

## Migration and Cultural Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters*

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### Abstract

This article explores the relationship between cultural identity, migration, gender, and self-reconstruction in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989) and *Desirable Daughters* (2002). Using a close reading of both texts, supported by critical scholarship, the paper analyzes how Mukherjee conceptualizes identity as fluid and migration as a transformative—often violent—process. Through the heroines Jasmine and Tara, Mukherjee portrays immigrant women who confront tradition, displacement, hybridity, and choices that remake their cultural selves.

**Keywords:** Cultural, Self-identity, Migration, Tradition, values

### Introduction

Bharati Mukherjee's fiction is shaped by her belief that immigration is a creative process of remaking the self. She states in an interview, "I am an American writer, not an Indian writer in exile" (Mukherjee, *Interview with Alta Jabolw*). This rejection of static identity defines *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters*. Both novels depict women who break from tradition and negotiate new forms of belonging.

Jasmine declares early in the novel, "I am not the person my born name says I am" (*Jasmine* 77). Similarly, Tara in *Desirable Daughters* confesses, "I live between two worlds, belonging fully to neither" (Mukherjee 45). These statements reveal Mukherjee's central idea: identity is an ongoing act of transformation, intensified by migration.

### Cultural Identity as a Fluid Construct

In *Jasmine*, cultural identity is never fixed. Jyoti's trajectory from village girl to American woman demonstrates how culture reshapes through experience. When Prakash renames her "Jasmine," she says, "He gave me a vision of myself as someone new" (Mukherjee, *Jasmine* 76). Naming becomes the first gesture of identity fluidity. Jasmine recognizes the instability of culture when she reflects: "We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams" (95). Culture, for her, is an ever-changing performance shaped by ambition, violence, and choice.

In *Desirable Daughters*, Tara's identity depends on her ability to navigate contrasting cultural environments. She notes that America teaches her, "You can be whoever you decide to be. No past is fixed here

unless you cling to it" (Mukherjee 53). Yet she admits, "India never leaves you; it shadows every choice you make" (87). Tara's cultural identity becomes a negotiated space between inherited values and chosen freedoms.

### Migration as Metamorphosis and Rebirth

Migration in both novels demands the shedding of old identities and the creation of new ones. Jasmine's journey is a literal series of rebirths. She declares: "To travel is to become someone else" (*Jasmine* 133). Each stage of migration—Calcutta, Florida, New York, Iowa—creates a different Jasmine: Jase, Jane, Jazzy, the au pair, the caretaker, the lover. After killing the Captain, she confesses, "I felt reborn, ready for the next life" (119). Migration becomes a cycle of death and resurrection. Tara undergoes transformation through emotional and psychological migration. Her divorce marks a new beginning: "The old Tara died in that courtroom; the new one walked out into the fog of San Francisco" (*Desirable Daughters* 102). Migration destabilizes her old patterns but opens possibilities for reinvention.

### Gender, Agency, and Cultural Resistance

Both novels foreground the specific pressures placed on South Asian women during migration. Jasmine and Tara resist patriarchal structures that attempt to contain them. In *Jasmine*, gendered agency manifests in the protagonist's willingness to break taboos and assert control over her destiny. Jasmine declares, "I will not give up my life to fate." Her choices—migration, love, survival—represent a feminist rewriting of immigrant narratives.

In *Desirable Daughters*, Tara navigates gendered expectations imposed by both Indian and American societies. Her decision to divorce Bish exemplifies her resistance to patriarchal expectations. She reflects: "I chose freedom, and that choice rewrote everything I had been raised to believe." Mukherjee presents immigration as an opportunity for women to reclaim agency, challenging traditional narratives that privilege male immigrant experience.

### Language, Storytelling, and Narrative Identity

Language plays a crucial role in shaping identity. *Jasmine* uses a nonlinear narrative to mirror the protagonist's fragmented transformations. The shifting narrative timeline reflects her multiple selves. Jasmine's voice becomes a site of self-construction as she recounts her past identities while asserting her present one. In *Desirable Daughters*, Tara's narrative voice is introspective and self-critical. Her storytelling mediates her sense of cultural displacement. Through narration, she attempts to reconcile her Calcutta past with her American present. Tara admits, "Telling my story is the only way I can understand who I am becoming." Narrative itself becomes an act of migration—a movement between memory and reinvention.

### Tradition and Modernity: A Conflict of Selves

Traditional expectations shape both heroines, but migration allows them to question inherited norms. Jasmine rejects the life of a traditional widow: "I will not curl up and die" (*Jasmine* 97). Her refusal to submit to widowhood marks her break from patriarchal custom. Tara's upbringing emphasizes purity and obedience, yet she reflects critically on it: "We were raised to be desirable, not independent" (*Desirable Daughters* 17). Migration forces her to confront what she calls "the tight braiding of fear and duty that defined a Chatterjee daughter" (25). For both women, modernity offers liberation but also cultural fragmentation.

## Trauma and the Construction of Immigrant Identity

Violence is central to Jasmine's identity formation. The attack by Half-Face is a pivotal moment: "I was pierced through my center, but I did not collapse. I was forged" (*Jasmine* 118). Trauma becomes a catalyst for transformation, not paralysis. Tara's trauma is psychological—her failed marriage, her guilt, and her alienation from her son. She confesses: "Every freedom came at the cost of something sacred from my past" (*Desirable Daughters* 131). Her trauma deepens her sense of cultural rupture.

## Hybridity and In-Between Cultural Spaces

Jasmine embraces hybridity: "I am a woman of many lives" (*Jasmine* 137). Her identities merge, overlap, and contradict each other. Critics note that Jasmine's hybridity signals "the diasporic subject's capacity for continual reinvention" (Roy 822).

Tara articulates her own hybrid state: "I speak in two voices now, one remembered and one acquired" (*Desirable Daughters* 79). Living in Silicon Valley, she experiences hybridity not as liberation alone but as fragmentation.

## Gendered Agency and Feminist Self-Fashioning

Mukherjee depicts immigrant women as active agents rather than victims. Jasmine repeatedly asserts her autonomy: "I steer my own fate" (*Jasmine* 240). Her choices—migration, romance, survival—are self-directed. Tara, too, embraces agency: "Leaving Bish was the first real decision of my life" (*Desirable Daughters* 101). She reclaims her freedom through self-definition rather than cultural obedience.

## Narrative Structure and Identity Formation

The fragmented narrative structure of *Jasmine* mirrors her multiple selves. The nonlinear chronology reflects how she experiences time—as overlapping, not sequential. Jasmine states, "Time is not a line for me; it is a circle of lives lived and shed" (Mukherjee 152). Tara's narrative voice is analytical, weaving memory and present reality. She admits, "I tell my story to understand what lies between the cracks of my identities" (*Desirable Daughters* 6). Storytelling becomes a form of self-reconstruction.

## Diaspora, Home, and the Question of Belonging

Jasmine rejects the longing for home: "There is no going back. That life is burned away" (*Jasmine* 181). Her radical detachment symbolizes a new model of immigrant belonging. Tara's idea of home is more conflicted. When she returns to India, she observes, "Home looked like a memory pretending to be real" (*Desirable Daughters* 209). She realizes that home is no longer geographical but psychological and cultural.

## Community, Family, and Cultural Continuity

Family and community act as stabilizing but also restrictive forces. Jasmine's migration severs her from traditional family structures. Yet she forms new, unconventional families along the way—as a caregiver, lover, and domestic worker. Each relationship contributes to her evolving identity. In contrast, Tara's family—her parents, sisters, and son—constantly remind her of cultural belonging. The Chatterjee lineage embodies rigid Brahmin traditions, creating tension between individuality and collective expectations. Tara reflects on this conflict: "My family wanted continuity; I wanted change." Mukherjee thus uses family dynamics to explore cultural continuity and rupture.

## America as a Space of Possibility and Precarity

Jasmine identifies America as a space of destiny: "In America, nothing is rooted; everything begins again" (*Jasmine* 171). Yet she also sees racial and class tensions. Tara acknowledges America's contradictions:

“We live in a place that both welcomes and suspects us” (*Desirable Daughters* 72). The immigrant experience includes mobility but also exclusion.

### Myth, Ancestors, and Cultural Imagination

Mukherjee embeds myth into both narratives. Jasmine embodies mythic rebirth, referring to herself as “a goddess of destruction and creation” (*Jasmine* 112). In *Desirable Daughters*, the legend of the Tree Bride represents cultural resilience. Tara reflects, “The Tree Bride reminded me that our past is never gone; it waits to be reinterpreted” (Mukherjee 57). Myth becomes a parallel narrative that shapes modern immigrant identity.

### Renaming as an Act of Identity Creation

In *Jasmine*, renaming is a profound symbolic act. Each name—Jyoti, Jasmine, Jazzy, Jase, Jane—marks a new life. Jasmine explains, “Each name was a gift, a curse, a possibility” (Mukherjee 147). Tara’s name ties her to tradition: “My name carried a history I could not escape” (*Desirable Daughters* 19). Naming anchors her identity even as she attempts to reshape it.

### Conclusion

In *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters*, Mukherjee presents cultural identity as fluid, migratory, and continually recreated. Jasmine and Tara represent two ends of the diasporic spectrum—one radically transformed, the other emotionally torn between cultures. Both women embody the complexities of immigrant identity, shaped by trauma, choice, hybridity, gender, and memory. Mukherjee challenges the notion that cultural identity is fixed or inherited. Instead, she portrays identity as a dynamic process shaped by migration and personal agency. Through vivid storytelling and female-centered narratives, Mukherjee affirms that the immigrant woman’s journey is one of resilience, reinvention, and self-determination.

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