

Economic Imperatives and Immigrant Transformations: A Socio-Economic Reading of Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

Asst. Prof. VarshaSahebraoAher
Dept of English,
K.J.S.College, Kopargaon
Tal-Kopargaon, Dist- Ahmednagar
E-mail ID- varshasaher@gmail.com

Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* is often analysed through the perspectives of transnational feminism, immigration, diaspora, identity crisis and cultural displacement. However, it can also be studied through the economic perspectives. This research paper examines the novel as a cultural narrative influenced by global economic inequalities and patriarchal power structures, immigrant labour structures, dynamic class positions, and gendered economic structures. The movement of the protagonist from rural India to the United States can be examined through the economic frameworks such as commodification of the migrant labour systems and the gendered discursive practices which create the economic instabilities. This paper argues that *Jasmine* depicts the capitalist power structures which profoundly shape the transnational identities, and cultural assimilation as a survival strategy of the transnational migrants.

Key Words: Global economic inequalities, commodification, immigrant labour structures, dynamic class positions.

Introduction

Since its publication Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* has attracted scholarly attention for its strong representation of the diasporic identity crisis caused by the movement of the woman beyond the national border. Yet, beneath these undercurrents lies a diverse and multi-layered socio-economic narrative. *Jasmine*'s migration is not a simple act of travelling to abroad but it is a response to the transnational economic power structures. Her journey is physical and psychological and it exposes the severe unequal forces of global capitalism. The novel also focuses on the fact that wealthier nations depend on the immigrant labour. These migrant women often experience the uneven opportunities for upward mobility.

Jasmine's identity transformations such as- Jyoti to *Jasmine*, *Jasmine* to *Jase*, *Jase* to *Jane* are affected by the dynamic economic contexts. Each individual identity aligns with a class positions, a role of labor and an economic expectation. Each identity aligns with a class position, a labor role, and an economic expectation, underscoring how capitalism shapes immigrant subjectivity. This paper explores these dynamics to argue that *Jasmine* is a powerful narrative about the economic forces that govern migrant lives.

➤ **Global Economic Inequality as the Catalyst for Migration**

The village in India, Hasnapur is characterized by poverty, limited infrastructure and patriarchal traditions and lack of opportunities. There are many economic push factors in Jasmine's Indian village, Hasnapur.

Although the novel foregrounds emotional and cultural elements, economic constraints heavily influence her worldview. Her father's inability to provide basic security and the village's dependence on subsistence-level agriculture reflect broader postcolonial economic stagnation.

Jasmine's journey from rural India to the United States is driven not only by personal trauma but also by an economic aspiration. America is perceived as a land of promise, where effort is rewarded and one can escape the limitations of fate and social hierarchy.

Jasmine travels through different identity formation as she tries different jobs- caretaker, nanny and office assistant. The different jobs show the vulnerabilities of immigrant labor, the low-wage sectors that depend heavily on migrant workers and the promise and limits of economic mobility in America.

Throughout the novel Jasmine experiences exploitation and opportunity which reflects how immigrants experience in the foreign land. Her experiences expose both exploitation and opportunity, showing how immigrants navigate capitalist structures. Her husband, Prakash dreams of modern, upward dynamic life in America which can be considered as an economic escape. The foreign country symbolises not only freedom but economic possibility.

Jasmine's migration is a part of larger economic pattern: the movement of skilled and unskilled labour from developing to developed countries. America, a foreign land becomes an epitome of prosperity. Hence, even before entering in America Jasmine considers the idea of the U.S. as a promise of development. This belief mirrors real-world global economic hierarchies that cast the West as a zone of opportunity.

The vulnerability of undocumented immigrants is revealed by Jasmine's early experiences in America. Her survival depends on networks that often intersect with illegal economies, such as human trafficking. Her lack of legal status makes her disposable within the capitalist system, which resonates Saskia Sassen's view that globalization, creates pools of marginalised labor essential to the economy yet denied full rights.

The novel contrasts her life in the 'Punjabi ghetto' with the Vadheras, where she feels stifled and financially dependent, with the Hayes household where she is paid a wage. This enables her to have the sense of empowerment and a sense of self worth through her own income.

Jasmine's transformations are often linked to economic survival and social mobility, effectively 'commodifying' her identity for the American market. The identity crisis or the different transitions of her identity is an emblem of her survival strategy to be fit into different American contexts and an erasure of a traumatic past that could compromise her new economic life.

Bharati Mukherjee presents adaptability as an economic skill for the survival. It is a kind of acculturation strategy used for sustained survival. Jasmine is a survivor who constantly tries to

reinvent her to navigate the American economic landscape, even if it means discarding parts of her former self.

➤ **Domestic Work and the Economy of Care**

In both the Gordon household and later in Bud Ripplemeyer's home, Jasmine performs domestic and caregiving labor. These roles reflect the 'care economy' dominated by migrant women from the Global South. Her work creates comfort and stability for middle-class American families, illustrating how immigrant women sustain domestic capitalist structures.

Domestic labor becomes a site of both exploitation and empowerment as she is economically dependent yet essential. Her invisibility is paired with intimate access to the household. She occupies a low status yet gains cultural capital and language fluency.

➤ **Upward Mobility and Its Limits**

Although Jasmine moves through higher socioeconomic spaces—small-town Iowa, middle-class suburban life—she never fully escapes her immigrant status. Her mobility is tied to her employers' wealth, not her own economic power. This dependency underscores the structural limits of upward mobility for immigrants within neoliberal capitalist frameworks.

➤ **Economics and Identity**

Jasmine's shifts in identity align with shifts in economic context as a Jyoti, she is a village girl shaped by poverty. As a Jasmine, she is the wife of a modern, economically aspiring Indian man. As a Jase, she is the fashionable caregiver in the Gordon household, exposed to American middle-class consumerism. As a Jane, she is the rural American partner of Bud, living within a stable yet constraining economic environment. Each identity is tied to labor roles, class expectations, and economic opportunities, demonstrating how capitalism shapes even the internal self. The novel suggests that economic conditions heavily influence self-reinvention: one's class position shapes how they are perceived and how they reshape themselves. In the novel, Jasmine goes through the complex process of identity transformation. Every new job, location, and socio-economic setting gives Jasmine a new identity—Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase, Jane. The novel suggests that economic conditions heavily influence self-reinvention: one's class position shapes how they are perceived and how they reshape themselves.

➤ **Globalization & Transnational Flows**

The novel captures the early wave of globalization as it shows movement of people across borders, flow of capital, labor, and ideas. It depicts shifting economic identities between the Global South and North. Jasmine becomes a symbol of the global capitalist subject, adapting fluidly to economic circumstances.

➤ **Consumption and Belonging**

As Jasmine enters higher economic spheres, her exposure to clothing, appliances, cars, and American lifestyle norms becomes a way of assimilation. Consumer behavior becomes a symbol of inclusion and modernity. However, the novel also critiques this process: assimilation through consumption reduces cultural identity to economic participation.

➤ **Economic and Gendered Violence**

Jasmine's journey is marked by violence—rape, exploitation, and emotional manipulation—that disproportionately affects migrant women. Economic insecurity makes her vulnerable to male power, whether through traffickers, employers, or partners.

➤ **Women's Work and Economic Agency**

Despite these vulnerabilities, Jasmine strategically uses her economic roles to gain agency. She leaves abusive situations when new opportunities arise. She leverages domestic labor to gain trust and mobility. She chooses partners (Bud, Taylor) whose economic positions provide stability or emotional fulfillment. Mukherjee portrays female agency as inseparable from economic self-positioning.

➤ **A Transnational Economic Identity**

Jasmine cannot be reduced to a single national or cultural identity. Instead, she represents a fluid, transnational subject shaped by:

- Economic migration
- Global labor networks
- Cultural hybridity
- Capitalist mobility

This fluidity reflects the realities of modern globalization, where identity becomes intertwined with economic adaptability. This fluidity is also a reflection of multiplicity of identities or hybridity of identities.

➤ **The Bank and the Farmer:**

The subplot involving Bud Ripplemeyer (a bank manager) and Darrell Lutz (a struggling farmer) highlights the economic anxieties and forces of the American heartland, particularly the power dynamics between financial institutions and individuals in the agricultural sector.

In essence, the economic lens reveals *Jasmine* as a story of a resilient woman using resourcefulness, labor, and self-reinvention to survive and eventually thrive within the complex and often exploitative systems of a globalized world.

➤ **Critique of the American Dream**

While the novel does not wholly reject the American Dream, it destabilizes it. Jasmine's mobility is real but limited, empowering yet dependent. The novel suggests that while capitalism offers the possibility of change, it also produces new forms of inequality.

➤ **Labor, Class Mobility & Survival**

Jasmine's movement through different jobs—caretaker, nanny, office assistant—illustrates the vulnerabilities of immigrant labor, the low-wage sectors that depend heavily on migrant workers,

the promise and limits of economic mobility in America. Her experiences expose both exploitation and opportunity, showing how immigrants navigate capitalist structures..

➤ Gender, Economics & Agency

As a woman, Jasmine faces: an economic exploitation, gendered labor expectations and power imbalance in relationships. Yet she uses economic opportunities to assert agency, showing how economic independence is tied to feminist empowerment.

Conclusion

An economic reading of Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* reveals the novel as more than a story of immigration and identity—it is a reflection on the economic forces that shape the migrant experience. Through Jasmine's journey, Mukherjee exposes the complex interplay between global inequality, immigrant labor markets, capitalist structures, and gendered economic vulnerability. Jasmine's transformations illustrate both the possibilities and constraints of economic mobility within a globalized world. The novel reflects how global economic disparities shape migration: poverty, lack of opportunities, and uneven development push individuals toward the West.

Ultimately, the novel critiques the myth of the American Dream while acknowledging the powerful allure of economic reinvention. *Jasmine* stands as a compelling narrative of survival, agency, and adaptation within the unequal terrains of global capitalism.

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