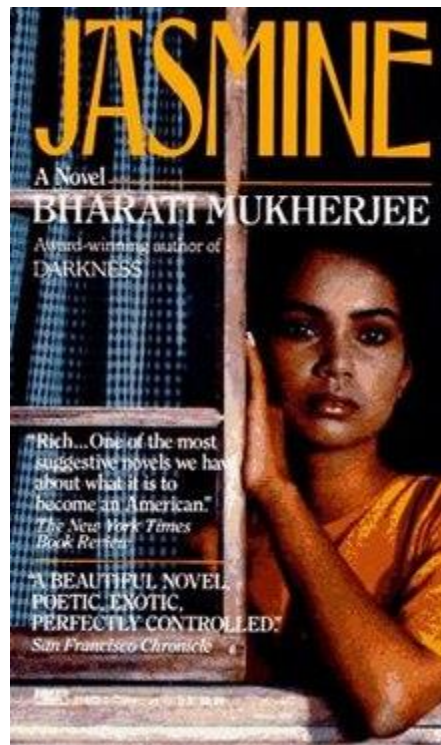


## *Jasmine: Re-Discovering and Re-Inventing Self* Anureet Gill

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### **Abstract**

Diasporic writing as a post- colonial perspective deals with concepts like marginalization, cultural insularity, social disparity racism and also creating a transnational space that is neither at home nor outside. The notion of space time and identity are integral components of culture which becomes problematic when the orient moves to a new country either to be assimilated into one or to create a separate ghetto as in trying to balance the ‘world of origin’ and the ‘world of adoption’ they keep oscillating between Indian ethos and American value system leading to dilemma as they realize that they are neither Indian, nor American. Bharati Mukherjee is one such diasporic writer who adopts the processes of assimilation as the only possible remedy to break the shackles of conventionalism in order to obliterate the past. The insulation of the expatriates from their own native culture leads to the distortion of the notion of identity. The research seeks to examine how Jasmine, the main protagonist of the novel *Jasmine*, re- invents her identity as an American, the conflict arising from the clash of native and foreign cultures, the extent to which Jasmine conforms to roles and identities imposed upon her by the patriarchal and American society and how she had to let go of her past in order to assimilate in a new culture, and the psychological trauma she endures in the process by using Homi Bhabha’s theory of

liminal space or in betweenness as it favours a dynamic identity that is always in a state of flux and refutes the notion of a singular monolithic identity.

**Keywords:** Bharati Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, moral conflict, cultural conflict, dilemma, acculturation

Today's contemporary world is marked by globalization and transnationalism that has led to mass migration of people, information and goods across world which Spivak defines as the 'new diaspora'. Bharati Mukherjee is one such Indian novelist whose works talk about these phenomena and her work revolves around women who leave India in order to settle in North America. Transnationalism has led to change in the notion of cultural identity from being homogenized concepts to being heterogeneous. Brah proposes that cultures should be understood as processes rather than as a fixed category, and that cultural difference should be comprehended without essentialism.

Bharati Mukherjee's novels are interwoven with reinvention and entanglement of time and place both in plot as well as in the character development. *Jasmine* not only talks about women's ideological liminality because of the patriarchal society, but also talks about the psychological transformation of Jasmine as the hybrid space she inhabits enables her to choose which elements of culture to retain or adopt by rejecting the notion of nostalgia.

### *Jasmine*

*Jasmine* (1989) is a novel that illustrates her cross-cultural experiences and her growth as a person in America as she tries to assimilate into American culture by assuming multiple identities and her dilemma of following the conservative Indian values and traditions that she had left behind. Having been born in a small conservative village in Hasnapur, Punjab, the novel traverses her journey from being a conformist small town girl to being free and modern women capable of taking her own decisions. The different names that she adorns in the process of assimilating in America, reflect her identity transformation. Mukherjee has presented a tale of two hybrid cultures where two divergent cultures of East and the West meet by interweaving the themes of class, quest for identity, history and psychological transformation.

### Space and Time

The notion of space and time, the integral components of cultural politics becomes problematic when the orient moves to assimilate into a new country. The journey of assimilating in a new culture can be violent as the native has to forget his culture and tradition in order to assimilate in a new country, but is unable to do so completely as their past keeps influencing their present. In *Jasmine*, Mukherjee examines the tension immigrants feel in the liminal space, caught between two cultures as well as the agency this betweenness affords them. The first chapter introduces the conflict between the Hindu "cultural sanction to multiple reinscriptions of self. For instance, when the astrologer told Jasmine that the mark on her face would bring nothing but destruction on the way and that her husband was destined to die due to her fate, she did not believe in his predictions as she felt that the future was unpredictable and bound to change. Jasmine's growth through the course of the story was not easy, she had to face a lot of obstacles in the way of her transformation. "We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the image of dreams" (*Jasmine* 25). This line clearly depicts that the process of

transformation was a violent one. Not only did she have to speak a new language and acquire new names and identities, but she also had to completely erase her violent past of murdering Half-Face Man, who raped her. Jasmine's rebirths as Jyoti, Jasmine, Kali, Jazzy, Jase and Jane represent stages in Jasmine's ever-changing process of self-identification and cultural influences she endures at each stage. After Prakash's death, Swamiji told Jasmine that "a person's highest mission is to create new life", She later realizes that her identity as Jasmine and her husband's dream of owning a shop called 'Vijh and Wife' were her versions of this "new life". It is through this redefinition of "new life" that Jasmine gains the agency to transform herself into a maximalist immigrant in true sense.

### Struggle to Assimilate

The novel also talks about Jasmine's struggle to assimilate into American culture, problems in defining gender boundaries and the implications of expatriatism. It also depicts her dilemma of following the conservative Indian values and traditions that she had left behind and the liberal American culture. This dichotomy is brought out in the novel as Jasmine Indian values keeps hindering with her present life. For instance, Jasmine's marriage to an Indian named Prakash is in contrast to her staying in a live-in relationship with Bud Ripple Mayor as *Jane* in Iowa. She is caught between the native culture and immigrant culture. Jasmine constantly shuffles in search of a concrete identity and debate whether to act according to the desire for freedom which the American life offers her or to be dutiful. The Indian consciousness in which she was raised, embodied by her grandmother, supports duty while the western consciousness embodied by her Manhattan employers Taylor and Wylie Hayes encouraged fulfilling ones dreams and desire.

Although her initial experience in America was traumatic as she was raped and robbed off her identity by a man named 'Half Face', it later helped her to grow as an individual she killed the man who had raped her and became a caretaker of Duff. In the process of assimilation, she realises the pitfalls of American culture where everything is evanescent. She could identify more with her adopted homeland than with their country of birth. Through the novel, Bharati Mukherjee also brings out the message that change, transformation, fluid identity, adaptability and finally assimilation are key to survival for immigrants." Jasmine speaks about fusion between two or more cultures which paves way for assimilate. Despite of her husband's death she moved to USA in hope for a better future and she also defied the Hindu tradition of marrying a boy after checking his horoscope, by not marrying a groom of her father's choice. When her husband Prakash died her grandmother blamed her as she did not marry the man that they had chosen for her: "If you had married a widower in Ludhiana that was all arranged. If you had checked the boy's horoscope and married like a Christian in some government office...if you had waited for a man I picked none of this would have happened...God was displeased. God send that Sardarji boy to do that terrible act (Mukherjee, 98). She refused this orthodox notion and took charge of her own life and decisions. *Dida, I said, if God send Sukhi to kill my husband and then I renounce God, I spit on him*(Mukherjee,89). After her husband's death, she was at cross roads as she was expected to commit sati or lead the life of a widower like her mother. But she did not adhere to it instead she left for America in hope of a better future and to fulfil her husband's dying wish. Even when she was raped by half faced man, she fought back by killing him, thus taking her revenge. Bharati Mukherjee uses the image of goddess Kali (goddess of

strength and destruction) and burning her old clothes as a sign of renouncing her earlier life in a hope for better future.

### **Dialectics of Culture**

In the article ‘Dialectics of Culture / Acculturation in Bharati Mukherjee’s Jasmine and Anita Desai’s Journey to Ithaca the author O.P Budholia, talks about how ‘Jasmine’ as a novel, deals with the concept of otherness and assimilation through the dialectics of culture and the socio psychological traumas relating to life of an expatriate. Jyoti marriage with Prakash Vijn helped her to become modern women. Jyoti as Jasmine fought the feudal laws in India and then in America so as to assimilate into their culture. Jasmine in the process of assimilation becomes symbolic of the duality of cultures the east and the west.

In the article Bharati Mukherjee’s Jasmine: Breaking the silence and weaving the web by Beena Agarwal , the author talks about how Jasmine in spite of being born in a conservative small village in Hasnapur challenges the patriarchal norms which did not allow women to speak for themselves. In spite of her traditional upbringing she nourishes her own dream of life but yet she faced cultural dilemma because of her upbringing. Prakash, her husband wanted her to take independent decisions and join his business, but the cultural restraints that constitute her psyche did not let her dissolve her identity in the unconventional progressive way of Prakash. He wanted her to call him by his first name, but Jasmine’s cultural code did not promote her to do so. Jasmine does not give up to the situations but offers a frontal challenge to the patriarchal thought, social organization and control mechanism in order to assimilate in the dynamic and progressive society of America where sexual moral codes are not so stringent, but yet she faced a cultural and moral dilemma. On one hand she had a dream “I wanted to distance myself from everything Indian, Jyoti like”, but at the same time she contemplated if her culture would allow her to do so being a widow.

### **Two Identities**

Bharati Mukherjee’s characters are enforced between two identities as they find it difficult to move away from their native culture but at the same time it’s not easy for them to identify with the dominant culture. Although Jasmine breaks the myth of single identity by trying to balance the ‘world of origin’ and the ‘world of adoption’ through the process of assimilation, she is unable to desert her native identity, and keeps oscillating between Indian ethos and American value system thus causing dilemma as they realize that they are neither Indian, nor an American. Their outer self is American, but inner self is Indian.

### **Multicentric Issues**

A lot of research has been done on singular concepts like gender bias, identity crisis, alienation and loneliness, migrants search for roots, racism, violence (both physical and psychological), un-housing, re-housing, and notions like conformity and non –conformity, that the protagonists face. However, my analysis of ‘Jasmine’ aims at discussing multicentric issues that the women protagonists face as expatriates like striving to create an American identity which lets to demolition of their native identity, how this predicament leads to psychological trauma as they are unable to let go of their native identity which is an inherent part of their ‘self’. Thus, my research encompasses aspects like identity crisis, psychological trauma, gender

relations and how they try to break free from the stereotypes of their native country as well as their acquired country. Although there are a lot of articles that provide insightful arguments which support my own claims, they either do not focus on all the aspects that I am dealing with in my work or their approach is different.

The research confines itself to study only a few aspects like identity crisis, psychological trauma, gender relations and how they try to break free from the stereotypes of their native country, amidst the myriad issues faced by the migrants.

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