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Research Article

## **Diasporic Identities in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine***

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### **Abstract**

*This paper analyzes the formation of Jasmine's fluid identities as her survival strategies in Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine*. While doing the textual analysis, theoretical notions like cultural identities, diasporic identities, and the concept of 'third space' are used as analytical tools in this article. In the process of her transformative journey, the young Indian female immigrant encounters cross-cultural challenges and complexities in the new world. She gradually adapts to different social and cultural landscapes of the American society and navigates a series of new identities. As a flexible immigrant, Jasmine develops her hybrid identities while living in diasporic locations in America. Initially Jasmine embodies a space of cultural negotiations and hybridity. Then she transcends the space of in-betweenness. She possesses a dynamic and evolving character. She is ever-changing according to the situation of new environments. She undergoes multiple identity transformations to locate herself in the American society. Her identity is formed according to the changes in her name from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jazzy to Jane. As a diasporic woman, she performs different facets of her multiple identities to situate and survive in the American society. Finally, the docile Indian widow turns into an independent active modern American woman. Due to her fluid identities, Jasmine is empowered and successfully transforms and assimilates into American culture. Jasmine survives in new diasporic locations because she moves forward courageously and independently.*

**Keywords:** Immigrants, diasporic locations, cultural landscapes, hybrid identities, fluid identities

### **Introduction**

The writer of *Jasmine*, Bharati Mukherjee (1940- 2017) was an Indian-born American novelist and short story writer. Mukherjee was born in Calcutta (now Kolkata), India. In order to pursue her higher education, she moved to the United States of America in 1961. As an immigrant she struggled hard in new cultural landscapes. In her writings, she has expressed her immigrant experiences, especially the issues of identity and cultural adaption.

In her early childhood days, Mukherjee was exposed to cross-cultural locations. It played a vital role in the formation of her character. Mukherjee got her higher education from America. After her marriage with a Canadian man, she lived in Canada. Then she again came back to America. With hard labor, she became a prominent Indian-American writer in America. By then she was an American citizen. Mukherjee being an Indian - Canadian and an American, she writes out of her own experience. Mukherjee claims herself an American writer. In her writings, she urges immigrants in America to adapt the mainstream American culture. She does not hesitate to embrace American way of life. It is a matter of adaptation and assimilation. Mukherjee's transformative journey replicates the changes taking place in South Asian immigrant women. They are capable of changing themselves in new cultural locations.

In the novel *Jasmine*, Mukherjee presents the experiences of immigrant women. As a diaspora woman, the writer projects her ideologies regarding the fluid and hybrid identities of immigrants in diasporic locations through the character of Jasmine. The female protagonist is born in Hasnapur, Jallandhar district of Punjab, India where daughters are considered as a burden. In this issue, Jasmine points out, "If I had been a boy, my birth in a bountiful year would have marked me as lucky, a child with a special destiny to fulfill. But daughters were curses" (39). This is a patriarchal mindset which gives priority to boys. Girls are humiliated and taken as a burden by the parents. In the expectation of male child, many girls are born in a family. As a child, she is named Jyoti by her parents. Once Jyoti gets hurt and has scars on her face. Her sisters warn her, "Now your face is scarred for life! How will the family ever find you a husband?" (5). Jyoti is discriminated in her own family. As a child, Jyoti is confined within her parents' house. After her marriage, she is controlled by her husband. These restrictions on Jyoti have been culturally sanctioned. Due to their physical and psychological hardships, girls become "old at twenty-two" (15). It shows that Jyoti has no agency.

Jyoti tries to find her identity through her relationship with men in her life. However, her identity does not remain the same with each different man in the novel. Jyoti adopts a new identity with each new man. Jyoti is renamed Jasmine after she gets married with Prakash. Then she is transferred from an extended family to a nuclear family. After Prakash's murder, Jasmine flees from India to America. It is Jasmine's diasporic journey. In New York City, Jasmine becomes the nanny to Duff. Taylor, Duff's father falls in love with Jasmine (now Jase). Taylor treats her exotic but the other from different cultural background. Then Jase flees to Iowa to begin her life with a new identity. She moves with Bud who renames her as Jane. Jasmine is always in flux. She keeps on fleeing and adopting new identities. Her fluidity enables her adapt to the new cultural locations in America.

### Statement of the Problem

Jasmine as a young immigrant from India travels to America for seeking a new self and fulfilling her dreams of becoming a modern independent woman. Her desire for freedom and self-discovery compels her to leave India. However, Jasmine encounters many challenges in a new cultural location. Despite her pain and suffering, Jasmine copes with the complexities of her diasporic life.

### Research Questions

This paper deals with the following research questions:

What compels Jasmine to move from one cultural location to another?

Why cannot Jasmine maintain her fixed identity in diasporic locations?

How does Jasmine overcome the challenges and complexities of diasporic identities in America?

### Hypothesis

Jasmine moves to America from India in search of her freedom and new experience. She undergoes a transformative journey in America. Jasmine embraces her fluid identities to survive in new cultural locations. She transforms herself by integrating new cultural values to survive and establish herself in America.

### Review of Literature

Bharati Mukherjee portrays her own personal experiences of being an immigrant in *Jasmine*. The protagonist of the novel is a young Indian widowed immigrant who undergoes many challenges and complexities in different cultural locations. This literature review primarily revolves around the main character Jasmine who undergoes a transformative journey to a new world.

Jasmine while in India is called Jyoti by her parents. She is born in a rural area of Punjab, India. She is confined within a patriarchy. In this regard, Anne Brewster comments, “Mukherjee’s ‘conversion’ narrative invests India with the status of the ‘old world’” (3). The cultural setting of India where Jyoti is born is traditional, rigid and dogmatic. There is discrimination in terms of gender, caste and creed. Brewster elaborates further, “The old world of India is figured in ways that are repressive: India represented for her ‘that kind of Third world hierarchy where your opportunities are closed by caste, gender, or family’ (3). India is the point of origin of Jasmine where she is passive and voiceless. She is without any agency. Her husband Prakash gets killed in a bomb blast. Her husband wanted to pursue his further education in America. After his death, Jasmine decides to fulfill her husband’s wish. So, she immigrates to America illegally.

The main character Jasmine flees to new cultural locations and grapples with numerous challenges related to her diasporic identities. Her journey is towards independence and freedom. Regarding Mukherjee’s main character Jasmine’s diasporic challenges and her transformations, Donna Schlosser critiques:

In the fictional autobiography *Jasmine*, by Bharati Mukherjee, an illegal Hindu immigrant in the United States reviews her past as she meditates upon her present circumstances and future prospects. Narrative events shift time and place during moments when the 24-year-old narrator’s recollections fuse the extraordinary in life with the commonplace. The narrative structure of juxtaposed settings and hybrid recollections mirrors the complexity of the narrator’s identity. Periodic renaming and refashioning of the narrator’s identity, coinciding with the absorption of cultural experience, fuels critical debate. (25)

The narrative voice of the twenty-four old woman is central to the novel. *Jasmine*, an illegal Hindu immigrant grapples with diasporic complexities. She persistently navigates multiple identities in different social and cultural locations and culturally adapts them. Her adaptability has been one of the survival skills.

Mukherjee’s works revolve around the immigrant women’s diasporic experiences. While confronting with alien cultures, they undergo bitter experiences like discrimination and humiliation. However, they aspire to adapt to the new culture. Regarding Jasmine’s transformation and adaptability in new cultural locations, Geoffrey Kain states:

In *Jasmine* we see most clearly not only the evolution of the central character (Jasmine) as she enters the unfamiliar American culture and moves through an oscillating series of painful and

joyful experiences, but we are asked by the author to comprehend Jasmine's metamorphosis (and her impact on the culture) through the implicit interplay of American myth and Hindu religious imagery. (151)

Jasmine, the protagonist of Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* is an evolving character. She keeps on changing according to the contexts. She survives in a new world because she is able to transform herself. Jill Roberts also remarks about Jasmine's adoptive quality, "In the course of the novel *Jasmine* (originally "Jyoti") transforms into "Jazzy", "Jase", "Jane" even "Kali," with each constructed identity conforming to its adoptive context: a family, community or an individual" (89).

The above reviews of the immigrant writer Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* and its protagonist Jasmine who transforms from an ignorant Indian rural girl to an independent modern American woman demonstrate that Jasmine is a dynamic character. In her diasporic journey, she transforms herself in new cultural locations. The above reviews reveal the need of a critical analysis on various facets of Jasmine's fluid and hybrid identities in diasporic cultural locations. In this paper, it is tried to fulfill this research gap.

### **Theoretical Framework: Notions of Cultural Identity and Diasporic Identities, and the Concept of 'Third Space'**

This paper revolves around the formation of multiple identities of immigrants, particularly Jasmine in the diasporic landscapes. This theoretical framework comprises of the notions of culture and identity, ideas of diasporic identities and the concept of Third Space.

#### **Notions of Cultural Identity**

The word "culture" is derived from the Latin word *cultura* which means "cultivation" or "care". Culture has been differently viewed in different periods by different thinkers. The British Marxist and culture expert Raymond Williams states that "... cultural practices are forms of material production" (127). All ideologies are politically and culturally constructed. So, culture is defined seeing the historical and social conditions. Similarly, the term identity has several facets of meaning. Culture and identities are inseparably related notions. Human beings have regarded the issues of identity seriously. According to Jostein Gaarder, men's curiosity and concerns about their existence, identity and values for life have lasted "as long as man has lived on this planet" (12). People are identified through their cultural practices. Now hybrid cultural identities are being borne across the world. In other words, hybrid identities are the diasporic identities. Cultural identities are fluid. In this regard, Stuart Hall strongly believes that cultural identity "is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture" (113). Cultural identities exist within the representations of history and culture.

#### **Diasporic Identities**

The origin of the concept of diaspora goes back to the Greek history. The ancient Greeks used the term to describe their spreading all over the world. The term traditionally refers to Jews community who got scattered after Babylonian captivity. From biblical perspective, it is the Exodus of Israelites, a traumatic exile from homelands. In recent times, the term diaspora is associated with colonial experience. Colonialism caused the displacement of people across the world. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin view, "Colonialism itself was a radically diasporic movement, involving the temporary or permanent dispersion and settlement of millions of Europeans over the entire world" (61). The displacement caused by colonialism extended the meaning of diaspora. Living in the diaspora is to experience the trauma of migration, displacement and rootlessness. The protagonist of *Jasmine* encounters all these issues but she overcomes these complexities by forming fluid identities in diasporic locations.

## Concept of 'Third Space'

Hybrid identities are created in Homi K. Bhabha's "Third Space". In other words, it is an in-between space where cultural exchanges and transformations take place. It is a dynamic location in which multiple hybrid identities are formed. According Bhabha, "It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew" (37). Meanings or significations are discursively produced. The locationality of Jasmine in a new world is "Third Space". It is a fluid or dynamic space in which hybrid multiple identities are formed. Third Space can be considered a melting pot in which diverse cultures and ideologies are processed and synthesized. This is how hybrid identities are constructed.

## Textual Analysis: Jasmine's Diasporic Journey and her Transformative Identities

This textual analysis critically examines Jasmine's transformative journey from India to America, her challenges and complexities as an immigrant, and her multiple diasporic identity formations.

Jyoti (later Jasmine) was born into a conservative, patriarchal family in a rural area of Hasnapur of Punjab, India. Being one of the five daughters out of nine children, she is unwanted in the family. At her early age, Jyoti gets married to a promising Indian man named Prakash Vijk. Considering Jyoti as a traditional name, Prakash renames her Jasmine. Her family and the society expect her to be an ideal Indian wife. Yet, they do not treat Jasmine equally in dignity and worth. Meanwhile Prakash is accepted by the Florida International Institute of Technology in America. She is nurtured in a rigid, conservative patriarchal Indian society. As a result, Jasmine has a conservative mindset about sex and sexuality. Regarding American women she thinks, "There will be all those hot-blooded American girls. You know what they are like." (91). Till now, Jasmine is quite ignorant about the complexities of racial and ethnic identities in America.

Being a liberal, progressive, and educated Indian, Prakash respects Jasmine's sentiments and privacy. Prakash Vijk, according to Jasmine, "was a modern man, a city man" (76). Prakash helps her in her transformation from 'Jyoti' to 'Jasmine'. "He [Prakash] wanted to break down the Jyoti 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" (77). Prakash's renaming of Jyoti as Jasmine is a sign of her new and modern identity. Jyoti represents traditional Indian customs and cultures whereas Jasmine a modern Indian woman. Initially, Jasmine shuttles between these two identities.

At the age of seventeen, she becomes a widow when Prakash is murdered. Then she decides to flee to America by hook or by crook to fulfill Prakash's dream to migrate to America. "Prakash had taken Jyoti and created Jasmine, and Jasmine would complete the mission of Prakash" (97). Her family members are stupefied seeing a village girl going to America alone. Here Jasmine wants to come out of the trauma of her husband's murder. Most importantly, she wants to be free from the claustrophobia of her native place. Coincidentally, she hears deceased Prakash's voice exhorting her, "There is no dying, there is only an ascending or a descending, a moving onto other planes. Don't crawl back to Hasnapur and feudalism. That Jyoti is dead" (96). After Jasmine arrives in Florida, she meets Half-Face, the captain of the ship. He takes advantage seeing her helplessness. He maltreats her as a sexual being. He brutally rapes her in a motel. She is filled with shame and fear. "I determined to clean my body as it had never been cleaned, with the small wrapped bar of soap, and to purify my soul with all the prayers I could remember from my father's and my husband's

cremations. This would be a fitting place to die. I had left my earthly body and would soon be joining their souls" (117). She wants to end her mission by killing herself there. Suddenly, she is driven by her revenge motive. Jasmine then stabs Half-Face to death. Then Jasmine vows to start her own life in America. The incident of her rape becomes a turning point in her life. Then she is transformed as an independent and autonomous woman.

Jasmine keeps on moving forming multiple identities in diasporic locations. She refashions her identity in the dominant culture of America. These locations for her are "a dynamic space" (Bhabha 37). In this domain of third space or in-betweenness, multiple hybrid identities are formed. According to him, there is "no primordial unity or fixity (37). Moreover, the central character of *Jasmine* goes beyond hybridity seeking new life in an alien land. She embraces fluidity and transformation. Lillian Gordon, a social worker provides Jasmine a temporary shelter and helps her find a job in New York. She renames Jasmine 'Jazzy', a westernized nickname. Jazzy learns how to walk, dress, and speak. Lillian reminds Jazzy, "... if you walk and talk American, they'll think you were born here. Most American can't imagine anything else" (134-135). Lillian teaches her the process of assimilation. Now Jasmine is no more helpless and ignorant Indian immigrant.

Jasmine is already in a process of transformation in a new cultural location. She sees the possibility of becoming an American. "I checked myself in the mirror, shocked at the transformation. Jazzy in a T-shirt, tight cords, and running shoes. I couldn't tell if with the Hasnapuri sidle I'd also abandoned my Hasnapuri modesty" (133). Now Jasmine is a new personality. She is being cut off from her past. In New York, Jasmine moves to a traditional Indian family where she is suffocated recalling herself as Jyoti in Punjab, India. This particular location in New York becomes a stasis in her transformation. "In this apartment of artificially maintained Indianness, I wanted to distance myself from everything Indian, everything Jyoti-like" (145). Jyoti is constantly willing to possess new identities in new situations in America.

While living in Hayes family, with Taylor, his wife Wylie and their adopted daughter Duff, Jasmine excels English language as an ultimate means to empower herself in America. Through English, she appropriates American culture. Gradually she adapts to American life and culture. Related to this issue, Frantz Fanon writes, "To speak means to be in a position to use certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language but it means above all to assume a culture. . . . A man who has language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language" (87). English language competence gives her courage to interact with Americans. Acquiring language means acquiring culture because they are inseparable. Taylor constructs her new identity calling her "Jase" and "Jazzy". Gradually, they develop their intimate relationship.

Identity issues are subtle and complex. In Hayes family, Jasmine is not directly discriminated because they are educated and culturally sensitive. "Educated people are interested in differences; they assume that I'm different from them but exempted from being one of "them," the knife-wielding un-documents hiding in basements webbing furniture" (33). Despite her specific racial difference, Jasmine is embraced in the community of Taylor and his friends. Jasmine transforms herself to fulfill her own yearning for personal change. In New York apartment, Jasmine transforms as an adventurous Jase. This quote shows her personality changes:

Jase was a woman who bought herself spangled heels and silk chartreuse pants. . . . Jasmine lived for the future, for Viji & Wife. Jase went to movies and lived for today. In my closet hung stain blouses with vampish necklines, in my dresser lingerie . . . For every Jasmine the reliable caregiver, there is a Jase the prowling adventurer. I thrilled to the tug of opposing forces. (176-177)

At times, Jasmine's past gets manifested in her. She wants to get rid of her past. He wants to live at present.

Jasmine undergoes internal conflict between her past and the present. She decided to flee to Baden County, Iowa to start new life. There Jasmine creates her new identity meeting Bud Ripplemeyer, an American banker. She is renamed as Jane after their marriage. Bud treats her as his sexual being and his companion. Bud encourages Jasmine to “change roles, from caregiver to temptress” (36) whenever she desires to do so. Bud views her through the lens of his Orientalism fantasy. For him she is dark, mysterious inscrutable. Being filled with sexual confidence, she now sees herself as a desired sexual being. She is able to rejuvenate Bud. It is Jasmine’s new identity. She completely appropriates American culture and assimilates herself in Baden community. “I whisper the name, Jase, Jase, Jase, as if I am calling someone I once knew”(215). Jasmine is no more an alien. We can see Jasmine westernized. “They tell me I have no accent, but I don’t sound Iowan, either. I’m like those voices on the telephone, very clear and soothing. Maybe Northern California, they say” (13). The Baden community sees her as almost white, no more South Asian. Jasmine becomes a typical American that she always wanted to be. She establishes her new cultural identity by changing her desires, habits and her attitude.

Jasmine is a fluid and dynamic character. She is not confined to a place. In this regard, Ravichandran and Deivasigamani aptly call the story of Jasmine as the “story of an identity in motion” (533). With every change in her name, she gets new identity. She again moves to California with Taylor. Jasmine will again create a new identity in a new place. Her diasporic identity is ever evolving. Regarding cultural identity, Stuart Hall asserts that cultural identity is “not fixed essence at all” (113). Cultural identity is not static but a fluid concept. Identity formation is an ongoing process. Describing her identity, Jasmine says, “I have had a husband for each of the women I have been. Prakash for Jasmine, Taylor for Jase, Bud for Jane. Half-Face for Kali” (197). Jasmine’s identity is always in the process of making, breaking and making and so on. She rejects the essentialist concept of cultural identity.

### Conclusion: Jasmine’s Fluid Identities as Her Survival Strategies

Jasmine is a tale of an Indian widowed woman who migrates to America to fulfill her futuristic aspirations. An illiterate and ignorant Punjabi girl Jyoti is renamed Jasmine by her Indian husband Prakash. Then he inculcates his dreams of going to America in her. She enters America with a trauma of her husband Prakash’s murder in India. Her diasporic journey is full of challenges, dilemmas and uncertainties. America is a new cultural location for her. Upon her arrival in the United States she is sexually abused. As a survivor, she accepts all challenges and is determined to lead an independent life. She moves from one cultural location to another and readily accepts the new cultural practice. Jasmine tries to create her new identities in new cultural locations.

Jasmine learns English language and American ways of life wholeheartedly to adapt American culture. She is not confined within certain boundaries. Jasmine undergoes many transformations in America: Kali, Jazzy, Jose and Jane. The changes in her name reveal Jasmine’s multifaceted diasporic identities. Her shifting identities enable her to adapt the new environments. Due to her fluid identities, Jasmine survives in new social and cultural locations. Finally, she becomes a brave and free-spirited woman in America. The process of making and breaking her identities continues. At last, she moves to California with Taylor. She is still in her transformative journey. Her identity is ever evolving. Jasmine’s diasporic identity is not fixed. Her transformative journey is guided by her survival instinct. Jasmine’s fluid identities are her survival strategies.

The issue of diasporic identity formations is vast. This article lacks the comprehensive analysis of various facets of diasporic identities depicted in *Jasmine*. I have not thoroughly read the other novels of Bharati Mukerjee which deal with the diasporic identities of the immigrants. There

is a vast body of secondary literature on *Jasmine*. This paper also lacks a comprehensive literature review. The theoretical framework is also selective and limited. Despite all my limitations, I have tried my best to critically analyze the protagonist's diasporic identities as depicted in *Jasmine*. The immigrants' diasporic identities are the burning issues of the contemporary world.

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