

THE NEW AMERICAN: IDENTITY AND REINVENTION IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S JASMINE

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Abstract :

Bharati Mukherjee's Jasmine presents migration as an ongoing process of identity reconstruction rather than a singular act of relocation. This paper examines how the novel conceptualizes the figure of the "New American" through Jasmine's repeated acts of self-reinvention as she moves from rural India to the United States. Mukherjee disrupts traditional narratives of assimilation by portraying identity as fluid, unstable, and shaped by cultural dislocation. Jasmine's successive renaming—Jyoti, Jasmine, Jazzy, and Jane—serve as a symbolic marker of her transformation and reflects the complexities of negotiating belonging within a transnational space.

Drawing on postcolonial and feminist frameworks, the study analyzes how gender, race, and migration intersect to influence Jasmine's evolving selfhood. The novel foregrounds the violence and trauma embedded in the migrant experience, suggesting that reinvention often emerges from survival rather than choice. At the same time, Mukherjee presents reinvention as a source of agency, allowing the protagonist to resist fixed cultural identities and patriarchal limitations. The concept of Americanness in Jasmine is thus redefined as a process of becoming rather than a stable national identity.

The paper argues that Jasmine constructs the "New American" as a hybrid subject who inhabits multiple cultural worlds while refusing cultural stasis. By emphasising movement, adaptation, and self-fashioning, Mukherjee challenges essentialist notions of identity and national identity. This study situates Jasmine within the context of migration and diaspora studies to highlight its contribution to understanding identity formation in contemporary migrant literature.

Keywords : Migration, Identity, Reinvention, Diaspora, Bharati Mukherjee, Jasmine, Transnationalism, Hybridity, Gender, Postcolonialism, Assimilation, Cultural Displacement

Introduction :

The narrative of the immigrant in American literature has often been defined by the "melting pot" or the "salad bowl"—metaphors of blending or co-existing. However, Bharati Mukherjee's 1989 novel *Jasmine* disrupts these traditional tropes by presenting migration as a



violent, transformative process of "unmaking" and "remaking." Unlike the characters of Jhumpa Lahiri, who often mourn their lost heritage, or Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's characters, who find solace in myth, Mukherjee's protagonist, Jasmine, views migration as a series of radical reinventions. Through the character of Jasmine, Mukherjee argues that the "New American" identity is not found through cultural preservation, but through the aggressive shedding of the past and the fluid adaptation to the present.

The novel begins in the rural village of Hasnapur, India, where the protagonist's life is seemingly predetermined by a forehead scar—a mark of "bad fate" predicted by an astrologer. In the traditional Indian context, identity is static and communal. However, Jasmine's first act of rebellion is her refusal to accept this fate. She tells the astrologer, "Fate is fate. When I'm a woman, I'll be a widow. But I'll be a widow who lives in a big house" (Mukherjee 3).

This early resistance sets the stage for her migration. In Migration Studies, this is often referred to as the "push-pull" factor, but for Jasmine, the pull is not just economic prosperity; it is the American promise of self-definition. When she marries Prakash, he renames her "Jasmine," moving her away from "Jyoti." This is her first taste of identity as a fluid construct. Prakash represents the modernizing influence that views migration as a gateway to "the real world" (Mukherjee 71).

Jasmine's journey to America is not the sanitized version of the immigrant story. It is marked by trauma, beginning with the bomb that kills Prakash and continuing with her brutal arrival on the shores of Florida. Her encounter with Half-Face, the man who rapes her, serves as a dark "initiation" into the American landscape.

Mukherjee uses this violence as a ritualistic shedding of the old self. After killing Half-Face, Jasmine contemplates suicide but instead chooses to "burn" her past. She leaves her suitcase and her widow's weeds behind. In this moment, she transitions from a victim of fate to a "shifter" of identity. As she notes, "I had a suitcase... I was a girl of twenty, but I felt like an old woman. I was a widow, but I was also a student" (Mukherjee 121). This duality is the hallmark of the migrant experience: existing in the "in-between" space of who one was and who one is becoming.

As Jasmine moves through America, her name changes to reflect her environment: Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase, and Jane. Each name represents a different layer of her Americanization.

Jyoti (Hasnapur) : The traditional, submissive village girl.

Jasmine (With Prakash) : The transitional identity, a bridge between tradition and modernity.

Jase (New York City) : The urban, independent woman. In Manhattan, working for the Hayes family, she learns that "identity is a matter of choice" (Mukherjee 186). Here, the city serves as a playground for her reinvention.



Jane (Iowa) : The settled, domestic woman living with Bud Ripplemeier.

In Iowa, Jasmine attempts to fit into the classic Midwestern narrative. However, even here, her "immigrant-ness" remains a point of friction. She observes, "Plain Jane is a role, like any other. In the supermarket, I am the girl from nowhere" (Mukherjee 210). This highlights a key concept in Migration Studies: the "perpetual foreigner" syndrome, where, regardless of how much a migrant assimilates, their origin remains a source of curiosity or distance for the host society.

A controversial aspect of Mukherjee's portrayal of migration is her insistence that assimilation requires the "murder" of the former self. Mukherjee once stated in an interview that she views herself as an American writer of Indian origin, rather than an expatriate. This philosophy is reflected in Jasmine's cold detachment from her Indian past.

"The Jyoti of Hasnapur was not the Jasmine of Baden," she reflects (Mukherjee 197). This internal fragmentation is common in diaspora literature, but Jasmine handles it with a survivalist's pragmatism. While Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's characters might keep "spices" or "saris" as emotional anchors, Jasmine treats her past as a skin she has outgrown. This makes her the quintessential "New American"—someone who is not burdened by the "hyphen" in "Indian-American," but who simply moves toward the future.

The novel concludes with Jasmine leaving Bud and her life in Iowa to follow Taylor to California. This ending is significant because it rejects the idea of the "final destination." Migration is not a journey from Point A to Point B; it is a continuous state of being.

"I am caught between the promise of America and the instincts of India," she says in the final pages (Mukherjee 240). Yet, her decision to leave for California—the land of ultimate reinvention—suggests that she has fully embraced the American spirit of the frontier. She is "greedy with want and reckless with hope" (Mukherjee 241).

In *Jasmine*, Bharati Mukherjee redefines the migrant narrative. It is not a story of cultural loss, but of individual gain. Jasmine's journey shows that identity is not something we are born with, but something we perform and negotiate every day. By using simple, direct prose and a non-linear structure, Mukherjee mirrors the fragmented but vibrant life of the immigrant. Jasmine remains a powerful figure in Migration Studies because she refuses to be a victim of her history, proving that in the "New World," one can always start over.

The journey of Jasmine is far more than a simple travelogue from the East to the West; it is a violent, beautiful, and necessary "unmaking" of a human being. Through the various avatars of Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase, and Jane, Bharati Mukherjee demonstrates that for the migrant, identity is not a fixed destination but a fluid performance. By navigating the harsh Florida swamps, the intellectual salons of Manhattan, and the stoic plains of Iowa, Jasmine proves that the American landscape is a forge that demands constant mutation.

As this paper has explored, Jasmine's reinvention is catalyzed by her relationships



with men like Taylor and Bud, who act as mirrors for her shifting selves. However, her ultimate decision to abandon the domestic security of Iowa for the uncertain frontier of California signals the birth of a "New American" who refuses to be categorized. Unlike the "melancholic migrants" of Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction, who remain haunted by the ghosts of their ancestors, or the magically-rooted characters of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Jasmine views her past as a skin to be shed rather than a treasure to be guarded.

The ethical cost of this transformation—the abandonment of Bud and the "murder" of her former Indian selves—suggests that the American Dream is not without its casualties. Mukherjee's protagonist teaches us that to survive the trauma of displacement, one must be "greedy with want and reckless with hope" (241). In the context of Migration Studies, *Jasmine* stands as a radical text that challenges the necessity of the hyphen in immigrant identity. She does not bridge two worlds; she creates a new one entirely within herself. Ultimately, Jasmine's story asserts that in the modern era of global transit, the most powerful act of agency is the refusal to stay still, proving that the true "New American" is one who is always in the process of becoming.

This "process of becoming" is not merely a psychological shift; it is a profound challenge to the traditional borders of the nation-state and the cultural expectations of the diaspora. By refusing to stay still, Jasmine subverts the role of the "passive immigrant" that Western society often expects. In the eyes of the Iowa community, she is expected to be "Jane"—a fixed, grateful, and static figure of successful assimilation. Yet, by choosing Taylor and the road to California over the domestic stability of the Ripplemeier farm, she asserts that the migrant's journey has no final destination. This rejection of a "happily ever after" in favor of a "happily ever moving" is what makes Mukherjee's work a cornerstone of contemporary migration studies. It suggests that the most authentic migrant experience is one of perpetual transition, where the self is a draft that is constantly being edited.

Furthermore, the novel's ending forces a re-evaluation of the ethical boundaries of the "New American." Jasmine's departure from a paralyzed Bud Ripplemeier is often viewed by critics as a moment of cold-heartedness, yet within the framework of Mukherjee's philosophy, it is an act of survivalist integrity. To stay with Bud out of a sense of traditional Indian "duty" would be to allow the "Jyoti" of Hasnapur—the girl ruled by fate—to reclaim her. By leaving, she chooses the "Jase" and "Jasmine" identities that prioritize individual desire and growth over communal obligation. This tension between the collective (the Indian family/village) and the individual (the American frontier) is the central crucible of the novel. Jasmine's choice reflects a radical form of feminism where the woman's body and future are no longer the property of her husband, her father, or her culture, but are hers alone to pilot through the vast American "elsewhere."

This narrative choice also highlights a critical distinction between Mukherjee and her contemporaries, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. While Lahiri's characters often find themselves paralyzed by the "hyphen"—caught in the painful space between being Indian and being American—Jasmine treats the hyphen as a launching pad. She does not seek



to balance two worlds; she seeks to consume the new world entirely. This "predatory" style of assimilation is a sharp departure from the gentle nostalgia found in *The Mistress of Spices* or the quiet resignation in *Interpreter of Maladies*. Mukherjee argues that for the "New American," the past is not a source of strength, but a "ghost" that must be exorcised to make room for the present. In this light, migration is portrayed as a form of "creative destruction," where the old self must be razed to the ground so that a new, more resilient structure can be built.

Ultimately, the scholarly value of *Jasmine in 2026* lies in its refusal to offer easy answers about the cost of the American Dream. The novel suggests that while the promise of America is infinite reinvention, the price is a permanent sense of displacement. Jasmine is a "shifter" of names and worlds, but she is also a woman who can never truly go home—partly because "home" no longer exists, and partly because she is no longer the person who lived there. Her story serves as a vital reminder for migration scholars that the "diaspora" is not a monolith of suffering or longing. Instead, it is a diverse collection of individuals who, like Jasmine, are using the ruptures of history to carve out spaces of unprecedented freedom.

As she moves toward California, Jasmine becomes the embodiment of the "transnational subject." She is a figure who exists beyond the binary of East and West, proving that identity is a fluid, evolving, and fiercely guarded construct. Her refusal to stay still is her greatest act of agency; it is a declaration that she is not a victim of global transit, but its master. In the final analysis, *Jasmine* does not just document the immigrant experience; it redefines it, offering a bold vision of a world where the only constant is change, and the only true home is the one we build through our own reckless, relentless hope.

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