff. There her name was changed from Jasmine to Jase. While she worked as a care-giver, she also took up part time jobs like answering phones and tutoring graduate students in Punjabi in the University. She absorbed the alien culture rather greedily. At this stage in her life, Jasmine had cultivated a strong sense of self and exuded confidence in her identity. Transforming from an alien with forged documents into the adventurous "Jase," she embraced living in the moment. The tension between her Indian roots and her new American life no longer frightened her; instead, it filled her with excitement. While many immigrants struggled to navigate these opposing forces, Jasmine found joy in assimilating into the new culture. This alien environment taught her to live with ease and confidence, and despite her fluctuating identity, she generously offered love and support to those who needed her and believed in her.

One significant relationship developed with Taylor, who provided Jasmine with crucial emotional support after his wife, Wyle, left him. He openly confessed his love for her, and Jasmine was deeply touched by his sincerity and kindness, which drew them closer together. Her immigrant status did not hinder the emotional bond they shared; instead, it became a source of strength in their connection.

However, a darker phase unfolded when Jasmine was forced to leave Taylor and Duff in a state of fear, haunted by the presence of Sukhawinder, the Khalsa terrorist responsible for Prakash's death in India. Seeking refuge, she moved to Iowa, where she encountered another benefactor in Mrs. Ripplemayer, who offered maternal support. There, Jasmine secured a job at a local bank and gradually forged a connection with Bud Ripplemayer, the banker, who began to hold a special place in her heart. This new chapter marked a significant turning point, allowing Jasmine to continue her journey of self-discovery and resilience.

Jasmine found a sense of peace in Bud's home, feeling happy about her new job and her role as a stepmother to Du, a sixteen-year-old Vietnam War victim adopted by Bud. Bud had separated from his wife, Karin, and his grown sons had moved out. In this new environment, Jasmine adopted the identity of "Jane," transforming from "Jase." She saw herself as a catalyst in Bud's life, believing that she was not the cause of his divorce: "Bud would have left Karin twisted in midlife until he dropped. I was a catalyst. Not a cause."

However, violence struck again when a disgruntled farmer shot Bud at point-blank range, leaving him paralyzed from the waist down. Jane devoted herself to caring for him, striving to comfort and instill confidence in him. Though she became pregnant with Bud's child, she didn't wish to marry him. Instead, she sought to reassure Karin that she was not an enemy; rather, it was Bud's happiness that mattered to both of them. Jane had fully embraced her role in this American family but was still waiting for true love.

Out of the blue, she received a letter from Taylor, informing her that he would be coming to take her away. This news was a welcome surprise, but she worried about how Bud would react when Du decided to move to California to stay with his sister. Understanding Du's need for change—something she resonated with as an exile—she gently shared the news with Bud.

Then, Taylor re-entered her life, encouraging her to leave Bud. Ultimately, she made the decision to walk away from Bud and go with Taylor and Du to work as a caregiver. Until that moment, she had been focused on serving others, but now she prioritized her own desires and love. Her thoughts crystallized in her 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 caregiver's life is a good life, a worthy life." These statements reflected her newfound courage; she felt no guilt for her decision, only a sense of clarity about what was right for her.

Jasmine's desire to "do the right thing" without feeling like a terrible person affirmed that she was no longer identifying with the name Jane. Having survived the worst of her struggles in America, she now felt free to carve out her place in Taylor's life. Instead of guilt, she experienced relief at leaving Bud, recognizing that she was finally pursuing her long-held wishes: "It isn't guilt that I feel; it's relief. I realize I have already stopped thinking of myself as Jane. Adventure, risk, transformation: the frontier is pushing indoors through uncalked windows. Watch me reposition the stars, I whisper to the astrologer who floats cross-legged above my kitchen stove."

In this moment, Jasmine declared, "Then there is nothing I can do. Time will tell if I am a tornado, a rubble maker, arising from nowhere and disappearing into a cloud." As she stepped out onto the potholed driveway, following Taylor, she felt a surge of eagerness and hope. Ultimately, this journey signified Jasmine's liberation and her return to her true self.

Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* chronicles the protagonist's journey toward achieving her true identity. Her move to America symbolizes a quest for self-discovery, and despite enduring some of the most challenging experiences of her life, she ultimately overcomes obstacles and gains self-awareness, forging a new identity that allows her to shed her past. By choosing to become a caregiver to Duff, Jasmine finds peace of mind in her adopted country, effectively repositioning her stars.

Throughout her journey, Jasmine emerges as a winner, refusing to let her struggles impede her progress. She actively seeks her place within society, embodying the spirit of a true feminist who confronts every challenge to establish herself. She understands that one's identity is not confined to being Indian or American; rather, it resides in the inner spirit of being at peace with oneself.

As a powerful exploration of a woman's serious quest for values, Jasmine's story is both rewarding and inspiring. She navigates multiple identities as both Jase and Jasmine, showcasing the strength inherent in womanhood. Breaking free from the constraints of caste, gender, and family, Jasmine learns to live for herself rather than for her husband or children. A survivor, fighter, and adapter, she confronts adversity head-on, ultimately carving out a new life in an unfamiliar land.

A close reading of Mukherjee's novels reveals her primary aim to champion the cause of women. While her early works present complex narratives, they often lack the art of storytelling that captures readers' attention. In contrast, her later works are more successful in this regard, solidifying Bharathi Mukherjee's status as a quintessential feminist writer. Her novels reflect the temperament and mood of the societies in which she lived.

In *Jasmine*, the protagonist begins her journey as an Indian girl steeped in tradition. She navigates a spectrum of happiness and grief at every turn, ultimately striving for a sense of fulfillment. Jasmine confronts male dominance both in India and the United States, as well as the tensions between her Eastern and Western identities, all in pursuit of total freedom and unity within herself. Although she eventually appears to gain control over her life, she finds herself far from her original desires and aspirations.

The dominant values of a globalized world compel Jasmine to reconcile the various facets of her multicultural identity. However, this reconciliation does not celebrate the richness of her identity; instead, it represents the triumph of globalization, which imposes a standardized identity upon her. The most significant promise of globalization for Jasmine lies in its conformity, allowing her to secure a place in the world as an American rather than remaining an outsider, a reality that proves exhausting throughout her journey.

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