



# Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*: Navigating the Path to Self-Identity

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**Abstract:** Identity is not a fixed, innate trait but a complex and evolving process. It is shaped both by inheritance and personal development, emerging from the interplay between the individual and society. Factors such as culture, religious freedom, tradition, economic opportunity, and lifestyle all influence identity formation. This process is often beyond one's control, and individuals may possess multiple or fragmented identities. Bharati Mukherjee's own experiences with marginalization and racial bias—first as an expatriate in Canada and later as an immigrant in the United States—deeply inform her literary work. These themes are embodied in her characters, particularly in *Jasmine*. The protagonist, Jasmine, exemplifies the struggle to establish a sense of self amid adversity. She continually reinvents herself in an effort to escape her former identities, not realizing that her past is an inseparable part of who she is. Ultimately, Jasmine comes to understand that forming a true identity involves embracing, not erasing, her previous selves.

**Key Words:** Identity, Marginalization, Displacement, Immigration, Formation, Alienation, Assimilation, Acculturation.

**Introduction:** Bharati Mukherjee, a distinguished modern Indian writer, was born in India and later settled in the United States. Her personal journey through India, Canada, and America profoundly shaped both her worldview and her creative voice. Writing predominantly from a female perspective, Mukherjee places women at the center of her narratives, exploring how immigration transforms their lives. Her female protagonists often grapple with feelings of alienation, displacement, identity struggles, and longing for their homeland. Mukherjee focuses on women from the Third World who break free from the constraints of traditional patriarchal societies. Her own encounters with cultural dislocation and racial prejudice in Canada, her transition from being an exile to becoming an immigrant within America's multicultural framework, her return visit to India, and eventual integration into American society are all

echoed in the emotional and psychological landscapes of the main characters in her novels from those respective phases of her life.

**Discussion:** Identity formation can be examined through various lenses, including race, gender, minority status, and culture. It involves a conscious process of reflecting on one's emotions, thoughts, behaviors, and interactions with others—especially those with different cultural norms and values. This process shapes how individuals understand their purpose, their role in society, and their perspectives on life, death, and uncertainty. Identity links the personal self with the collective culture, forming a unified sense of self rooted in both individual and communal contexts. It evolves—or is hindered—through a complex interplay between the self and society.

Philosophers and scholars have offered diverse definitions of identity. Classical views emphasize continuity amidst change or unity within diversity. John Locke suggested that identity arises from comparing a person or object at one time and place to its existence at another. David Hume emphasized time as central to identity, arguing that the idea of sameness is formed by observing continuity despite changes in context. Most philosophers agree with Hume's view that identity involves recognizing sameness over time. Erik Erikson described personal identity as “the self-sameness and continuity of one's sameness and continuity.” In philosophical terms, identity refers to the defining traits that distinguish one entity from another, while in everyday understanding, it's simply what makes someone or something unique or consistent over time.

In psychological terms, an individual's identity is considered to be established when they are in a position to meet their personal needs and can consistently fulfill roles within their community. However, the concept of identity—and the awareness of it—has expanded beyond the individual, now encompassing groups, institutions, social classes, professions, and even entire nations. The search for identity reflects the modern individual's spiritual journey to rediscover a sense of belonging after losing traditional social and spiritual anchors. Emphasizing the importance of having a strong foundation, K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar observed, “Only a tree that has deep roots into the soil could put forth sufficient foliage and yield abundant fruit,” highlighting the idea that identity requires a deep connection to one's origins.

When a person's sense of rootedness or belonging is disrupted, it often leads to an identity crisis. This is especially true for individuals experiencing a unique kind of confusion—such as those shaped by a colonial mindset—who are particularly vulnerable to such struggles. In today's diasporic context, individuals often possess multiple, overlapping identities, and their personal identity emerges from the interaction of these varied elements. Immigrants frequently grapple with unsettling questions: *Where do I truly belong? Have I severed my roots? Does this new place accept me? Do I accept it? Am I stuck here, with no way back?*

Personal and diasporic identity is often shaped by ethnic and cultural affiliations, but it also hinges on the dynamics between the periphery and the center, or between tradition and modernity. For someone in the diaspora, identity is fluid and constantly evolving. Such individuals maintain awareness of both their past and present lives, allowing them to understand their identity across the timeline of their experiences. As Satendra Nandan notes, “Diasporic identities constantly produce and reproduce themselves through transformation and differences,” highlighting the ever-changing nature of identity in displacement.

Bharati Mukherjee is a distinguished contemporary Indian author who holds a significant place among Indian English novelists, particularly those who have migrated from their homeland to settle abroad. She is widely recognized as a prominent voice expressing the experiences of the expatriate and immigrant consciousness. Mukherjee’s novels delve into the challenges of adapting to foreign cultures and the identity struggles faced by women in the diaspora, especially in the contexts of the United States, Canada, and India. Her fiction—both novels and short stories—centers on themes of self-discovery. Her female protagonists often embark on journeys to find personal meaning and a sense of identity, navigating the tensions between traditional values and modern life.

*Jasmine* (1989) stands as one of Bharati Mukherjee’s most acclaimed novels. It explores themes of expatriation and assimilation on both physical and psychological levels. In this work, Mukherjee dramatizes the process of Americanization through the journey of a young Indian woman who endures hardship and eventually finds success while striving to create a new identity. Jasmine's character is marked by a deep desire to move beyond the feeling of exile, driven by a determination to establish a sense of belonging and to find a place she can truly call home.

*Jasmine* tells the story of a young woman from rural India who embarks on a journey across continents in search of a new life and identity. As she moves through various cities and countries, she undergoes several transformations, adopting new roles and names that reflect different stages of her evolving self. With each change, Jasmine receives affirmation of her shifting identity and, rather than resisting these transformations, she embraces them and builds meaningful connections with each version of herself. Her journey is marked by resilience and determination as she strives to define who she is. Ultimately, Jasmine comes to understand that true self-independence lies not in being distinctly American or Indian, but in finding inner peace and acceptance of her multifaceted self.

In *Jasmine*, Bharati Mukherjee presents the protagonist as a model of the "assimilated immigrant." Mukherjee herself has lived the intense and transformative experience of immigration. She defines an immigrant as someone who must repeatedly reshape their identity in order to adapt to and integrate with the dominant culture. This journey reflects a shift from the margins of mainstream society to its center. Transitioning from an expatriate to an immigrant is a complex and challenging process, often accompanied by emotional pain and personal loss. To truly integrate, the immigrant must distance themselves from their former identity and cultural attachments. Ultimately, the immigrant’s goal is to find a sense of belonging within their new environment.

The life of Jyoti-Jasmine-Jazzy-Jase-Jane is a fictional rendering of an ‘assimilated immigrant.’ Jyoti is born in such a gender-biased society in a small town of Hasnapur in India, where the birth of a girl child is viewed as the consequence of a woman’s past sins. Jyoti wonders, “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 fulfil.”<sup>4</sup>Jyoti’s family belongs to a patriarchal society and her life is controlled and guided by her brothers and father. The transformation of Jyoti’s identity begins after her marriage with Prakash Vihh, a progressive-minded and bright young man, who wants to transform her from a humble village girl to a modern city woman.

“He 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. He said; ‘You are small and sweet and heady, my Jasmine. You’ll quicken the whole world with your perfume’. Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttle between identities.”

Mukherjee illustrates that forming one’s identity is a complicated process influenced not just by personal choices but also by the surrounding social and cultural factors. The new name, Jasmine, symbolizes a fresh perception of herself. She transforms from a modest village girl into a modern city woman, and this change of name marks her initial step away from traditional Indian values. While Jyoti and Jasmine represent two separate identities, Jasmine experiences both within herself. Prakash, her husband, hopes they can achieve a better life than what India offers, but he is tragically killed by a religious extremist just before they leave for America. This loss deeply affects Jasmine, yet she remains determined to fulfill her husband’s dreams. She overcomes her sorrow as a widow and departs for the United States using a fake passport. This move from Jyoti to Jasmine represents her first break from the conventional role of an Indian wife toward becoming a more global, Westernized woman. She arrives in America illegally, landing in Florida. Her journey begins with the sense that she and others like her are treated as unwanted outsiders—deportees or strange pilgrims—transported roughly in old army trucks, subjected to bribery by customs officials, and clad in outdated traditional clothes. Their only plea is to be allowed entry, to pass through, and to keep moving forward.

Jasmine leaves India in an effort to escape the control of fate, but her journey in America begins tragically. Her original goal is to take her husband’s suitcase to the engineering school campus in Florida, perform a ritual fire, and commit sati. After a dangerous trip aboard a shrimper named Gulf Shuttle, she arrives illegally on the Florida coast. However, her first day in America turns grim when she is raped by Half-Face, the ship’s captain. Taking on the fierce persona of the goddess Kali, Jasmine kills Half-Face, who represents pure evil. After the murder, she shuts the door, lights a fire, and burns her husband’s suitcase along with her blood-stained clothes. This act symbolizes her rejection of the painful past and her determination to survive in a foreign land. Jasmine sheds the burden of centuries-old traditions and prepares herself to embrace the newer history of the New World. As Jaspal Kaur Singh observes in this context,

“When Jasmine burns her clothes in the trash bin, Mukherjee seems to suggest that Jasmine can symbolically trash the old traditions and, hence, her traditional identity.”

This event reveals Jasmine's inner journey to discover her true self and identity. It marks the death of her old self and the birth of a new Jasmine. Rather than killing herself, she is reborn through the act of killing Half-Face. After the murder, she feels empty inside—her former self reduced to a mere shell. The killing is an act of self-assertion. While the idea of suicide reflects the traditional submissive Indian wife, who lives solely for her husband, killing Half-Face is driven by her determination to survive and continue living. As Samir Dayal notes, "In killing Half-Face, she experiences an epistemic violence that is also a life-affirming transformation." After burning the remnants of her past, Jasmine's strong desire becomes to live. She embarks on a path toward liberation, looking forward to the future without longing for the past. Both physically and mentally, she is prepared for her next transformation and rebirth.

Lillian Gordon plays a crucial role in Jasmine's ongoing transformation. She encourages Jasmine by saying, "Let the past make you worry, by all means. But do not let it deform you." Just as Prakash transformed her into a city girl, Lillian helps shape her into Jazzy, an American woman. Lillian actively guides Jasmine's assimilation into American culture and lifestyle, teaching her how to navigate and survive in the harsh realities of America's urban environment. Through education and support, Mrs. Gordon frees Jasmine from the weight of her past and empowers her with the strength to persevere. As a result, Jasmine begins to embrace and adapt to her new American identity and way of life.

Jasmine's journey is full of significant changes, showing how she openly alters her identity and appearance to fit different circumstances. Mukherjee highlights the harsh reality that immigrants often must drastically transform themselves to start new lives. Jasmine is no longer the same person from India; she becomes "Jazzy in a t-shirt... and running shoes." This change is not just external—her identity itself shifts completely. The name "Jazzy," given to her by Lillian, represents this new identity, one she accepts without resistance because it is her only means of survival in a foreign land.

Empowered by Lillian's guidance, Jasmine approaches Prof. Vadhera, hoping his influence—since he helped Prakash gain admission to engineering school—will make him sympathetic to her plan of self-sacrifice. However, when she discovers that Prof. Vadhera now works as a trader in human hair rather than an academic, she feels deep disappointment and frustration. Choosing to leave his house and live independently, Jasmine's decision reflects her growing self-awareness and autonomy, likely influenced by her assimilation into American values and lifestyle.

Taylor plays a crucial role in Jasmine's transformation. Employed as a caretaker for Duff, the adopted daughter of Taylor and Wylie Hayes, Jasmine is given the nickname 'Jase' by Taylor. In Taylor's apartment, Jasmine absorbs the cultural values and lifestyle of the New World, fully blossoming into 'Jase'—a confident American woman.

During this time, Jasmine begins to fall in love with Taylor and embraces her new identity as Jase. This period marks the happiest and most fulfilling part of her stay in the United States. She starts to appreciate herself as Jase—a brave, independent woman capable of achieving anything. Jasmine feels a strong sense of self-worth and joy in her new life. She describes this dual identity: "For every Jasmine the reliable caregiver there is a Jase, the prowling adventurer. I thrilled to the tug of opposing forces." She views her life as an exciting adventure full of possibilities and takes pride

in the woman Taylor helped her become: “I liked everything he said or did. I liked the name he gave me: Jase. Jase was a woman who bought herself spangled heels and silk chartreuse pants.”

Jasmine constantly changes herself to fit the image of an American woman, gradually becoming rooted and assimilated into the new culture. It seems as though the old Jyoti and Jasmine have completely vanished, allowing her to effectively “rebirth” herself. The tension between her Indian and American identities doesn’t disturb her; instead, it excites her. Jasmine embraces her assimilation with enthusiasm. Her experiences in the foreign land teach her to live confidently and comfortably despite her unstable sense of self.

When Wylie, Taylor’s wife, leaves him for another man, Jasmine feels that she has finally found her place. She quickly adopts this new identity, easily stepping into it as if it were ready-made. At this stage, Jasmine’s identity formation appears successful, but a closer look reveals that she is essentially replacing her former self and deliberately distancing herself from her past. Her conscious effort to “murder” her old identity reflects an attempt to forget her history and previous life. This marks the emergence of Jasmine’s bicultural identity—caught between two worlds, yet striving to move forward.

Jase’s next transformation into Jane is triggered indirectly by Sukhwinder Singh. If he hadn’t spotted Jasmine in Central Park, she might have stayed in Manhattan, but their encounter brings a flood of traumatic memories. Her past invades her thoughts, causing her to lose her sense of self and expression. Unable to cope with the embarrassment and conflict of her multiple identities, she decides to flee to Iowa. Her primary motivation for running away is concern for the safety of Taylor and Duff. As the text notes, “She runs away for life, not escaping from life.”

Bud Ripplemeyer becomes the next influential figure in Jasmine’s assimilation. He offers her a home and helps transform her into Jane Ripplemeyer. Jasmine becomes pregnant with Bud’s child and appears to be embracing the American way of life. She believes that Bud loves the American version of her and doesn’t want to know about her past. This shows Jasmine’s desire to fully replace her traditional cultural identity with American values. She wants to be a normal American wife, avoiding any interference from her complex past. Thus, she takes on the identity of Jane Ripplemeyer in Iowa. As she says, “Bud calls me Jane. ... But Plain Jane is all I want to be. Plain Jane is a role, like any other.”

Jasmine embraces her new identity as Jane because she believes that this name helps her blend into American society. However, her transformation is not entirely authentic—she must actively suppress her past since her foreign appearance already sets her apart in the small-town environment. In Iowa, Jasmine manages to settle down; even when Bud becomes disabled and nearly dies, she remains devoted, caring for him. The immigrant experience, as depicted here, is one of continuous rebirths—living multiple lives within a single lifetime. This concept reflects both Bharati Mukherjee’s own journey and Jasmine’s. Mukherjee reveals her personal transformations, saying:

“I have been murdered and reborn at least three times—the very correct young woman I was trained to be, and was very happy being, is very different from the politicized, shrill civil rights activist I was in Canada, and from the urgent writer that I have become in the last few years in the United States.”

This statement has a marked similarity with Jasmine’s outcry:

“There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself. We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves – in the images of dreams.”

Through Jasmine’s character, Mukherjee seems to convey that true assimilation into a new culture often requires letting go of one’s past. This idea is clearly reflected in Jasmine’s own words: “Once we start letting go – let go just one thing, like ...not wearing a tika on the forehead – the rest goes on its own down a sinkhole.” This suggests that even a small act of shedding traditional identity can trigger a gradual loss of former cultural ties, allowing a person to fully embrace the new culture.

Jasmine’s life reflects her unconscious struggle with the reality that she cannot completely escape her past identities, as all her former selves continue to exist within her. Despite her efforts to reinvent herself and adapt to different situations, she has yet to integrate these multiple identities into a unified, coherent sense of self. She moves back and forth between her Indian roots and her American experiences, trapped by the belief that she must be only one person at a time. Jasmine has not yet embraced the fluid nature of a hybrid identity, which allows for the coexistence of multiple cultural selves without forcing a choice between them. Her ultimate decision to leave Bud and reunite with Taylor symbolizes her yearning to transcend boundaries and explore the boundless potential of her identity. As Kumar observes, by choosing Taylor over Bud, Jasmine doesn’t merely switch partners; she transforms her entire world.

Throughout her life in America, Jasmine is deeply drawn to American culture and quickly let’s go of her past identities. Since arriving in the USA, she has devoted herself to serving others, but now she begins to focus on her own desires and love. Her reflections reveal an internal conflict: she is not simply choosing between two men, but is torn between the promise of America’s opportunities and the traditional sense of duty from her old world. Embracing her role as a caretaker, Jasmine accepts this identity, which highlights her strength and courage. Having endured the harshest experiences in America, she is now determined to find her place in Taylor’s life. She feels no guilt for her choice, expressing a sincere desire to “do the right thing” and not be “a terrible person.”

Jasmine is a true adventurer whose hybrid identity is always evolving—never fixed or stagnant. She is forward-looking, eager to embrace whatever the future brings. Unburdened by guilt or moral hesitation, she embraces change freely. As she says, “It isn’t guilt that I feel. It is relief. I realize, I have already stopped thinking of myself as Jane.” For Jasmine, life is about adventure, risk, and transformation, with new frontiers constantly pushing into her world. Confident and bold, she whispers to the astrologer above her stove, “Watch me reposition the stars,” symbolizing her determination to shape her own destiny.

In conclusion, Jasmine ultimately breaks free from all constraints and discovers her true self. She recognizes that her identity has evolved into something distinct, moving beyond the confines of Jane Ripplemeyer. As McLeod aptly observes, Jasmine's hybrid identity is "perpetually in motion," marked by experiences of "displacement, fragmentation, and discontinuity." This ongoing flux captures the complex reality of Jasmine's journey toward selfhood.

Through her journey of transformation, acculturation, and assimilation, Jasmine ultimately empowers herself. Her evolution from Jyoti to Jasmine, then Jazzy, Jase, and finally Jane, frees her from the constraints of her past and gives her a powerful voice. Not only does she express her own personal desires and dreams, but she also becomes a representative voice for countless immigrants who arrive on America's shores every day, embodying their struggles, hopes, and resilience.

In her quest to resolve her identity crisis through changes in name—from Jyoti to Jasmine, then Jase, and finally Jane—and through shifting geographical locations—from Hasnapur to Jullundhar, Florida, Manhattan, and Iowa—Jasmine experiments with various external transformations. However, by the end of the novel, when she leaves with Taylor, she remains fundamentally the same person she was at the beginning. If she had fully embraced American culture and values, she might have abandoned Bud when he became disabled. Instead, she stays with him until after Duff leaves and Taylor proposes, indicating that she still holds on to certain Indian cultural values. As Indira Bhatt notes, while Jasmine's multiple identities and relocations may seem like genuine transformations—from old world to new—her core self remains largely unchanged throughout the novel.

## CONCLUSION:

Throughout her life, Jasmine moves from place to place and from one relationship to another in search of her true identity. However, she gradually comes to realize that she cannot completely change herself or allow others to define who she is. Instead, she must take charge of evolving her own identity to adapt to the changing circumstances around her. By the end of the novel, Jasmine accepts that her identity will always be in flux and that it is unnecessary—and impossible—to erase her past selves. All her former identities remain integral parts of who she is. She embraces her hybrid identity, recognizing that its fragmented and fluid nature is not a weakness but a source of strength. Ultimately, Jasmine understands that true identity is not confined to being Indian or American; rather, it lies in the inner spirit of a person finding peace within herself.

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