



**Postcolonial Trauma and Identity Reformation in  
Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine***

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**ABSTRACT**

Postcolonial literary studies invariably document the exploitation of postcolonial subjects by imperial powers. The application of psychology to postcolonial studies not only offers an insight into the psyche of those who experienced slavery, forced migration, alienation, identity crisis, and colonization, but also connects to those who faced trauma. The present study explored postcolonial trauma in *Jasmine* by Mukherji. It analysed how colonial legacies affect a postcolonial woman's identity, leading to crises and psychological disintegration. Drawing on Frantz Fanon's postcolonial trauma theory, Braun and Clarke's six-step qualitative thematic approach helped explore the overarching themes of alienation and identity crisis in *Jasmine*. The protagonist endured colonial and migratory pressures, and her identity was transformed from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jase to Jane. The study found that trauma caused the cyclical nature of identity crisis. Alienation, fuelled by undocumented status and language alienation, aggravated her suffering; however, Jasmine's empowerment was grounded in cultural hybridity, alienation, and identity crisis instead of assimilation. The findings revealed that trauma, while destructive, also initiated identity reformation of a postcolonial woman. The study concluded that the novel's continued relevance lay in its contribution to debates on trauma and identity in postcolonial literature. This research opens pathways for future interdisciplinary studies, comparative literary criticism, and reestablishes *Jasmine's* significance in exploring identity and trauma.

## **Introduction**

### **Background of the Study**

Postcolonialism is a significant area of literary studies that examines the literary, social, and cultural control by imperial nations over the colonized. Initially, psychological theories addressing the effects of natural disasters, wars, genocides, asylum, and displacement were rejected by postcolonial studies pursuing them as ‘ecocentric’ (Ward, 2013). However, ‘psychological approaches were adopted as a critical tool to dismantle the internal, mental, and affective damage caused by colonialism’ (Ward, 2013).

Instead of using psychology for a classification of colonized people as ‘abnormal’, prominent postcolonial theorists such as Frantz Fanon revisited psychology to analyse the ‘pathogenic’, i.e., the toxic essence of the colonial situation itself. The effects that follow are an inferiority complex, dependency complex, identity crisis, alienation crisis, marginalization, and trauma resulting from slavery (Ward, 2013).

Trauma is defined as an event that cannot be assimilated, creating a fractured identity (Caruth, 1996). Postcolonial trauma is defined as the psychological and cultural influence caused by colonialization, affecting entire societies, and it passes down through generations (Visser, 2015). It embraces a wide range of sufferings, namely marginalization, forced migration, and cultural dislocation, which are often ignored by Western trauma theory (Craps, 2013). The trauma theory from psychology focuses on the psychological workings of the mindset. On the other hand, postcolonial trauma deals with the implications of trauma in a postcolonial context in which individuals bear alienation, migration crisis, and identity crisis due to colonial subjugation. Postcolonial trauma can thus be defined as a psychological effect of colonization or decolonization on formerly colonized and colonizing people (Ward, 2013). The present study explores the postcolonial trauma in Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*. The novel is set in the 1980s. It reflects the experiences of a young Indian woman who moved to the United States and assimilated American ways of life to be accepted. The significance of the study lies in understanding the postcolonial trauma of the female protagonist in the postcolonial setting arising from patriarchal oppression and complexities, thereby drawing a connection between life and fiction.

### **Problem Statement**

Ideas of complex identity and gender violence have been debated in postcolonial studies. Women are labelled as the “weaker sex”. The present research contests this idea represented in *Jasmine* to highlight the resilience of a female character from a postcolonial world under the pressure of patriarchal oppression, gender violence, identity crisis, and alienation.

### **Research Objectives**

1. To explore themes of Mukherji’s *Jasmine* reflecting colonial legacies and analyse their effect on the female protagonist’s identity, leading to crises and psychological disintegration.

### **Research Questions**

1. How do themes of *Jasmine* reflect colonial legacies affecting the protagonist's identity, leading to crises and psychological disintegration?

### **Literature Review**

*Jasmine* by Mukherjee has been extensively read through the lenses of post-colonial and feminist studies for its subtle representation of identity and trauma. The novel focuses on the journey of a young Indian woman, Jasmine, who gets uprooted from her home and travels to the United States.

Srinivas and Bharathi (2023) observed Jasmine's psychological fragmentation and delved into how her attempts to acclimatize and realign herself in a Western environment reflected the deep-seated trauma of colonial history. Fanon (1952) called it ‘the internalization of inferiority’. Jasmine’s transformation into one identity and another — Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase, and Jane revealed a dissociation and desire to wear the ‘white mask’ as Fanon described, one

that postcolonial subjects resisted in their effort to assimilate the foreign culture. A complex identity of Jasmine in a postcolonial setting depicted deep mental trauma of Jasmine caused by colonialization and her act of wearing a 'white mask' to survive and be accepted in a foreign land, which damaged her personal sense of self. Bhaumik (2012) discussed trauma in her work to show how Mukherjee constructed Jasmine's identity as a series of rebirths, trauma changing her modes of resilience. This conforms to Fanon's theory of postcolonial trauma, where each of these traumatic experiences, namely violence, migratory conditions, or cultural dislocation, acts as a focal moment that changes Jasmine's self-representation. According to Bhaumik (2012), Jasmine's handling of trauma compelled her to recognize the standards of her original cultural identity, and she overcame its boundaries by adopting a character equally adding to her existing and continuing process of changing identities. The study explored how trauma reshaped her identity. Scholars argued that Jasmine's identity is continually reconstructed as a response to the gravity of colonial history and cultural dislocation (Bhaumik, 2012).

In this regard, Jasmine's character is distinguished by a poignant engagement with the construction of identity in the contexts of postcolonialism. Swamy (2020) highlighted how trauma and adaptability intersect in the novel, transforming the immigrant's identity. Swamy (2020) argued that Jasmine's story echoed a postcolonial trauma; a condition combined with the need for resilience for survival in a foreign land, but her resilience is neither a relaxed path to empowerment nor a simple survival strategy. It is because of her background and the socio-cultural expectations that she was lost in mainstream America.

Narrative of *Jasmine* focuses on the protagonist's constant displacement. Jasmine's identity was tested once she went from India to the United States. Dash (2022) discussed that Jasmine wore multiple facial masks for the world. The novel portrayed how the postcolonial population must adapt manifold personalities to survive in unfamiliar cultural surroundings. Saha (2020) argued that Jasmine, as a postcolonial immigrant, experienced psychological fragmentation while migrating from Hasnapur to the United States. Balaji and Thenmozhi (2023) contended that Jasmine outlined the miseries that stemmed from the individual's choices between their Indian roots and Western culture. According to Wahl (2021), the 'white mask' symbolized Jasmine's psychological condition. Ali and Khadim (2024) discussed the importance of Fanon's concept of postcolonial legacy, explaining the long-term impact of postcolonial trauma on societies, which subsequently transformed into political discourse.

Mukherjee developed Jasmine's fractured identity through historical colonial experiences and the personal transformations she pursued. Malkawi (2022) explored the various historical stages that reflected the process of postcolonial identity formation, when Jyoti became Jasmine, later converted into Jase, and Jane. Therefore, Morve and Kadri (2023) discussed *Jasmine* from the perspective of Homi Bhabha and focused on how Jasmine's character reflected the concept of the 'third space', in which postcolonial individuals created hybrid selves by existing across cultural binaries. Dash (2022) discussed that Jasmine's persistence in reshaping herself was an attempt to overcome colonial discourse that divided postcolonial subjects into social categories who dwelled among various identities. The present study uses Fanon's (1952) insights into colonial trauma for analysing *Jasmine*. It fills the gap by addressing the postcolonial trauma, triggering the reformation of a postcolonial woman's identity constructed in *Jasmine*.

### **Research Methodology**

The present study used a qualitative research method. A thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) helped to explore postcolonial trauma in *Jasmine*. Codes were generated by referring to specific excerpts reflecting trauma. Codes were further labelled into two major themes identified as 1) alienation and 2) complex identity.

### **Theoretical Framework:**

The study employed Fanon's postcolonial trauma theory (1952), which highlighted the effect of colonialism on the mental health of colonized people and focused on how self-alienation and an inferiority complex were indoctrinated in colonized people. Much of postcolonial trauma theory rests on Fanon's claim that colonial trauma is deep-rooted in the psyche of individuals and causes ruptures to the identity and struggle for self-assertion.

Fanon's main focus is that colonialism and racism corrupt the psyche of both 'blacks and whites' in different ways. He (1952) examined the colonizers' experience when they were viewed as 'things' rather than individuals. This experience of colonizers was central to postcolonial trauma, as it denied postcolonial subjects the right to claim themselves as human beings. This led to feelings of powerlessness and a distorted self-identity. Fanon emphasized that trauma was caused by the cultural dislocation of colonized people who were forced to reject their culture and tradition to fit into the 'white' society. This forced revisioning created the feelings of displacement, isolation, and alienation. Colonized people felt embarrassed by their own culture, which created serious emotional damage. The damage also created identity crises (pp. 25-27). Fanon (1952) continued that the colonized people wore a 'mask' to meet the standards of colonizers. This attempt at wearing a mask further prolonged their psychological wounds (p.89). Fanon also discussed the role of violence in creating trauma. Colonialism is marked by the violence that harms the psyche of the colonized and leaves deep psychological scars. He suggested that acts of violence could sometimes lead to resilience of the colonized (1952). Therefore, 'colonialism would be effective for the colonizers if they practiced it with great violence'.

The present study focused on the novel *Jasmine* by Mukherjee (1989). It was explored for the themes reflecting colonial legacies such as patriarchal oppression, gender violence, migration crisis, alienation, fear, identity crisis, challenges of navigating cultural changes, and transformation.

### **Trauma and Reformation**

#### **1. Alienation:**

Alienation is one of the main themes explored in Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989), which shows how the female protagonist is socially and culturally isolated when she is far from her homeland. She adapts to a new culture by compromising her identity. Jasmine, as a postcolonial woman, moves from India to the US and appears powerless to adjust completely. The murder of her husband leaves her completely desolated and isolated. She encounters deep disruptions in her social, linguistic, and cultural life during her journey, which transform her. Nothing seems to belong to her in the foreign land, neither the language nor the society. Her social alienation is initiated by the tragic accident that happens to her on her arrival in America. Sexually assaulted by the captain of the ship, she starts her struggle for survival and transformation. This voyage transforms her radically. With this cultural dislocation and immediate intense tragedy, she finds comfort in the natural surroundings. This moment is described by her as follows:

*'I smelled the sweetness of winter wildflowers. Quails hopped, hiding and seeking me in the long grass. Squirrels as tiny as mice swished over my arms, dropping nuts. The trees were stooped and gnarled, as though the ghosts of old women had taken root. I always felt the she-ghosts were guarding me. I didn't feel I was nothing'* (Mukherjee, 1989, p. 9).

This scene offers Jasmine a moment of peace as she feels emotionally safe and connected to nature in the land where she was disconnected from her cultural roots, language, and identity.

The imagery of trees as an old woman makes her feel protected and evokes motherly feelings. At this moment, rather than feeling alienated, she feels safe and protected. Though her arrival in the United States makes things worse for her as the cultural shock and being alone cause her to lose her sense of freedom, the novel exhibits her feelings through a simile by comparing Jasmine to a stone:

*I feel at times like a stone hurtling through diaphanous mist, unable to grab hold, unable to slow myself, yet unwilling to abandon the ride I'm on. Down and down I go, where I'll stop, God only knows" (Mukherjee, 1989, p. 96).*

The simile reiterates Fanon's idea that postcolonial subjects often sense they are deprived of a fixed identity because they are labelled as others. Jasmine's feelings of being 'unable to grab hold' display her mental stress of being uprooted from her culture and the inner conflict among the different versions of herself. Jasmine felt separated from the mainstream US people because of language as well. While in America, she remarks that her English seemed to be slipping away from her, 'I felt my English was deserting me' (Mukherjee, 1989, p. 100). In connection with diaspora concepts, language becomes a 'space' of falling apart for Jasmine. Her attempt to integrate into American society by speaking English exacerbates her alienation from her homeland, though she admits that she is not welcome anywhere. This linguistic alienation aligns with Fanon's (1952) idea that the language of the colonizers becomes a symbol of superiority, leading the individuals of colonized regions to feel inferior when they are unable to learn and master it. Jasmine observes how the American people try to force her to integrate into their society.

*They want to make me familiar. In a pinch, they'll admit that I might look a little different, that I'm a "dark-haired girl" in a naturally blond county. I have a "darkish complexion" (in India, I'm "wheatish"), as though I might be Greek from one grandparent (Mukherjee, 1989, p. 28).*

The lack of a real connection to American identity and attempts to achieve close resemblance to people of the other region or race show how immigrants are caught in a dense situation where they can neither cling to their own identity nor completely assimilate the foreign culture, hence suffering from a complex identity crisis. It causes trauma, overpowering one's identity, shattering one's sense of self. It often erodes confidence, leaving one feeling worthless, disgraced, and powerless. It puts an individual in confusion. It fractures one's identity, leading to a misconception of personal values, goals, and history, or may also cause 'an over-identification with the trauma itself, trapping the individual in a perpetual past'. The effects of trauma are far-reaching to the extent that individuals are dissociated and disconnected from emotions, memories, and personal history. Diaspora studies have emphasized that migration and displacement affect individuals' emotional health. They are caught between the 'roots and routes', defined as a 'postcolonial hang-up' (Clifford, 1997). Jasmine's legal status also portrays her as an individual not accepted in the US, making her feel that she does not belong in or exist in the country. The trauma of legal invisibility contributes to Jasmine's perpetual anxiety and social withdrawal. She announces, 'I didn't feel safe going outdoors' (Mukherjee, 1989, p. 102), which demonstrates how alienation infiltrates her daily life, reducing the postcolonial subject to a state of fear and internal anxiety. Later, she feels suffocated in the company of her Punjabi relative in New York, irritated by their artificial manners to hold the Indian traditions. She is happy to remain isolated. Isolation plays a significant role in Jasmine's struggle for survival and acceptability. It detaches her from mainstream citizens physically, emotionally, and legally. She frequently ponders her situation and condition, and she tries to establish a connection with the US world. She sheds her old identity and adopts a new one. Her struggle depicts an enormous

transformation of a passive traditional Indian girl into a ‘hybrid’ yet independent and active American woman. Working as Jase reflects an adventurous woman, undoubtedly alienated from her roots. To gain inner strength, she sacrifices her past and her traditions. She was understood as a traditional Indian widow in exile; however, she resists her limited gender role for her survival. Alienation from her culture and roots plays a positive role in her transformation journey. It shapes her to the best. Also, as a catalyst, it compels Jasmine to disengage with her past identity for survival by adapting to a new environment. Initially alienated from her family, later she controls herself to detach herself from Indian traditions as well.

## 2. Complex Identity

The idea of complex identity sustains in the novel. It can be defined as a dynamic, multidimensional, ‘fluid understanding of self’, beyond a singular or fixed definition. It involves ‘the intersection of individual, social, and historical contexts, including culture, power dynamics, and personal experiences’ (Kaplan & Garner, 2017). This is a paradigm shift challenging conventional, ‘essentialist views of identity’. An identity crisis is defined as a condition of uncertainty and confusion in which a person’s sense of identity becomes compromised and insecure, typically due to shifts in their expected roles. In the context of post-colonialism and ‘cultural hybridity’ (Bhabha, 1990), identity crisis is defined as a rooted, prolonged state of uncertainty, perplexity, and anxiety, which bars individuals from a self-definition experienced by individuals and societies in the aftermath of colonial rule. It often reflects a conflict between indigenous heritage and the cultural, political, and linguistic structures followed or imposed by colonizers. This is a psychological damage caused by the colonizers (Fanon, 1952).

Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* (1989) does not portray the protagonist’s identity in just one way but allows it to grow and change. Whatever her disguise, whether Jyoti in Hasnapur by birth, or Jase living in Manhattan with Taylor and Duff, or Jane in Iowa, Jasmine liberates herself. That is the phase of her American transformation that shows how she responds to particular events and adjusts her emotions accordingly. This change in her personality occurs with each new traumatic event or shift in the society around her. Postcolonial subjects are often denigrated; they carry the weight of this history while also hoping to be recognized in a foreign land. Jasmine continually changes from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jase and Jane. Under the Indian cultural influence, she sometimes assumes the role of Kali avenging those who tortured and betrayed her. When she is assaulted and kills her attacker, she temporarily becomes Kali, the Hindu goddess of destruction and rebirth. Jasmine’s transformations reverberate with extreme trauma or an existential turning point. For instance, when she becomes a widow and moves to America, she actively renames herself to leave behind her old identity.

*He wanted to break down the Jyoti I’d been in Hasnapur and make me a new kind of city woman. To break off the past, he gave me a new name: Jasmine (Mukherjee, 1989, p. 57).*

This act reflects postcolonial mimicry, in which postcolonial subjects adopt Western culture as a symbol of modernity and progress by abandoning their culture. Yet, this mimicry is never complete; it always contains a residue of resistance and ambivalence (Fanon, 1952).

*Jyoti would have saved. 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 Viji & Wife. Jase went to watch movies and lived for today” (Mukherjee, 1989, p. 119).*

This identity is not merely symbolic; it is an embodied act of vengeance and self-preservation. Jasmine’s identity crisis unfolds over the course of the novel through a series of

deliberate and involuntary changes, each linked to specific episodes of violence, migration, or emotional rupture. In one of the earliest instances, Jasmine declares,

*I am carrying Bud Ripplemeyer's baby. He wants me to marry him before the baby is born. He wants to be able to say, Bud and Jane Ripplemeyer proudly announce..." (Mukherjee, 1989, p. 14).*

The above lines illustrate that Jasmine embraces an American domestic identity, also reflecting her desire for belonging and legitimacy in the new cultural context. Such a psychological fragmentation continues when she states, 'In Baden, I am Jane. Almost' (Mukherjee, 1989, p. 24). The word 'almost' indicates her struggle to adjust to the domestic mould that her American partner expects. This also unravels the internal conflict between entrusting family traditions and the desire to adopt new ones. Immigration and forced cultural changes affect her emotionally. Since she is a member of 'both' groups (colonized and colonizer), her identity remains 'impure'; she inhabited a zone of uncertainty. Jasmine's 'self' was not just shaped by agony but also by a constant process of 'being and becoming'. She strategically handled each situation.

The novel's portrayal of postcolonial identity as fluid and negotiable rather than fixed implies that, by reconfiguring her identity, Jasmine reclaims symbols of subjugation for her own self-preservation. Through feminine resilience, she demonstrates strength as she redefines her identity by challenging and resisting the gender roles and societal expectations imposed on her (Butler, 1990). Her resilience is a continuous struggle against the patriarchal system and marginalization, where survival becomes a powerful form of political resistance (Mohanty, 2003; hooks, 1984). Jasmine's story lays down a path for feminist characters who can change, split apart, and remain resilient. Mukherjee's open-ended conclusion affirms the perpetual change of postcolonial identity in *Jasmine* (1989).

## CONCLUSION

The present study unravelled how postcolonial trauma functioned as a destabilizing force and a generative catalyst in *Jasmine*. Jasmine changing identities from Jyoti to Jasmine, then Jase, and finally to Jane, highlighted a fusion of experiences, including loss, survival, adapting to new situations, and the formation of a new identity. Analysed within Fanon's postcolonial trauma theoretical framework, the study concluded that postcolonial subjects experience psychological fragmentation, alienation, and disorientation, particularly when migrating to the Western world. Jasmine's journey from Jyoti to Jane is a powerful literary representation of psychological, cultural, and social metamorphosis. All the different phases in her life are adorned by both suffering and resilience, which signifies that identity shifts and develops in a situation of belonging to a conservative background, the influence of patriarchy, and a foreign land. By transforming herself into Jase, Jasmine tried to accept American urban life, helped by her connection with Taylor. Taylor, representing the US, signifies that the master in any situation will remain the master. It is also important to note that Jasmine's struggle to be more independent and to reform herself cannot liberate her from her past. Her transformation into Jane in Iowa with Bud is the pinnacle of transition. This identity does not stay the same forever, as leaving Bud and choosing Taylor again, Jasmine showed that she did not want to be sealed into any one role. The discussion reflects that Jasmine's changing identity leads to her psychological disintegration, defined by Fanon in postcolonial trauma, in which the postcolonial subjects camouflage themselves with "white" ways and assimilate into situations of racial and cultural differences. Jasmine, being an outsider, confronts places, violence, and discrimination. Life experiences follow her internal conflicts, showing how the colonial legacy and its enduring effects influence people long after colonialism. Moreover, Mukherjee's *Jasmine* challenges the idea of a fixed self by emphasizing that identity is fluid

and flexible, shaped by external forces. Interdisciplinary in nature, the study relies on psychology as a tool to understand human character.

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