

## Immigration and Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine and Desirable Daughters*

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**Bharati Mukherjee**

### Multiple Dislocations of Personal Life

Bharati Mukherjee is one of the most celebrated writers of the Asian immigrant experience in America. Her writings are largely honed by the multiple dislocations of her personal life, which itself has been described as a text in a kind of perennial immigration. Immigration and Identity in the fiction of Mukherjee, examine how post-colonialism affects identity formation in contemporary women's immigrant literature. Immigrant literature is increasingly interested in the transnational experiences of its protagonists and is not simply about migrating to and making it in America, but engage with the literal and metaphorical crossing and re-crossing of borders.

Mukherjee's *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters*, explore the symbolic significance of these characters representing Indian migrants to the U.S. These novels discuss the depiction of the development of personal identity of Indian migrant women in the U.S. and their confusion, the dilemma of adjusting between two different cultures. As E P. Lazure notes: "Mukherjee

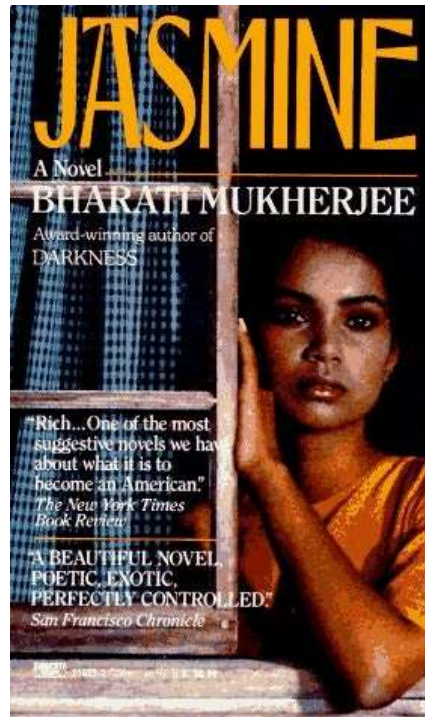
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portrays the contours of the character's transited identity that are in constant negotiation and transformation because of the interaction between the past and the present” (Lazure 10).



### *Jasmine*

The story of *Jasmine* is the story of an identity in motion. The novel opens with an astrologer's prediction about Jyoti's widowhood and exile. *Jasmine* continues beyond the realization of the prediction indicating repositioning of the stars and the heroine's gaining enough strength for a peripatetic transformation. She blossoms from a meek submissive Indian wife, to a strong independent Indo-American woman who lives mostly in the here and now, stops worrying about the future and is indifferent to the past. She is renamed Jasmine after her marriage to Prakash Vih. Prakash wants her to become a modern city woman and as he aids her in her transformation from 'Jyoti' to 'Jasmine'; she perceives herself as the woman he envisions her to be, and eventually becomes the person that Prakash desires to create. "He wanted to break down the Jyoti as 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... Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttled between identities" (JS 77).

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Here Mukherjee is depicting the identity formation as a complex process that is dependent not solely upon the agency of the individual, but also upon the surrounding environment. Her renaming is a sign of her initial migration away from traditional India. Jyoti and Jasmine are two separate selves, yet Jasmine finds herself occupying both identities.

### **Jasmine's Married Life**

Jasmine's husband Prakash is murdered and she emigrates to America all alone to fulfill his dreams. Upon her arrival in Florida, she meets Half-Face, the captain of the ship on which she entered the country, and his disrespectful treatment gives her, her first taste of American racial categorization. Half-Face sees her only as a sexual being and after the rape Jasmine finds that she cannot escape this new perception of her identity. Thus she turns to violence in order to express the conflict she is experiencing. She stabs Half-Face to death and in this act she finds the strength to continue to live and vows to start a new life in America, separate from India and the naive identity of her past. Hence Jasmine's identity is formed not only through construction, but also through the destruction of her existing self.

### **Beginning the Process of Assimilation**

Jasmine then meets Lillian Gordon, staying with whom she begins the process of assimilation by learning how to become an American. Lillian bestows upon her the nickname 'Jazzy', a symbol of her entrance into and acceptance of American culture which she welcomes gladly. After that she moves in with a traditional Indian family in Hushing, New York. Jasmine soon finds herself stifled by the inertia of this home for it was completely isolated from everything American. Considering it to be a stasis in her progression towards a new life, she tries to separate herself from all that is Indian and forget her past completely.

### **Migration to New York City**

She proceeds with her migratory plans and moves to New York City, and stays with an American family. With Taylor, his wife Wylie and their daughter Duff, she creates yet another identity upon a new perception of herself. But though Jasmine creates a new identity for every

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new situation, her former identities are never completely erased. They emerge in specific moments in the text and exacerbate the tension, thereby causing Jasmine to create another more dominant identity, different from all those that came before. Taylor begins to call her 'Jase' suggesting that again she does not have an agency in the creation of her new self since Taylor constructs it for her. Jasmine becomes aware of her racial identity because Taylor and his friends understand that she was from South Asia and try to associate her with that community. In becoming Jase, Jasmine gets increasingly comfortable with her sexuality which she always tried to repress earlier, even more than ever, after her traumatic experience.

### **Jasmine Becomes Jane**

In Baden she meets Bud Wipplemeyer, an American banker who instantly falls in love with her. They eventually marry and Bud renames Jasmine 'Jane', yet another sign of her evolution. Bud encourages Jasmine to freely change roles from caregiver to temptress whenever she feels the desire to and views her sexuality through the lenses of his own oriental fantasy. Thus instead of denigrating Jasmine, serves to imbue her with a sexual confidence and she thrives on it. Her racial identity also morphs in Baden, for here her difference is recognized, but not comprehended or openly acknowledged. The community attempts to see her as familiar instead of alien. This new perception of her race is an essential part of her identity as Jane, because she feels assimilated now and in fact becomes the typical American she always wanted to be.

### **Jane Becoming Jase – Emerging New Personality**

The end of the novel finds Jasmine moving to California with Taylor, uncertain of what the future will bring but nevertheless confident in her decision to leave. The shifting of her identity from 'Jyoti' to 'Jasmine' to 'Jane' to 'Jase' is suggestive of the death of one personality and an emergence of a new, but it does not have negative implications. This sense of movement further reinforces the notion that her identity is forever evolving, she cannot remain in a stable life because disruption and change are the means of her survival. The surrounding environments influence the formation of her identities. She navigates between temporal and spatial locations, her perception of herself changes, thereby resulting in a multiplicity of consciousness. These

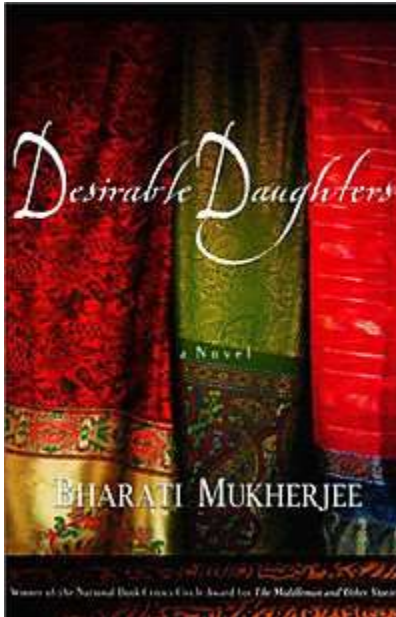
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create a tension within her and she feels the need to reconcile these conflicting perceptions, so that they do not wage a psychological war inside her. Thereby we see her reinvent her identity completely.



### **Accommodating Feminist Culture in South Asian Milieu in America**

Mukherjee's novel *Desirable Daughters* depicts the life of South Asian immigrants; ethnic minorities in the United States. The foremost and recurrent theme of *Desirable Daughters* is the conflict arising from the clash of native and foreign cultures. The main characters in the novel grapple with the challenge of accommodating the American feminist culture into their traditional Indian one. Tara Lata was first married to a tree in a ceremonial ritual, as a measure to mitigate the malefic aspects of her horoscope. It was earlier predicted by a Hindu astrologer that Tara's married life would be short-lived as a result of this malefic aspect. Such conceptions of marriage are mere superstitions from the point of view of feminism. The American feminist movement, which was informed by scientific, sociological and historical knowledge would never approve of such primitive practices in the name of orthodoxy. This is a typical example of the sorts of conflict that Tara and her sisters confront throughout the narrative text.

### **Contrast between Indian Society in India and America**

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The aforementioned example also brings to light the different ways in which societies are organized in India and in America. In India, the happiness of the individual is subordinate to the collective good of his/her community. More importantly, the role of women is to be supportive to their husbands in all circumstances. The individual needs and aspirations of women are not given due importance in what is essentially a patriarchal society. But the three sisters from Calcutta are no longer strictly bound by this primitive culture, for they find themselves in the midst of liberal America, where the scope of their freedom and expression is at its furthest from realities in India.

### **Identity Creation – A Continuous Process**

In her essay, Beulah R Jayashree remarks: “In Mukherjee’s *Desirable Daughters*, the creation of identity emerges as a continuous process forever transforming and never truly complete. Tara is a savvy, cosmopolitan world-traveler having beauty, brain, wealth and a privileged life as the wife of a Silicon Valley magnate” (Jayashree 14). Tara emigrates after marrying Bishwapriya Chatterjee, and arrives in America steeped in Indian culture exhibiting the behaviour of the paradigmatic Indian wife. Back at home, she had led a sheltered life where she was inundated with culture, tradition and values though inculcated with education by the Catholic nuns.

Thus when Tara reaches America she feels the tug between tradition and freedom as she tries to meet expectations that are often wildly contradictory. But then she immediately tries to embrace American culture taking advantage of the opportunities it affords and attempts to assimilate as best as she can to the new society. She finds it impossible to convey to her American friends -- citizens of comparatively classless, mobile society how circumscribed and static Indian identity is: “[It] is as fixed as any specimen in a lepidopterist’s glass case, confidently labelled by father’s religion (Hindu), caste (Brahmin), sub-caste (Kulin), mother-tongue (Bengali), place of birth (Calcutta)...” It goes on and on in ever decreasing circles. Although Tara and Bish had left Calcutta decades ago, she is always on the alert decoding names, manners and accents whenever she encounters strangers of Indian descent” (DD 85).

### **Frustrations**

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Tara's frustration at her endeavours to assimilate and Bish's lack of it eventually leads to a divorce. It marks her transition into a new identity and a liberated self. She soon recognizes that her sexuality is also an aspect of her identity, which she can possess and embrace, after being accosted by the same men who had been respectful towards her during her marriage. She realizes the sexual double standard, the unfair distinction between male and female sexuality in the Indian culture. Yet her life remains submerged by her ex-husband and her son Rabi, and her lover Andy Karolyi, a Hungarian Buddhist. It is only with Andy that her perceptions of sexuality get altered, since she becomes selfish, intimate and involved in a relationship without any expectations for the first time in her life. She creates a new sexual identity that does not come in conflict with her previous self perceptions. They merely get replaced by new, different perceptions. In parallel projection the two men in her life symbolize two diverse cultures and her cultural dilemma. Initially, she tries to seek solace by clinging on to the past through people, memories, visits or calls and by bonding with her two elder sisters, Parvati and Padma, who serve as links to a past that Tara has begun to forget. But the appearance of the mysterious Chris Dey exposes the shallow intercontinental relationship of the three sisters. He acts as both Tara's catharsis and nemesis. Finally Tara is shaken out of her complacency, and her emotional paralysis is shattered, as her family is stalked by a menace.

### **Consequences of Investigating the Past**

Tara's boyfriend Andy warns her about the consequences of investigating the past, as it has the power to dominate one's entire present. Tara proceeds with her quest and as the mystery unfolds she is forced to face her family, her past and a culture that she has distanced herself from, resulting in a conflict between old modes of thinking and new forms of consciousness that have been created. When her house is firebombed she is completely exhausted, making her yearning for a homeland and traditional life more acute. A trip back to India rekindles a desire to find her family's ancestral roots and their place in the history of pre-independent India. Tara Chatterjee is trying to discover herself and fit into her place in the universe. While struggling with the thought of getting back to her ex-husband and being pregnant with his child, she tries to understand her heritage and the actions of her ancestors which may and may not have contributed to the sum total of the person she has evolved into.

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## **Multiple Selves of a Person**

Bhagabat Nayak in his essay observes Tara's quest for identity in her new land. "Tara after time-traveling finds that she is comprised of multiple selves accepting or rejecting certain aspects of both Indian and American culture" (Nayak 23). She comes to terms with the idea that she never will have a single identity, but rather be dispersed between being Indian and American. She does not fight with her multiplicity but rather accepts it as part of her progressive capacity. The Sanskrit poem in the novel's foreword lays out Tara's mission: "No one behind, no one ahead. The path the ancients cleared has closed. And the other path, everyone's path, easy and wide, goes nowhere. I am alone and find my way" (DD 125).

## **A Space of Liminality**

It suggests a space of liminality and also portrays identity as a continuous journey rather than a fixed construction. Unlike Jasmine, in Tara there is no struggle between the emerging selves that caused Jasmine to remain always on the move and invent completely new identities. Tara's multiplicity evolves in a continuous process that she welcomes. She recognizes that living in the past, whether temporally, spatially or both, is dangerous to the development of one's identity. She keeps on changing and evolving, but at the same time does not lose the identities she had once possessed. Instead of transplanting Indian culture or disposing it off altogether, she tries to assimilate her Indianness through reinventing her identity, as experiences keep on turning it into something new over and over again.

## **Neither Unified Nor Hybrid**

The characters in Mukherjee's novel develop multiple consciousness, resulting in the sort of character who is neither unified nor hybrid, but rather fragmented. As the protagonists perceive both their race and sexuality through new and different lenses throughout the course of the text, they come to realize that the notion of a singular identity is a fallacy and the reality of the diasporic experience is the indeterminate multiplicity. This multiplicity becomes a significant plight of the characters, for as their different consciousnesses contradict each other, the characters are left uncertain as to the nature of their identities, not knowing where they fit in the

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American society. Finally they become capable of living in a world where individuals exist not as unified persons, but as many, bound by no borders with infinite possibilities of inventing identities.

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