SOCIAL IDENTITY IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S *JASMINE*

SMARANDA ȘTEFANOVICI[1]

Abstract

Bharati Mukhejee's postcolonial fiction reflects the Indian culture merged with the immigrant experience. She writes about the cultural clashes and interracial confrontations she experienced as an exile from India, an expatriate in Canada, and an immigrant in USA. For her, despite hardships, America treats immigrants as Americans more than as minorities. The article favors and proves the postcolonial idea of fluid identity. Despite the cultural constraints imposed on her by the rigid, patriarchal Indian society, she believes in Indian core values such as family, motherhood, gender, and sexuality as necessary ingredients towards her 'passage' to define her as an individual.

Keywords: social identity, fluid identity, postcolonial duality, enculturation, acculturation

A Brief Overview of the Novel and the Historical, Political, Economic Context.

In literature, social identity can sometimes reflect the journey of assimilation traveled by an immigrant writer going through processes of acculturation and enculturation. The road to belonging, or at least integration, is fraught with many difficulties and these experiences "are being recorded by immigrant and diasporic writers through autobiographical narratives, memoirs, and novels" (Bhatia 35). The themes examined by these exiled or expatriate authors vary: from the response to the condition of exile, and the nostalgia for the native country, to the hostility and racism experienced by an expatriate.

Such an immigrant writer was the Indian-born American Bharati Mukherjee, whose novels and short stories reflect the Indian culture merged with the immigrant experience. Her work describes the cultural clash and interracial confrontations she herself confesses to have experienced. (Grimes "Bharati Mukherjee, Writer of Immigrant Life, Dies at 76")

She writes of her immigrant life, the cultural clashes and interracial confrontations she experienced as an exile from India, an expatriate in Canada, and an immigrant in USA. While she saw Canada as racist, America made her feel at home, and not a foreigner. "I am less shocked, less outraged and shaken to my core, by a purse snatching in New York City in which I lost all of my dowry gold—everything I'd been given by my mother in marriage—than I was by a simple question asked of me in the summer of 1978 by three high-school boys on the Rosedale subway station platform in Toronto. Their question was, 'Why don't you go back to Africa?'" (Bhatia 184)

Born into a wealthy Calcutta family in 1940, Mukherjee spent her formative years in India, attending several prestigious universities. She got her B.A in 1959 from the University of Calcutta and her M.A. in 1961 from the University of Baroda. After living and working for a decade in Montreal, Canada, alongside her husband, she moved in 1980 to the United States, and began teaching postcolonial and world literature at Berkeley, the University of

[1] Associate Professor, PhD habil., UMFST Târgu Mureș.
Acknowledgements to Chiluț (Muntean) Florina-Gabriela, MA student, for the contribution to this article.

BDD-A29195 © 2018 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:13:26 UTC)

California. She retired in 2013 and died four years later in January 28, at the age of 76. (Leith "Author Bharati Mukherjee Wrote of Immigrant Lives")

"The 1965 Immigration Act and the Vietnam War meant that by the 1980s the Asian American population was predominantly immigrant" (Adams 139). In the 1980s America, a separation becomes apparent between the American-born Asians and the Asian-born American immigrants. In the first category are the sons and daughters of previously arrived parents, second, third, and even fourth generation Americans that have been able to establish themselves and even flourish in some cases. In the second group, we have the recently arrived, often illegally, Asian immigrants, refugees or non-documented. They are marginalized not only by the Americans but also by some of their American-born brothers and sisters. The immigrant authors of the period depicted in their works this phenomenon of interracial and intergenerational confrontation as well as the immigrant-bashing they experience. "Some Asian Americans achieved success, although others – for example, many post-1965 immigrants – struggled with poverty and violence. This struggle was exacerbated by immigrant bashing in a right-wing political climate (Adams 139).

In this context, "the interracial and intergenerational romance proved commercially successful" (Adams 139) and several authors of the period publish books based on it. In 1989, Bharati Mukherjee publishes her novel *Jasmine,* based on an earlier short story included in *The Middleman and Other Stories*. The book tells the story of a young Punjabi[2] woman who immigrates to the United States after becoming a widow at seventeen. The girl, who seemed fated to a life of quiet isolation in the small Indian village where she was born, is thrown into a life of tragedies and hardships that force her to change her identity several times in the interest of her own safety.

Bella Adams suggests that "Jasmine's class and national affiliations do bear an uncanny resemblance to Mukherjee's" (Adams 128). Indeed, *Jasmine* centers on an immigrant woman's search for her place in the world, for individual and social identity and a sense of belonging. That place proves to be America, where her strong, tenacious nature will flourish. This storyline is a direct consequence of Mukherjee's own opinions on the matter of identity: "'I believe that some people were meant to be American even if they never leave their village in Punjab – at heart, they are American" (Adams 128). Just like her character, "Mukherjee claims America, 'not [as] a minority', but rather, as an American" (Adams 128).

Mukherjee depicts in the novel the cultural constraints in the lives of women in India and rejects the idea that identity is something unchangeable, fixed by one's birth (sex) and social status. In this sense, the novel can be compared to Mukherjee's own search for identity in a world prejudiced against women in power and even more against an Indian woman in a position of power. Jasmine's struggle to construct a social identity in a multicultural land reflects the author's own experiences and difficulties when moving to Canada, and later to America. Just as her main character Jasmine, Mukherjee has lived

[2] **Punjabi people** are an ethnic group associated with the Punjab region of the Indian subcontinent, who speak Punjabi, a language from the Indo-Aryan language family, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Punjabis

BDD-A29195 © 2018 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:13:26 UTC)

through events that enable her to understand the alienation, isolation, and discrimination encountered by other Asian Americans. (Leith "Author Bharati Mukherjee Wrote of Immigrant Lives")

The main character learns how to handle anything and everything life throws at her, gaining a sense of self-identity and self-value in her road towards freedom and happiness. She learns to confront pain with courage, adversity with determination, and believes that life is a journey, not a destination. She becomes like a diamond with many faces: each face has its beauty, each face is different from the other, but without their complexity, the diamond would be just a simple, plain, slab of crystal that has no depth, no spark, and no life. And, like a diamond that glitters once its faces are polished, so does Jasmine in the end.

Social Identity Constructed Through Names and Child Rearing Practices

In Cultural Anthropology "a name is an important device for self-definition—without one, an individual has no identity, no self" (Haviland 148). Indeed, the first step an individual takes in discovering his or her identity is often an involuntary one: baptisms, naming ceremonies, and related practices are the result of an exterior influence, rarely a personal choice.

The main character, Jasmine, goes through several rebirths and the consequent name changes in order to assume in the end her American identity. She has no choice in choosing any of the names she is given throughout the book. The main protagonist has no less than five names, assigned to her by the people in her life, by individuals invested in her well-being and happiness. Each name marks a pivotal moment in her life, and each name assigns a different social identity.

Jyoti, Jasmine, Jazzy, Jase and finally Jane; she is called different names during the adventures that take her from India to Iowa, passing through Florida and New York, and each name signifies a major change in her life and a milestone she passes in her quest for self-empowerment and happiness.

Her story, naturally, started with her birth. Her first name was Jyoti: a name given to the unwanted fifth daughter, the seventh of nine children in a poor Punjabi family. This name predestines her to be a creature of the light. Her destiny is to lead a simple rural life, to marry and have children and die in Hasnapuri[3], her birthplace. But life has a different plan for Jyoti. "My grandmother may have named me Jyoti, Light, but in surviving I was already Jane, a fighter and adapter (Mukherjee 68)."

The second baptism, Jasmine, occurs at fourteen. She marries a learned city man, who decides that her new status in life warrants a new name. For a young girl this sudden change of identity is a shock: "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 shuttled between identities" (Mukherjee 127).

[3] **Hastinapur** is a city in Meerut district in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hastinapur

BDD-A29195 © 2018 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:13:26 UTC)

Life is not easy for Jasmine, and after a few short years of happiness, she is forced by her husband's death to travel to America. In doing so, she observes his final wishes of moving there. Here, she is born a third time. After going through a traumatic rape, Jasmine finds help and is dubbed Jazzy by an American woman who has made herself a business out of helping undocumented immigrants find work. As Jazzy, she becomes a servant, but also she begins her first steps in integrating into the American culture. A new name, new clothes, a new walk: "I checked myself in the mirror, shocked at the transformation. Jazzy in a T-shirt, tight cords, and running shoes. I couldn't tell if with the Hasnapuri sidle I'd also abandoned my Hasnapuri modesty." (Mukherjee 248)

After a few months working as a servant, she becomes a nanny for an American family living in Manhattan with their adopted daughter Duff. Taylor, the husband, is the one who names her a fourth time: Jase. In Jase she finds a new confidence, she leaves behind Jyoti, Jasmine, and Jazzy with their broken dreams and personal tragedies. She falls in love and finds a new family. "But Jyoti was now a sati-goddess; she had burned herself in a trash-can-funeral pyre behind a boarded-up motel in Florida. Jasmine lived for the future, for Vijh & Wife. Jase went to movies and lived for today" (Mukherjee 289).

Her happiness is short-lived. She is on the run once again, after seeing her husband's killer in New York. The journey takes Jasmine to Iowa, where she stays with Bud Ripplemeyer. She is 24 now, and pregnant, and is assigned again a new name, Jane, and a new identity, the dutiful wife, and mother. Her husband Bud believes she must hide her immigrant identity under an American name. "Bud calls me Jane. … My genuine foreignness frightens him. I don't hold that against him. It frightens me, too. In Baden, I am Jane. Almost"' (Mukherjee 45).

From all her alter egos, gained and discarded throughout her life, Jase is the one she wishes to go back to the most. Jase represents love, happiness, and family. Jase is the identity the man she loves gave her: "I whisper the name, Jase, Jase, Jase, as if I am calling someone I once knew" (Mukherjee 359).

Jasmine is aware that she is constantly changing, that with each new name, with each new identity, she evolves and devolves. Like one of the Hindu deities, she has many faces. Furthermore, the different names and identities transform Jasmine in several profound ways: physically, emotionally, and psychologically. Like a butterfly that goes from caterpillar to chrysalis only to reach the final destination, her metamorphosis has several stages as well. And each stage has a name: "In the white lamplight, ghosts float toward me. Jane, Jasmine, Jyoti (Mukherjee 38)."

Mukherjee's craft shines in the way she builds this intriguing character page after page, putting in her way obstacles that change and model her into different representations of the same core. The different names she is given represent different social identities: Jyoti - the simple Hindu girl raised in a feudal-like Indian village, Jasmine - the newly married child wife who wishes to please her husband, Jazzy – the immigrant searching for an American identity, Jase – the caregiver, the woman in love, Jane – the survivor, the temptress, the adventurer.

BDD-A29195 © 2018 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:13:26 UTC)

Social Identity Constructed Through Marriage, Family, Gender, Sexuality

Everything we are as adults is an accumulation of all the experiences we go through while growing up. Therefore, family is an important part in constructing identity: it is the first social group that we are exposed to. In Jasmine's case, family is more than the group of people that brought her into the world, and raised her. Throughout her life, she finds several adoptive families that have a crucial role in shaping her social identity: Lillian Gordon - the woman who saves her upon arrival in America, the Hayes in Manhattan, and the Ripplemayers in Iowa. Each family brings a new cultural baggage with it, new experiences, and a new Jasmine.

The core of what she is today was shaped by the first family she ever had: her birth family. Being the fifth daughter of a poor family, Jasmine – Jyoti at that time - was from the beginning considered a curse. Accordingly, her mother literally tried to kill her: "When the midwife carried me out, my sisters tell me, I had a ruby-red choker of bruise around my throat and sapphire fingerprints on my collarbone." (Mukherjee 67) The reason for this apparent criminal behavior is deeply ingrained in the Indian culture. Jasmine's mother hopes to spare her daughter the shame and disgrace of being a dowry-less bride in the future. She knows what it means to grow poor, to be a woman in a patriarchal society. Women, "dowerless wives, rebellious wives, and barren wives" (Mukherjee 70) suffer more than men in their society. "They fell into wells, they got run over by trains" (Mukherjee 70) and knowing that, her first impulse was to spare her a life of hardships. Nevertheless, later on, we see another aspect of Mataji, as she fights for her daughter's right to learn, to continue school, and maybe have one day a better life than she has.

Despite being predestined to a life full of suffering, Jasmine's first experience with love isn't a traumatic one. She marries Prakash for love, very young indeed – at fourteen, but old enough by Hindu standards. Through her marriage, Jyoti undergoes the first metamorphosis of many: her husband Prakash, a modern city man who does not believe in the subservient role of the Indian wife, wants a refined woman, not a simple country girl, so he calls her Jasmine, and urges her to leave behind the antiquated ways of her rural Hasnapur. "Pygmalion wasn't a play I'd seen or read then, but I realize now how much of Professor Higgins there was in my husband. He wanted to break down the Jyoti I'd been in Hasnapur and make me a new kind of city woman" (Mukherjee 127).

Prakash sees Jyoti as an outdated version of his Jasmine and endeavors to erase all that remains of the old her: "He laughed again and told me to stop regressing into the feudal Jyoti. "You are Jasmine now. You can't jump into wells!" (Mukherjee 153)

Next to family, motherhood is another important facet of Jasmine's personality, one that deeply influences the decisions she takes, and ultimately who she is. From the first years of her marriage in India, Jasmine yearns to become a mother. She is "past fifteen" now, and the women from her native village "were beginning to talk" (Mukherjee 127). Her husband doesn't share the same antiquated values: "We aren't ignorant peasants!"(Mukherjee 127) He considers them too young and too poor to start a family.

BDD-A29195 © 2018 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:13:26 UTC)

Prakash has dreams and ambitions he wishes to realize before having children. Even so, the desire to have a child is deeply rooted in Jasmine's psyche, and will reappear throughout the novel, guiding her path and determining her actions. She loves the child she cares for as a nanny in Manhattan, and will readily adopt and accept into her life an older child alongside her partner Bud.

Jasmine's marriage proves to be not quite as modern as her husband wished it. Not unlike her mother, who shaved her head and refused to eat after her abusive and lazy husband passed away, after Prakash's death in a bomb attack, Jasmine continues her husband's wishes to go to America, not because she hopes to improve her life, but because she plans to burn there an effigy wearing his clothes and to throw herself on the burning pyre. Prakash wanted her to break from her old, feudal identity, telling her: "Don't crawl back to Hasnapur and feudalism. That Jyoti is dead" (Mukherjee 158), but Jyoti isn't dead, she's just dormant underneath layers and layers of perfumed Jasmine.

Sadly, Jasmine's first experience on American soil is a violent rape that awakens in her the strength and rage necessary to kill her aggressor: "for the second time in three months, I was in a room with a slain man, my body bloodied. I was walking death. Death incarnate" (Mukherjee 248). The extreme physical and mental violence endured mold Jasmine into a different woman, forging for her a new identity as she incorporates these new events into herself. She leaves behind dreams of sacrifice and death, feeling reborn.

Gender and sexuality are defining aspects of any individual, but for a woman – an Indian woman especially – they are paramount. In Mukherjee's novel, we see how Jasmine finds strength in these traits, and how she learns to use her beauty as a weapon. Like almost everything else in her life, her sexuality changes as well. Jasmine grows from the shy and inexperienced child-bride, to the traumatized victim of rape, to the woman in love and finally the temptress: "her sexual allure becomes something of transcendent force" (Adams 134). This is how she bewitches Bud, the man who will provide for her a home, stability, and a family. In Iowa, with Bud Ripplemeyer, Jasmine is a wife and a mother. For the first time since coming to America, she can assume these identities freely, without fear of discovery. Bud's money and influence have bought her this veneer of respectability. She feels very close to her future mother in law, whom she considers family, and to whom she gives all the respect due to an elder. Her Indian heritage doesn't allow otherwise, and, even though she loves her birth mother, she wishes to be another kind of woman and mother. Jasmine wants to be the type of woman she admires: "Lillian Gordon, Mother Ripplemeyer: one day I want to belong to that tribe" (Mukherjee 325).

Living in America has forced upon Jasmine several profound changes, pushing her to adapt and fit in. From the way she dresses and speaks, to the way she acts and behaves, this Jasmine seems to be a completely different one. But her soul remains Indian, and she is aware that there's a living duality in her: the Indian identity that shaped her formative years and the American identity she still strives to attain: "I'll wait supper for you. Indian wives never eat before their husbands. I add a laugh to lighten what I've just said." (Mukherjee 354)

BDD-A29195 © 2018 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:13:26 UTC)

Looking back at all that she has been through, Jasmine realizes that she doesn't feel complete without a man in her life. "Crucial to Jasmine's iron butterfly persona are beauty and sexuality, as mainly defined by men." (Adams 134) This is her Indian heritage speaking; no matter how much she changes in order to fit, she will never be exactly like the American women she admires: "I have had a husband for each of the women I have been. Prakash for Jasmine, Taylor for Jase, Bud for Jane. Half-Face for Kali" (Mukherjee 327). Her dependence on the men in her life is real, and is partially imposed by the culture she was raised in; however, she doesn't let this fact define all that she is. Jasmine knowingly chooses the men in her life, and knowingly adopts a certain role that best fits that man.

Conclusion

An interracial and intergenerational romance, *Jasmine* reflects Mukherjee's own sense of belonging as an immigrant woman. She believes in gender, family, motherhood and sexuality as cultural constructs, and not as pre-given static issues. She combines exterior, societal practices (such as names and child rearing experiences in India and America) with core values in India as well (such as gender and sexuality, baptism, marriage, family, and motherhood) to prove that all of them can be transformed to your own benefit. Paradoxically, Jasmine, like Mukherjee, defines herself through men, and finds strength in these social units and in her life's misfortunes (such as her husband's death, her being raped, not becoming a mother, etc.); they transform her physically, emotionally, and psychologically, and finally, contribute to her identification as an individual.

Works Cited

Adams, Bella. *Asian American Literature*. Edinburgh, Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2008, pp. 15-139.

Bharati, Mukherjee. *Jasmine*. London: Virago, 1991.

Bhatia, Sunil. *American Karma*. NYU Press, 2007, pp.184-219.

Grimes, William. "Bharati Mukherjee, Writer of Immigrant Life, Dies at 76." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 1 Feb. 2017, <www.nytimes.com/2017/02/01/books/bharati-mukherjee-dead-author-jasmine.html. Accessed 18 Apr. 2017>.

Haviland, William A. *Cultural Anthropology: The Human Challenge*.Cengage Learning, 2014.

Leith, Linda. "Author Bharati Mukherjee Wrote of Immigrant Lives." *The Globe and Mail*, Special to The Globe and Mail, 14 Feb. 2017, www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/author-bharati-mukherjee-wrote-of-immigrant-lives/article33990951/. Accessed 18 Sept. 2018.

BDD-A29195 © 2018 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:13:26 UTC)