



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

## From Mimicry To Metamorphosis: Re-Reading Bharati Mukherjee's Immigrant Narratives Through The Lens Of The New Materialisms

Madhan S <sup>1\*</sup> and Dr. K Kumar <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1\*</sup> Ph.D. Research Scholar (PT), Periyar University, Salem &  
Assistant Professor, Department of English,

K.S.R. College of Engineering, Tiruchengode-637 215, Namakkal, Tamil Nadu, India.

<sup>2</sup> Associate Professor, Department of English,  
Government Arts and Science College, Harur-636 903, Dharmapuri, Tamil Nadu, India.

### Abstract:

Bharati Mukherjee, a pioneering voice in the Asian American literary canon, is predominantly read through postcolonial and feminist frameworks that emphasize themes of cultural displacement, identity crisis, and gendered agency. While these readings are invaluable, this article argues for a re-interpretation of her major novels—*Jasmine* (1989), *The Holder of the World* (1993), and *Desirable Daughters* (2002)—through the emerging theoretical paradigm of critical posthumanism and new materialism. This lens shifts the focus from the psychological and cultural interiority of the immigrant subject to the dynamic, agential role of non-human forces (the body, technology, geography, objects) in co-constituting identity. It is contended that Mukherjee's protagonists do not merely adapt to a new culture; they undergo a radical, material metamorphosis facilitated by their entanglement with the American landscape, its technologies, and the visceral capacities of their own bodies. This reading moves beyond the dialectic of loss and assimilation to reveal a more complex, posthuman vision of becoming, where identity is a fluid assemblage rather than a stable essence, anticipating key concerns in 21st-century thought about mobility, materiality, and subjectivity.

**Keywords:** Bharati Mukherjee, New Materialism, Critical Posthumanism, Immigrant Literature, Diaspora, Identity, Metamorphosis, Agency, Non-Human Actants, Assemblage Theory.

## Literature Review:

The critical reception of Bharati Mukherjee's work has evolved significantly over the past four decades, mirroring shifts in literary and cultural theory. Early scholarship, such as that by Fakrul Alam (1996), firmly positioned her within the tradition of postcolonial literature, focusing on themes of exile, displacement, and the "unhomely" condition of the migrant. This approach often contrasted her optimistic, forward-thrusting narratives with the more melancholic vision of writers like V.S. Naipaul, framing her work as a celebration of American possibility over Old World stasis.

Feminist criticism quickly became a dominant and productive framework. Scholars like Annette White-Parks (1995) and Ruth Maxey (2012) provided incisive analyses of the gendered dimensions of immigration, particularly in *Jasmine*. They read the protagonist's journey as a violent but ultimately liberating reclamation of agency from patriarchal structures, both Indian and American. The theme of self-invention—the shedding of identities like Jyoti for Jasmine and Jane—was interpreted as a distinctly feminist act of writing and rewriting one's own destiny against the grain of prescribed social roles.

This celebratory reading, however, soon faced robust critique. Scholars such as Gita Rajan (1997) and Inderpal Grewal (2005) raised crucial questions about the politics of Mukherjee's assimilationist narratives. They argued that the radical self-transformation of a character like Jasmine often relies on the violent erasure of her past and the bodies that represent it (e.g., the rapist Half-Face), potentially perpetuating a neoliberal myth of the American Dream that requires the immigrant to become a blank slate. This critical strand highlighted the potential complicity of her narratives with hegemonic power structures, questioning the cost of such "success."

More recently, transnational and diasporic studies have provided more nuanced readings. Critics like Cynthia F. Wong (2005) have examined the fluidity of borders and identities in her later work, particularly *The Holder of the World*, seeing it as a sophisticated critique of fixed national and historical narratives. This approach aligns Mukherjee with a globalized, networked understanding of identity.

However, a significant gap remains in this rich body of criticism. While these studies excellently map the psychological, cultural, and political terrain of Mukherjee's fiction, they largely operate within an anthropocentric paradigm. Identity is understood as a cultural, psychological, or discursive construct. The material environment—the transformative, agential impact of the American soil, the role of technology (from airplanes to computers), and the visceral, non-conscious power of the body itself—has been treated as a backdrop or symbol rather than an active, co-constituting participant in the narrative of transformation. This article seeks to fill this gap by applying the theoretical insights of new materialism (Jane Bennett, Karen Barad) and critical posthumanism (Rosi Braidotti), arguing that Mukherjee's work not only accommodates but prefigures these theories by presenting identity as a materially constituted and constantly evolving assemblage.

## Introduction: Beyond the Cultural Lens to the Material Mesh

Bharati Mukherjee's fiction has long been celebrated for its visceral, often brutal, portrayal of the immigrant experience. The critical tradition has rightly focused on the cultural shock, the psychological dislocation, and the gendered negotiations that define this journey. Yet, to stop at this level of analysis is to miss the profound, radical materialism that pulses through her narratives. This article proposes that the most innovative aspect of her work lies in its implicit, embodied understanding of identity not as a stable essence or a cultural script, but as a material process of continuous becoming. By reading her novels through the lens of new materialism and critical posthumanism, we can see her protagonists not just as cultural hybrids or feminist agents, but as posthuman subjects whose metamorphosis is catalyzed by their dynamic, often violent, intra-actions with a world of vibrant matter.

New materialism, as articulated by thinkers like Jane Bennett in *Vibrant Matter* (2010), fundamentally challenges the deep-seated Western binary between active human subjects and passive non-human objects. Bennett proposes the concept of “vital materiality,” suggesting that things, infrastructures, ecosystems, and even bodily fluids possess a certain agency or “thing-power” that can shape events, histories, and subjectivities. Similarly, Rosi Braidotti in *The Posthuman* (2013) defines the subject not as a coherent, rational self (the humanist subject) but as a nomadic “assemblage”—a temporary, dynamic gathering of human, non-human, technological, biological, and social components. This framework is perfectly suited to analyze the literal and figurative metamorphoses in Mukherjee’s work, where the human is always in a state of co-creation with its material environment. The question is not “who am I?” in a cultural sense, but “what am I becoming?” in a material sense, as part of a specific assemblage.

### ***Jasmine* – The Vital Agency of the Body and the Land**

In *Jasmine*, the protagonist’s journey from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jazzy to Jane is typically read as a series of strategic performances, a shedding of old skins for new ones in pursuit of the American Dream. A new materialist reading, however, demands we focus on the corporeal and geographical materialism of this transformation. Her identity is not just a story she tells herself; it is physically inscribed upon her body, catalyzed by traumatic events, and shaped by the very landscapes she traverses. She becomes a different assemblage of matter and meaning with each relocation.

The novel begins with an act of profound material violence that sets the entire narrative in motion: the bomb blast that kills her husband, Prakash. This event is not merely a tragic plot point; it is a violent infusion of matter—shrapnel, force, heat—that irrevocably alters her life’s trajectory. The bomb is a vibrant, malicious actant that dismantles her current reality. In its aftermath, Jasmine makes a vow that is both spiritual and intensely physical: to journey to America and commit sati on the grounds of the Florida college Prakash dreamed of attending. This vow binds her destiny to a specific, foreign material location.

Her immigration is a journey through vibrant, agential landscapes that actively work upon her. The swampy Florida coast where she is raped by the smuggler Half-Face is not a passive setting. It is a sticky, oppressive, “teeming” force that acts upon her. The air is thick with mosquitoes, the ground is unstable. This environment mirrors and intensifies the violation. After the rape, the materiality of the scene—the “greasy” sheets, the “sour” smell of the room—becomes unbearable. Her response is not initially psychological but visceral, a reaction to the vile assemblage she has become part of. She smashes a bottle and cuts Half-Face’s throat, an act she describes not in terms of moral justification, but as a necessary reconfiguration of a toxic material entanglement: “I was not extinguishing a life... I was extinguishing the process of dying I had been thrust into” (Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 117). This act of violence is a moment of supreme agency, but it is an agency born from the body’s reaction to a threatening material assemblage. The body itself becomes the most vital non-human actant, taking charge of its own becoming.

Her subsequent movements across America are a series of re-assemblages. In New York, with Taylor and Wylie, she becomes Jazzy, an identity facilitated by the material culture of Manhattan—the intellectual buzz, the foreign foods, the cosmopolitan apartment. But it is in the flat, fertile plains of Iowa that her most significant material integration occurs. The landscape itself is described in terms that suggest openness and possibility, a direct contrast to the confined, teeming spaces of her past. She notes, “In Baden, the horizon is a straight line. The world is flat. You can see the weather coming from miles away” (179). This geographic flatness correlates with her own expansive, unburdened sense of possibility. She learns to drive, a quintessential American act of mobility that integrates her with the machine and the land. She works in a bank, handling the material symbols of value. Her relationship with Bud Ripplemeyer is rooted in the physicality of the prairie—their home, his disability, her pregnancy.

The novel’s famous ending, where she decides to follow Taylor to California, abandoning the stable life with Bud, is the ultimate expression of her nomadic, assemblage-based subjectivity. She is not rejecting one identity for another, but choosing a different set of material relations. She declares, “I am not choosing between men. I am caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness... Adventuring is a

state of mind” (214-215). This “adventuring” is Braidotti’s nomadism in practice. Jasmine’s identity is not assimilated but *assembled* and re-assembled through these continuous material intra-actions with places, bodies, objects, and forces. She is a testament to Bennett’s idea that “the us and the it slip into one another” (*Vibrant Matter*, 4).

### ***The Holder of the World – A Trans-historical Assemblage of Objects and Data***

*The Holder of the World* dramatically expands the materialist vision across centuries and continents, moving beyond the individual immigrant body to explore how history itself is a product of vibrant material entanglements. The novel’s dual narrative structure, featuring Beigh Masters, a late-20th-century computer expert, and her historical subject, Hannah Easton, a 17th-century woman who journeyed to India, deconstructs linear, human-centric history. In this novel, non-human actants—objects, technologies, and natural forces—are the central connectors that bind time and space.

Beigh’s profession is itself a posthuman conceit. She is an “asset hunter,” who uses advanced computer technology, a program called “the correlator,” to locate priceless artifacts. The correlator is not a passive tool; it is an agential force that actively reconstructs the past by finding patterns in vast datasets. Beigh explains, “I deal in facts... But facts are like subatomic particles... The correlator doesn’t just retrieve facts, it correlates them. It makes patterns” (Mukherjee, *The Holder of the World*, 6). This description echoes Karen Barad’s concept of “intra-action,” which argues that entities (like the past and the present) do not pre-exist their interactions but rather emerge through them. Beigh and Hannah do not exist independently; their subjectivities are intra-actively constituted through the correlator’s data-mining.

The novel is saturated with objects that possess vibrant “thing-power.” The central MacGuffin is the legendary “Emperor’s Tear,” a diamond of immense size and value. This diamond is not a mere symbol of wealth; it acts upon the characters, driving their desires, motivating piracy, war, and love. It assembles histories around itself. Similarly, the “Salem samplers” stitched by Hannah as a girl are not just decorative art; they are material repositories of skill, memory, and cultural translation that prefigure her journey. The ocean that carries Hannah to India is a powerful, non-human force that determines the fates of thousands.

Hannah’s identity, like Jasmine’s, is an assemblage formed through her encounter with the vibrant materiality of a foreign culture. When she is captured by the Maratha king and becomes the legendary “Mughal Bibi,” Salem-born Hannah is physically and culturally remade. Her clothing, food, language, and even her body are reconfigured by her new material environment. She does not simply “go native”; she becomes a new assemblage of Puritan resilience, Mughal courtly politics, and Indian landscape. The novel suggests that her survival and power are contingent on her ability to intra-act with this new material world, to become part of its assemblage.

The climax of the novel, where Beigh uses the correlator to virtually experience the sack of the king’s fortress and locate the diamond, is a stunning illustration of a posthuman, materialist historiography. Beigh doesn’t just learn about the past; she materially enters it through a technological simulation that blurs the boundaries between body and data, past and present. She states, “I was there... I was in the tent, I was Hannah, I was the soldier, I was the diamond” (298). This is not mystical time-travel; it is a representation of how contemporary subjectivity is assembled through information networks. The past is not a sealed archive but, like Bennett’s vibrant matter, is an active force that can be intra-actively engaged with in the present. Beigh and Hannah are not separate subjects but part of a larger, trans-historical assemblage, connected by the very objects, data, and material traces that constitute their stories.

### ***Desirable Daughters – The Unruly Agency of Biological and Digital Matter***

In *Desirable Daughters*, the materiality of identity takes on a distinctly 21st-century character, exploring the agency of biological and digital matter. If *Jasmine* focuses on the body-in-the-landscape and *The Holder of the World* on objects-across-time, *Desirable Daughters* concerns itself with the microscopic and the virtual. The novel’s plot is driven by the arrival of a young man named Ronald D. Poster who claims to



be the son of the protagonist, Tara Bhattacharjee. This claim is rooted not in a simple lie, but in the stolen biological material of her son's umbilical cord stem cells.

This premise directly engages with the posthuman concept of biological agency. The stolen stem cells are vibrant matter par excellence—they are not merely a part of a body but possess the agential capacity to generate life, to disrupt and reconfigure familial and personal identity. The threat Tara feels is not just social but ontological; it challenges the very boundaries of the self and its progeny. Her identity as a mother, and her son's identity as a unique individual, are revealed to be vulnerable to the unpredictable agency of their own biological components, which can be alienated and used to create a "copy." This echoes concerns about biotechnology raised by posthumanist thinkers, where the biological body becomes a site of technological intervention and fragmentation.

Furthermore, the narrative unfolds through global networks of communication—phone calls, emails, air travel—highlighting how contemporary diasporic identity is assembled through technological systems. Tara, a Bengali Brahmin woman living in San Francisco, is connected to Calcutta, to her sisters in New Jersey and New York, and to the mysterious Ronnie Poster through a digital web. The novel is structured by these flows of information. A crisis that begins in the "real world" is investigated and mediated through the virtual one. Tara's sense of self is not confined to her cultural heritage or her immediate physical surroundings in San Francisco; it is distributed across a global network of biological and digital information.

The novel's title, *Desirable Daughters*, points to the objectification of women within patriarchal systems, but a new materialist reading reveals a deeper layer: the daughters themselves are composed of desirable *matter*—genes, bloodlines, and now, stem cells—that have their own social and biological currency. The story of the three sisters—Tara, Padma, and Parvati—is not just a story of contrasting life choices, but of different material assemblages: Padma's life is assembled around traditional Bengali wealth and social status in New Jersey; Parvati's around a spiritually-inflected, minimalist existence; and Tara's around a hybrid of Californian lifestyle and Bengali memory, constantly disrupted by digital and biological intrusions. The "self" is revealed to be a precarious assemblage, perpetually vulnerable to the unpredictable agency of its non-human components, from a strand of DNA to a phishing email.

## Conclusion:

Reading Bharati Mukherjee through the lens of new materialism and critical posthumanism does not invalidate previous cultural, postcolonial, and feminist readings; rather, it enriches them by adding a crucial, often overlooked, material dimension. Her novels demonstrate that immigration, especially for women, is not merely a cultural passage or a psychological adjustment but a profound material reconfiguration of the self. The protagonist's body, the technologies that transport her, the landscapes she inhabits, and the objects that surround her are not mere settings or symbols; they are active, vibrant participants in her becoming.

From Jasmine's corporeal metamorphosis across the American terrain, to Hannah Easton's trans-historical entanglement with jewels and data, to Tara Bhattacharjee's confrontation with the agency of her own biological and digital matter, Mukherjee's work consistently decenters the human subject. Her characters are not sovereign agents mastering their environment; they are nomadic assemblages, constantly formed and reformed through their intra-actions with a lively and often dangerous material world.

By foregrounding this material entanglement, Mukherjee's work moves beyond the established paradigms of mimicry, hybridity, and assimilation to explore a more radical and continuous metamorphosis. In doing so, she anticipates contemporary theoretical concerns by several decades, offering a vision of the immigrant subject—and indeed, the contemporary global subject—as a nomadic, posthuman assemblage. This vision is not about finding a new, stable home or identity, but about embracing the perpetual, material process of becoming-other. In a world increasingly defined by climate change, global pandemics, and digital ubiquity—all events that highlight the power of the non-human—Mukherjee's literary project feels

more relevant than ever, providing a narrative framework for understanding subjectivity in an age of vibrant matter.

## References:

1. Alam, F. *Bharati Mukherjee*. Twayne Publishers, 1996.
2. Barad, K. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Duke University Press, 2007.
3. Bennett, J. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke University Press, 2010.
4. Braidotti, R. *The Posthuman*. Polity Press, 2013.
5. Grewal, I. *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms*. Duke University Press, 2005.
6. Madhan, S. "A Study on the Struggle to Accustom the Socio-Cultural Structure in Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*". *Nagfani*, 12(43), 2022, 65-67.
7. Madhan, S. "Exploring Identity and Immigration in Bharathi Mukherjee's Novels". *Masivan : Journal of Language and Literature Studies*, 2(2), 2025, 34-45.
8. Maxey, R. *South Asian Atlantic Literature, 1970-2010*. Edinburgh University Press, 2012.
9. Mukherjee, B. *Jasmine*. Grove Press, 1989.
10. Mukherjee, B. *The Holder of the World*. Ballantine Books, 1993.
11. Mukherjee, B. *Desirable Daughters*. Hyperion, 2002.
12. Rajan, G. "Ethical Responsibility in Subaltern Contexts: A Reading of Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*." In *Transnational Asian American Literature: Sites and Transits*, Temple University Press, 1997, 129-143.
13. White-Parks, A. "A Reversal of American Concepts of 'Otherness' in the Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee." *MELUS*, 20(1), 1995, 133-154.
14. Wong, C. F. "The Postmodern Ethnic Immigrant Novel: Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* and *The Holder of the World*." In *A Companion to the British and American Novel*, Blackwell Publishing, 2005, 406-420.

