



## Research article

# From Third Space to Transnational: A Study of Alter Identities in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

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## Abstract

The burgeoning presence of the Indian Diaspora across the world has triggered a new consideration of the cultural theories of nation, identity and international affairs. Depicting the process of negotiating the borders, both physical borders of states and countries and the metaphorical borders, between genders generations and cultures, Bharati Mukherjee, an American writer of Indian origin, raises the question of space and identity of the Indian immigrants in the US. An attempt is made to map the journey of the Indian Diaspora from the status of the immigrants to that of the transnational citizens of the world. The scope of this study lies in its treatment of transnational space which is going to redefine the idea of Diaspora as a process of gain, contrary to conventional perspectives that construe immigration and displacement as a condition of terminal loss and dispossession, involving the erasure of history and the dissolution of an "original" culture. Rejecting the binaries of the Western Centre and the Eastern Periphery, the paper invites a post-structural approach to the cultural identity construction of the Indian Diaspora.

**Keywords:** Migration, Liminality, Acculturation, Transnational Identity, Cultural Identity



[Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions](#)

## Introduction

In the rapidly moving modern world, migration and multiculturalism have become an accepted reality. Diaspora is an umbrella term for all those who have been away from their homelands, voluntarily and involuntarily. Migrant literature occupies a significant position between cultures and countries and it has commanded a growing interest within literary studies since the 1980s. The term diaspora owes its homage to the Greek translation of the Bible. It was originally composed of the verbs "*dia*" and "*speirein*" which mean "to scatter", "to spread" or "to disperse". The word "diaspora" was used in earlier days by academicians and thinkers to detail the scattering of Jews all over the world. Gradually the term was widely used to represent the geographical, religious, psychological, philosophical and cultural phases of the scattering of the Palestinian Jews.

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It also foregrounds the emotional and cultural attachment with which the Jewish community is affiliated to the land of Israel. "Thou shalt be a diaspora in all kingdoms of the earth" (xxviii, 25), seems to be the first use of the term Diaspora. Americans and Greeks are referred to, as the other two classical or traditional Diasporas in the world.

Today the term Diaspora is used to signify the lives of "any group living in displacement" (Clifford, 310). Apart from the immigrants, the expanded domain of diaspora has started encompassing groups such as political refugees, alien residents, guest workers, expellees and ethnic and racial minorities. Jana Evans Braziel in her book *Diaspora: An Introduction* defines diaspora as "a term historically and typically denotes the scattering of people in their homelands into new communities across the globe" (24). William Safran in "Diaspora in Modern Societies: Myths of Homelands and Return", discusses the fact that the word diaspora is used as a metaphoric designation for several categories of people- expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants and ethnic and racial. While adding to this, Robin Cohen in *Global Diasporas* states that diasporic consciousness is taken as "strong tie to the past or a block to assimilation in the present and future" (Cohen, 21).

The term diaspora turns out to be a very politically loaded and culture-specific term. It has received wide acceptance and attention by anthropologists, literary theorists, cultural critics and sociologists to chronicle the mass movement of people from their place of birth to other distant lands in the second half of the twentieth century. In cultural theory, the term 'diaspora' is used to cover a wide range of territorial displacement and forced or voluntary emigration.

Perhaps no diaspora in the world is characterized by such diversity in its population as the Indian Diaspora in terms of culture, including languages, regions, religions and other forms of social stratification. The Indian diaspora may well be regarded as an international phenomenon with its presence in more than 100 countries globally. For people of the old Indian diaspora, the departure from India is final. The idea of a lost homeland is more important than the notion of a new one, and the imaginary homeland provides them with many of the themes and idioms with which to create their lives afresh. The hyper-mobility of the globalized world makes borders porous and the technology-driven society finds it less difficult to disseminate ideas immediately via websites and search engines and promotes transnational identity.

### **The immigrants presented in the works of Bharati Mukherjee**

Unlike the refugees of today, the immigrants presented in the works of Bharati Mukherjee have not been forced into exile from India; rather they have crossed the geographical borders of their native country voluntarily to pursue their education, personal economy, and working career. However, what is particularly striking about the portrayal of the Indian diaspora in America is that, irrespective of their higher income and more education than almost any other ethnic group including white Americans, they often retain the elements of the cultural identity of their homeland. Some of them even fall victim to the enclave of their ethnicity.

Sunanda Mongia says, "India functions as a central metaphor and a framework even when a novelist, for example, BM [sic] refuses her Indian roots and prefers to call her novels examples of 'New American Literatures'" (Mongia, 218). However, instead of seeking the "Indianness" as a

fragile identity to be preserved, the novel *Jasmine* sees it as a set of fluid identities to be celebrated. Jasmine is endowed with a determined intention, a vocal assertiveness, and a clear-headedness that direct her towards the transformation of her identity. When she is tragically widowed on the very eve of her departure to America, she prepares her mind to cross the geographical borders of her nation to fulfil her husband's last wish. "There is no dying; there is only an ascending or a descending, a moving on to other Planes" (Mukherjee, 86). Alone and unescorted, she arrives in the US as an illegal immigrant with forged documents. Half Face, the captain of the Traveler in which she crosses over to Florida, rapes her repeatedly. The following extract shows the violent transformation within herself by which she conceives herself as goddess Kali of Hindu mythology and ends up with the brutal murder of her rapist. "No one to call to, no one to disturb us, just me and the man who raped me, the man I had murdered" (119).

### **Jasmine in a New World**

Until the very end of *Jasmine*, the protagonist Jasmine keeps on murdering herself and her identity only to reinvent a new identity which is the most suitable one for her new context, and the evolving identity seems to be unstable. She constantly alters and modifies herself in the changing environment. Each time Jasmine is given a new name, the shifts in her cultural identity are very visible and comprehensible to the reader.

Jasmine could easily adapt to the patterns of dominant American culture. It does not mean she throws to the wind her race, her religion, and her beliefs, though Jasmine does not hold fast to nostalgia, but maintains certain basic traits of Indian culture even after imbibing American culture. Nowhere in the novel has she fallen victim to the ethnic enclave. Though there is hardly anything in Jasmine that would enable her to identify herself with her American employer, she expects unrealistic equal treatment from them. Through her complete Americanization, she thinks that she can overcome the impediments in her ways such as lack of education, class consciousness, racial barriers, intellectual inequality, and the profound psychological trauma that she has suffered since her arrival in America. What is unique about Jasmine is that, as the paid employee of a liberal humanist, she experiences financial dignity but relinquishes her native sensibility.

Amidst the other female immigrants, who hang suspended between the two worlds, Jasmine feels proud that she is getting rooted in the new world. To Jasmine, the US is her dream world. She is able to shed her Indian name and dress and adapts herself easily to every circumstance of life. In spite of occasional memories of life in India, she is never tormented by the flash of traditional Indian values and the American world she faces. She exemplifies Mukherjee's 'maximalist' creed which is essential, according to her, for every expatriate. Those who celebrate immigrant Identity and transnational status are neither nostalgic for their past nor afraid of their unfamiliar present.

### **Hybridity, Identity and Jasmine**

Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity recognizes all cultural relations as ambivalent, subversive, transgressive and hybrid. Hybridity challenges the assumption that cultural encounters invariably establish hierarchical dominator/dominated relationships. Jasmine hops from one person to another, one place to the other, and from one circumstance to the other, with a keen desire to

mark her space in the world she exists. She allows herself to be moulded and mended because none of her transformations are accidental, but the result of conscious effort; on the other hand, her process of acculturation is always entwined with the social and cultural changes taking place around her. She maintains her Indianness when she narrates the stories of *Yama* and *Nachiketha* to Bud. She is not very far away from her Bengali tradition to identify herself with the goddess *Kali*, the embodiment of power, at the moment of crisis. Instead of collapsing, she assumes herself to be the Goddess Kali and kills the half-faced monster who brutally raped her. She even acts as a dutiful wife and rejuvenates the crippled Bud, just like Savitri of the Indian epic who brought her dead husband back to life. However, Her Indianness never comes as an impediment in any of her attempts to become a true American in its fullest sense. On the other side, she obeys Lily Gordon who says: "Now remember, if you walk and talk American, they will think you were born here. Most Americans cannot imagine anything else..." (134-135). She is least bothered of her unwed motherhood when she leaves Bud to join her ex-employer, Taylor. She is not "choosing between men" (240), but she is "caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness" (240). This cultural fluidity is what is required most in the process of being and becoming a transnational citizen. She justifies her decision to join Taylor who accepts her as she is:

Taylor didn't want to change me. He didn't want to scour and sanitize the foreigner. My being different from Wylie or Kati didn't scare him. I changed because I wanted to. To bunker oneself inside nostalgia, to sheathe the heart in a bulletproof vest, was to be a coward. On Claremont Avenue, in Hayes's big, clean, brightly lit apartment, I bloomed from a diffident alien with forged documents into adventurous Jase. (185)

Identity is also always associated with time and place, and is very much vulnerable to change. Hall has demonstrated this very evidently in his writing: "Identities are questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we come from', as much as what we might become" (4). Identity is the total of one's experience, outlook and the cultural residues hidden within one's self. As Homi K. Bhabha has rightly pointed out in *Commitment to Theory*, the immigrants living in the "third space" are characterized by in-betweenness. Their identities are not pure, not even consistent, because entering another culture, they are "neither the One ... nor the Other ... but something else besides which contests the terms and territories of both" (41 italics in original). Jasmine becomes Jase very comfortably and gradually falls passionately in love with Taylor and with her own self, who is elevated and is capable of transcending the borders and differences regarding culture, languages, beliefs and value systems. In other words, as she begins to realize her space in Taylor's family, she begins to enjoy the celebratory mode of migration. She spends a lot of time in front of the mirror to check and recheck "her new appearance in a T-shirt, tight cords and running shoes" (133). Under the shade of Taylor's friendship, she learns how to transform herself from a diffident alien into an adventurous woman. "I changed because I wanted to.... On Claremont Avenue, in the Hayeses' big, clean, brightly lit apartment, I bloomed from a diffident alien with forged documents into adventurous Jase" (185- 186).

Jasmine is adaptive and adept at the art of learning as well as unlearning. Interrupted by the discovery of the man at the central park, who had originally aimed to kill her and who had murdered her husband Prakash, Jasmine resolves to run away from California. This encounter

seems to be like an opportunity for Jasmine to murder Jase symbolically and emerge as a new being. In Iowa, she is about to prepare herself ready for another drastic transformation, both physically and psychologically. Lady Ripplemayer offers her employment in the bank owned by her son Bud, who looks after his father's bank in Iowa, a man of traditional views, on whom the Iowan farmers heavily depend upon to get their agricultural loan sanctioned. Jase becomes Jane and accepts her new role as a stepmother to Du, a sixteen-year-old Vietnam War victim adopted by Bud. Jane also renders love, affection, and care to make Bud's life meaningful. When Jane first appears before Bud, Bud is not only crippled physically but also dead psychologically. She breathes life into him and entertains him with her stories of Bhrahma Vishnu and Shiva.

Hybrid identity is composed of variable sources, different materials and many locations. Hybrid identities which are never complete in themselves, remain perpetually in motion, open to change and reinscription. Through inventing this hybrid identity, the immigrant can join together the many different parts of her life to compose an identity suitable for living and managing in a new country and a new situation. This hybrid identity is never stable as the immigrant's journey continues; the identity keeps changing. The person moving away with Taylor is not very much the same person, the one the reader encounters at the earlier stages in the novel. Jyoti, the woman who surrendered to Prakash to get moulded and modified as per his ideas is not the same person, who prefers Taylor to Bud and wants to be shaped according to the American way of life. Jasmine, the protagonist of Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* learns to unlearn her past and relearns how to overcome being viewed as the other in an entirely alien cultural landscape. Thus, the novel *Jasmine* demands the understanding of the formation of new transnational identity and the coming to consciousness of what is called transnational empathy.

## **Conclusion**

The process of constituting identity involves a solid mental or emotional stamp of experiences, relationships, interactions, and connections, whereas it figuratively suggests an accumulative and symbolic representation of thoughts or emotions in an expressive way. Nobody's cultural identity can be perceived and projected on his national ground or ethnic ground or racial context alone, but a summation of all. Thus, the protagonist in *Jasmine* breaks the myth of a single identity and tries to balance the 'world of origin' and the 'world of adoption' through the process of assimilation. Unlike other Indian writers such as Kamala Markandaya and Anita Desai, who treated the Indian immigrant situation as one of conflict and adjustment, Bharati Mukherjee gives it a new and challenging perspective, enabling the immigrants to emerge out of their cocoons of defense into the openness of assertion and transnational identity.

## **Declaration of Conflicts of Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest.

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