

**Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* – The Novelist's Positive Vibe on Diaspora**

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Paper Received on 21-05-2025, Accepted on 27-06-2025  
Published on 29-06-25; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.10.2.640

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**Abstract**

Bharati Mukherjee dovetails fiction and experience to bring out the classic *Jasmine* on diaspora. She does not dwell on the travails of the immigrant community alone but rather succeeds in stamping a positive note on immigrants and their lives in America. In her attempt to showcase the fact that her views are quite different from other diasporic writers, Bharati Mukherjee projects different dimensions of her protagonist. For instance, Jasmine of *Jasmine* is astute. She adopts multiple identities to suit her needs and camouflage her real self. She exposes the correspondence between hybridity and assimilation to introduce the modern diasporic culture. This becomes all the more conspicuous with America becoming a melting pot of cultures. Finally, this paper highlights the detail of how the shifting conscience of the protagonist suits the changed immigrant experience with a positive perception of 'alien' experience.

**Keywords:** identity, hybridity, assimilation, conscience, alienation

**Introduction:**

Bharati Mukherjee is not a traditionalist in her projection of diaspora. *Jasmine* is out of the usual run of things. It is not moralistic or authoritarian on diaspora. She admits this: "Unlike writers such as Anita Desai or R.K. Narayan, I do not write in Indian English about Indians living in India. My role models, view of

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the world and experiences are unlike theirs. These writers live in a world in which there are still certainties and rules. They are part of society's mainstream." (Alson B. Carb, 35) While writing about diasporic consciousness, Mukherjee is diagnostic on American ambiguities: "In America, nothing lasts. I can say that now and it doesn't shock me, but I think it was the hardest lesson of all for me to learn, to adjust, to participate only to find the monuments are plastic, agreements are nulled. Nothing is for ever, nothing is so terrible or so wonderful, that it won't disintegrate." (*Jasmine*, 181) When the protagonist meets successive disasters in her life, she does not wither but explores the alternatives with gusto: "Adventure, risk, transformation; the frontier is pushing indoors through uncaulked windows. Watch me reposition the stars, I whisper to the astrologer who floats cross-legged above my kitchen stove." (240) This is the attitude of Bharati Mukherjee also: "I believe in the existence of alternate realities and this belief makes it evident in my fiction." (Alison B. Carb, 35)

### **Tradition And Individuality**

The novelist wants her readers to appreciate the sagacity of her protagonist. Her prominence stems from her preserving and practising the tradition and culture of the country of her exile in her thoughts and deeds. At the same time, when the second generation immigrants change over to the culture of the dream land and become 'hybrid' citizens, the natives do not cherish it. For instance, Du, a Vietnamese, the adopted child of Bud Ripplemeyer, is 'hybrid' while Jasmine is 'genetic' revealing mostly all the virtues of her native values. But, at times, she conceals this treasure of nativity or even tries to discard them and cover herself with the veil of the culture of the country of settlement. This equates her with Punjab, her native state: "...just as Punjab had reached the final phase of a social order that had gone on untouched for thousands of years." (229) "The America Jasmine enters and drifts in is a changed social order where thousands of immigrants, in fact, too many of them, are responsible for the change." (S. Sivaraman, 216) When Bharati Mukherjee affirms that she is an American writer catering to the American readers, her declaration includes the conveyance of this perception of changed values in the American society to the conventional American readers. According to the novelist, Jasmine is different because, as a heroine, after being born in a "newly independent (and emerging country)" which is plagued by civil and religious conflicts" is uprooted and absorbs "two hundred years of American history" and learns "to adapt to American society." (S. Sivaraman, 217) Mukherjee's poser is threadbare. She presents a new version of the protagonist in which she dispenses with Indian cultural heritage without inquisitively looking into the brilliance of the thousands of years old tradition and adopts just two hundred years old American history to become genetically modified

American. But the precarious standpoint persists. In these modern days of conglomeration of ethnic and racial prejudices rocking the different parts of the globe, “will equality and identification remain only an ethical aspiration that cannot be realised without recourse either to despotism or to an act of fraternity?” (Octavio Paz) Jasmine, thus, becomes an icon of what it is to become an American. Mukherjee deploys journey as a metaphor to bring to light the composite personality traits of the protagonist. The novelist’s dexterity lies in merging these diverse identities without dissolving even one of them. (N. Swamy, 162)

### **3. Identity Makeovers**

Jasmine adopts multiple identities to achieve her ends. For her first identity change, Prakash is the causative factor and the passion involves her tortuous journey across three continents. In the next identity alteration, the man involved is Half-Face, who brutalizes her and viciously rapes her. Unable to bear his rude conduct, she stabs him to death and walks out. The Indian culture innate in her makes her “death wish switches into a survival instinct and she repays violence with murder. Her identity is now an illegal immigrant charged with homicide. The impact of rape has a revitalizing aspect in that she is made to carve her own survival. In other words, she becomes, in a way, analogous to the legendary phoenix bird since, at every stage, a new identity of Jasmine emerges when the old identity is forcefully eliminated. This conceptual detail turns out to be a recurring motif and is better understood in Jasmine’s clarification of her stand when Jasmine turns to Jase at the mercy of Taylor: “Taylor didn’t want to change me...I changed because I wanted to.” (185) Her journey discloses a universal pattern which varies with her domicile status. For instance, the gender norms and systems of power relate to patriarchy in India and ethnic tenets in America. Thus the multiple identities stimulate the psyche of Jasmine and make her conscience adapt to shifting values according to the persons and environment in a diasporic reality. Only then, she can subsist in the conditions in which she is wedged.

She states with conviction that she is speaking on behalf of “the New Americans” from non-traditional immigrant countries. (P. Mallikarjuna Rao, 39) The minority Americans have played a vital role in redefining the culture and tradition of America but the mainstream American fiction does not take into account their contributions. (Bharati Mukherjee, 1) Bharati Mukherjee is vehement since the immigrants despite their “sophistication and struggle and hunger to belong” do not get the respect due to them from the conventional American writers. Hence she takes upon herself the responsibility of recording their struggles and agonies.

### **Hybridity And Assimilation**

Hybridity is synonymous with assimilation in the diasporic parlance. The migrant has to dissociate with all the snags associated with the confluence of different cultural conglomerations and become part of the mainstream culture of the alien land. Jasmine of *Jasmine* treats as utter adversity by shunting between the past and the present towards achieving a future of one's design. Jasmine does not prefer to remain a second rated migrant-turned-citizen. Instead, she aims at growing into a self-asserting individual and assimilating into the archetypal American culture and tradition. Her adventure is modelled on the typical American dream. She tumbles into the chasm of corruption and battles with misadventures. But this toughens her stand and convinces her to dump her motive of ritual suicide to move forward to explore the 'land of opportunities.' When she murders Half-Face to avenge the sexual assault on her, she is actually murdering her inhibited or doubtful mind set in favour of a strong will. The act also fortifies her against any future assaults through hardening her feelings and emotions and directs her towards her goal. "Mukherjee has called Jasmine 'a very real feminist' who leaves behind 'a world of despair,' and has observed that the sort of 'gumption' and/or 'hustlerism' she learns to show in the States evokes the image which Americans traditionally have of themselves." (Runar Vignisson, 163) Jasmine represents the voice of the "New America," and the "an American neo-nationalism." For Mukherjee, the choice is clear: to choose hybridity is to choose expatriation over full citizenship. As a result, in *Jasmine*, the hybrid, fluctuating and flexible self loses out to the self-governing self of 'citizenship' in a country where 'prospect' counts on an individual's faculty to seize the country from someone else and stake out the territory. (Runar Vignisson, 160)

### **America – The Melting Pot**

The cutting-edge postulation of the post-modern environment that America is a melting pot for different cultures and there is every need to achieve assimilation to integrate into the so called 'native' American culture has become antediluvian. In America, cultural or racial divergence does not pose any discomfiture or mortification. Rather, it has drawn recognition in self-esteem and dignity. The stand-in concepts are 'mosaic' coined by Joan Morrison and Charlotte Fox Zabusky, 'quilt' created by Wesley Brown and Amy Ling and 'salad bowl.' There is a paradigm shift in values. The accent moves away from 'assimilation' to the 'recognition' of alien cultures and 'tolerance' of multiple ethnic communities as parts of an aggregate society. In the context of the new pattern of American literary environment, Bharati Mukherjee feels that "some forgivable fraud is involved in the maintenance of expatriation." She adds: "...in literary terms, being an immigrant is very déclassé. There is a low-grade ashcan

realism implied in the very material...The Exiles...come wrapped in a cloak of mystery and world-weariness. By refusing to play game of immigration, they certify to the world and especially to their hosts, the purity of their pain and moral superiority to the world around them.

### **The Protagonist's Shifting Conscience**

Jasmine's obsession with one of the determining influences, family, can be looked into in the framework of her shifting conscience. Clark Blaise's words ricochet in the diasporic context with regard to the immigrants' dilemma: "Family, family, family. In India, all is finally family. If we in the West suffer the nausea of disconnectedness, alienation, anomy, the Indian suffers the oppression of kinship." (Blaise, Clark and Bharati Mukherjee. *Days and Nights in Calcutta*. New York: Doubleday, 1977) Blaise's blatant view on kinship may sound compatible in the American societal pattern. But in the Indian cultural nexus, uniqueness of family ties is critical. No doubt, Jasmine is disenchanted with the tradition and culture of the country of her exile but at every turn she tries to blueprint the familiar alliances but her patterns of family are in contravention of her native land's picture. The very introduction of her [Indian] husband Prakash happens to be his voice in the Punjab's political scenario: "I fell in love with that voice. It was low, grave, unfooled. I was prepared to marry the man who belonged to that voice" (66) and adds, "only a very tall and a very strong man could have a voice like that." (67) Her marriage is unconventionally celebrated: "Ours was a no dowry, no guests, Registry Office wedding." (75) The conscience of the woman protagonist could be examined even through her shifting images and identity crisis. Most of Mukherjee's women are characters bent upon drifting towards American materialism. Jasmine is no exclusion. Bharati Mukherjee's intentions are apparent: "I am in fact writing about American more than about dark-complexioned immigrants. My focus is on the country on how it is changing minute by minute. My stories explore the encounter between the mainstream American culture and the new one formed by the migrant stream. I'm really writing about joining of two cultures. Many expatriate writers are destroyed by their duality; I personally feel nourished by it." (17)

### **Conclusion**

*Jasmine* is counted as the Avant-garde novel of Bharati Mukherjee which symbolizes a defining moment in her literary career. In the earlier works, her thoughts hovered between "expatriation" and "immigration" and from *Jasmine* onwards, she has reached a point of no return by shedding her nostalgia and assimilating herself in the mainstream American literary movement catering to the American readers through the adoption of her "Maximalist" credo.

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