

# Quest for Identity and Search for Roots in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

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**R. Suganya**

Ph.D., Research Scholar, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7732-7074>

## Abstract

*Bharati Mukherjee, the author of six novels, two collections of short stories, and a smattering of nonfiction works, reflects personal experience in crossing cultural boundaries in her almost all writings. The state of exile, a sense of loss, the pain of separation, and disorientation make Bharati Mukherjee's novel, Jasmine "a quest for identity and search for the roots" in an alien land. This paper discusses how the protagonist of the novel, undergoes several transformations during her life journey in America, which results in a fluid state of identity.*

**Keywords:** Cultural Boundaries, Exile, Sense of Loss, Identity, Roots, Transformations

## Introduction

Indian writing in English has been enriched by non-resident expatriates who have not only assimilated and naturalized the medium but also accepted their changed identities and have formed emotional ties with their places of residence. Bharati Mukherjee, an Indian American immigrant novelist, describes herself as "an American author in the tradition of other American authors whose ancestors arrived at Ellis Island." To celebrate the awe and mystery of the human condition, which have been absent from the earlier writings in English, suddenly find expression in her writing, especially in the novel *Jasmine*.

Ethnic women in America are twice-marginalized: by virtues of their ethnicity and their gender. The central figure in Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* - Jasmine fight two simultaneous battles against marginalization during her early expatriate experiences in America; coming as from (an) other world, her very identities are in question in America, calling out for a re-visioning and re-defining at the start. The moments of change/transformation/re-incarnation are crucial because, though the exercise is assertive/powerful/celebratory in its mainstream movement, the echoes at the margins valorize the anxieties of expatriation.

The identities of Mukherjee's women eventually emerge with exemplify the characteristics of a whole new breed in this country, the "ethnic" who is also "American." The finding identities must be a matter of intense struggle: with the self, with tradition, with growing aspirations, hopes, and desires. Where gender, race, and the American experience meet in Bharati Mukherjee, the intersection is fraught with the tension of combat, even when the combat itself needs to be identify in sub textual moments.

The word 'identity' also implies certain homogeneity and coalescence; in other words, assimilation. Identification can be on many levels; psychological, sociological, linguistic, cultural, and emotional. The extent to which identification has been achieved on all these fronts will qualify how complete one's identification has been with the new surroundings.

The quest for identity by marginal groups in developing multi-racial societies emerges as one of the significant concerns in literature.

Bharati Mukherjee, the author of six novels, two collections of short stories, and a smattering of nonfiction works, reflects personal experience in crossing cultural boundaries in her almost all writings. *Jasmine* is one of the best-loved novels from a writer of richness, significance, and reluctance for root. The central theme of this novel is the recreation of one's self. The state of exile, a sense of loss, the pain of separation, and disorientation make Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* "a quest for identity and search for the roots" in an alien land. Jasmine, the protagonist of the novel, undergoes several transformations during her life journey in America, from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jazz to Jane to Jase, and often experiences a deep sense of estrangement, which results in a fluid state of identity.

Mukherjee's women eventually find their distinctive voices, but not before they have battled violently with the images of their selves as representations of "Otherness"- exotic yet silent, capable yet repressed. More often than not, these women have grown up in Indian families, in the wake of the British Raj, amalgamated Western ideas with traditional beliefs; this often finds the young women emancipated but confused. Cultural roots retain their hold in insidious ways. However, in times of fear and indecision, Mukherjee's Westernized Indian women return to seek the comfort of traditional faiths, they increasingly discover it to be cold- and so the quest for a new identity continues.

The novel *Jasmine* whose opening phrase is "Lifetimes ago, under a banyan tree in the village of Hasnapur, an astrologer cupped his ears-his satellite dish to the stars- and foretold my widowed hood and exile. I was only seven then, fast and venturesome, scabrous-armed from leaves and thorns." (Mukherjee 1). The state of exile, a sense of loss, the pain of separation, and disorientation make Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* "a quest for identity" in an alien land. Jasmine, the protagonist of the novel, undergoes several transformations during the journey of her life in America, from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jazz to Jane to Jase, and often experiences a deep sense of estrangement, which results in a fluid state of identity. This journey becomes a tale

of moral courage, searching for self-awareness and self-assertion.

The novel *Jasmine* focuses on Jasmine, an underage village girl from Punjab, who ventures as an undocumented woman and a widow to the United States, where her fate will be "rewritten." The novel has a non-chronological order of events creating a rather cinematic effect, making it hard to follow the shifts in location, focalization, and time. The narration is in the first person, and the time and setting are Baden, Elsa Country, and Iowa when Jasmine is aged twenty-four. The Fabula begins in Hasnapur, a village in Punjab, when Jasmine is aged seven. The bold events, have allowed her transformation from the ill-fated village girl, Jyoti, to the self-assured emancipated American woman.

Her transformation starts from a village girl under the shell of her father and brothers to a wife of an American traditional husband who gives her all liberties. But Jasmine's happiness is short-lived. She is widowed. She returns to her family. She has to now choose between the rigid traditions of her family and perform Sati or continue to live the life of Jasmine in America. However, she manages a forged passport for going abroad. Jasmine sets off on an agonizing trip as an illegal immigrant to Florida and thus begins her extended journey of transformations, displacement, and a search for identity. She is trying to adapt the American way of life to be able to survive, and changes her identity several times. In her path, she faces many problems, including rape, and eventually reaches the position of a health professional through a series of jobs.

Jyoti gets married at the age of fourteen to her brother's friend, Prakash, a twenty-four-year-old electronic student whose voice she falls in love with. Prakash plays a modern enlightened man He, renames her Jasmine to remove from her any trace of traditional dutifulness. At the age of sixteen, she plans to move with her husband to the United States. Her husband is shot to death by Khalsa Lions. Grief-stricken after his death, she takes the risk of illegally entering America and goes through a journey than that of enslaved people imported to America. Helpless land vulnerable in a strange land, she grips with cruel reality after her rape by Half- Face and his murder by her. It is in the bath while she is cleaning

herself that she decides to transcend “personal dishonor” and fulfill her mission. Her Indian identity leaves her at this point; the desire to achieve a task that had seen her through the difficult passages to America is abandoned.

The body becomes a mere shell, soon to be discarded, and what she dumps is her Indian psyche and is reborn in America. There she meets Lillian Gordon; she stays with her. From here, she begins her process of assimilation by learning how to become American. Lillian calls her the nickname Jazzy. Jasmine soon finds herself suppressed by the atmosphere of this home because it is far isolated from everything American. As in Baden, she meets Bud Ripplemeyer, an American banker who instantly falls in love and marries an unofficial and renames her Jane. Bud encourages Jasmine to change roles from caregiver to professional. Her racial identity also changes quickly in Baden. This new perception of hers is an essential portion of her identity as ‘Jane’ the typical American she always wanted to be.

Jasmine is trapped between the two cultures of the east and west, past and present, old and new; she is constantly conscious in search of a concrete identity. She compares American life to Indian life when she meets her husband’s teacher Mr. Devinder Vadhera. She says to him she wants a green card more than anything else in the world and that a green card is freedom. She has also lived with Taylor, Wylie, and Duff (other Americans) as a caregiver. She is trying to learn and adopt the culture here and has started to take an interest in learning the language. It shows her desire to adjust to circumstances.

Taylor arranges a part- time job for her at Columbia. She creates yet another identity upon a new perception of herself. But though Jasmine creates a new identity for every unique situation, her former identities are never entirely erased. They emerge in specific moments in the text and create another more dominated identity, different from those that came before. Taylor begins to call her ‘Jase.’ It suggests again that she does not have another creation of her new self, since Taylor already constructs it for her. In the Hayes household, Jasmine becomes aware of her racial identity. Darrel’s proposal of marriage creates another problem for her. She feels entangled among men and helpless, and sometimes

she becomes unable to understand society, culture and these create tension within her mind. She feels the need to reconcile these conflicting identities. Her journey through life leads Jasmine through many transformations- Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase, and Jane.

Mukherjee is fascinated by people with a fluid identity, people who are adventurous, who are constantly on to go, people who live a life in transit, who have to forgo their former identities to accommodate and assimilate themselves in another country to acquire the identity of the other. They have to find their identities with self, tradition, and with the wonders and horrors of a new culture with growing aspirations, hopes, and desires. However, her growing concern is that these new-born identities should not suffer from the horror and terror of marginalization.

Many questions are lurking in the margins of this tale, not least regarding the improbability of a young uneducated village girl from Hasnapur, Punjab, blossoming so quickly into the “adventurous Jase” in jeans and T-shirts and sneakers. Jasmine, moreover, appears to be happy to wipe out most of her history, except for occasional memories of her slain husband, Prakash. She has no sentimental longing to return to her homeland: she has the spirit of a true immigrant. Though Jasmine comes to America with the crazy notion of erecting a funeral pyre for her dead husband’s clothes on his university campus and burning herself on it, once again, the idea of sanctioned suicide is rejected when America offers other possibilities.

By grasping at the dream of a new life, Jasmine feels compelled to sacrifice most of her original self. Both the ethnicity and the womanhood that she identified with have to be massively reworked. In terms of the complete reconstruction of the self that Jasmine subjects herself to, it appears that to discard the notions of womanhood that she had then nurtured, she needs to discard her ethnicity, too- the only way that she can cope with the freedom of choices thrust upon her, intellectual and sexual, is to see herself within the construct of a new “American” woman.

### **Conclusion**

Jasmine discovers her identity as difference, as a multiply split subjectivity: Jyoti/Jasmine/Kali/

Jase/Jane. She does not remain Jyoti but recognize her multiplicity only after the violence. After the violence, she forsakes her identity and recognizes within her Jasmine. As a fighter and adapter, and even after so many transformation of herself into different names, she still enquires, "who I am" (*Jasmine* 197). She quotes the words of Karim who says about her: "I am tornado [...] How many more shapes are in me, how many more selves, and how many more husbands" (*Jasmine* 215). Here she expresses the inner pangs of an exile and expatriate who lives in America. The end shows the positive acceptance of the protagonist after facing worst condition boldly. Ultimately she has adjusted herself in alien land.

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### Author Details

**R. Suganya**, Ph.D., *Research Scholar, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai Tamil Nadu, India,*  
**Email ID:** [suganyagea1989@gmail.com](mailto:suganyagea1989@gmail.com)