

Interrogating the Ambivalence of Self-Fashioning and Redefining the Immigrant Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

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Abstract

Rejecting the paralysis of exilic consciousness, Bharati Mukherjee embraces the cultural diaspora of America to create a transformed identity of her own. Her psychological evolution is reflected in her fictional character, Jasmine, who, like her, subverts and participates in the hegemonic notion of immigrant identity and tries to carve out a different selfhood by participating in the violent process of *decolonising* the mind. However, the novel subverts this emancipatory rhetoric by creating ambiguous sites of identity performance where the protagonist is both complicit and resistant to the dominant culture. Analysis of these ambiguous sites in the novel would require us to consider the rhetoric of American “exceptionalism” which makes the United States a unique, liberal, “redeemer” nation, a place where individuals could carve out their identities through hard work, agency and determination. The aim of this paper is to apply the above rhetoric to explore the ambivalence of identity and subvert the notion of agency in Mukherjee’s diasporic novel, *Jasmine* (1989).

Abstract in Malay

Menolak perasaan terbuang yang melumpuhkan, Bharati Mukherjee menerima dengan terbuka budaya diaspora Amerika dalam mencipta perubahan identiti untuk dirinya sendiri. Evolusi psikologinya dipantulkan dalam watak fiksiennya, Jasmine, yang sepertinya, melibatkan diri dalam idea kekuasaan identiti para penghijrah dan cuba mencipta konsep diri yang berbeza dengan melibatkan diri dalam proses ganas memerdekakan minda. Walaubagaimanapun, novel ini menenggelamkan retorik tentang kemerdekaan dengan mencipta tempat kabur persembahan identiti di mana watak utamanya terlibat dan juga menolak budaya utama. Analisa daerah kabur novel ini memerlukan kita untuk menimbangakan retorik yang membuatkan Amerika unik, liberal, tempat di mana keadaan dibetulkan dan individu boleh membentuk identiti mereka menerusi kerja keras, agensi, dan semangat jitu. Tujuan artikel ini ialah untuk mengaplikasi retorik di atas dan meneroka percanggahan identiti dan idea agensi di dalam novel diaspora Mukherjee bertajuk *Jasmine* (1989).

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Keywords

Migration, identity construction, violence, Third world woman, diaspora, feminism

Keywords in Malay

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There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself. We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dream. (*Jasmine* 29)

This “remaking” or reshaping of identities is an important concept in the novels of Bharati Mukherjee, an immigrant writer of Asian-Indian origin who, discarding the hyphenated label of Indian-American, calls herself an American by “choice” (Dlaska 1). Her novels, according to her husband, Clark Blaise, deal with the “unhousement” and “rehousement” of people, “the process of breaking away from the culture into which one was born and the re-rooting of oneself in a new culture” (qtd. in Dlaska 1).

The persistent theme of (re)fashioning of immigrant identity in Mukherjee’s work is seen by some postcolonial critics like Inderpal Grewal as a result of the author’s lived experience as an expatriate Asian first and then as a naturalised citizen of the United States (70). Mukherjee came to America as a doctoral student in 1961. In an interview with Bill Moyers she says, “I knew the moment I landed as a student in 1961... [t]hat this is where I belonged. It was an instant kind of love, a feeling of being at one” (Moyers, “Interview”). She mentions that America offered romanticism and hope to her from a world of cynicism and despair. For Mukherjee, as Fakrul Alam writes, “immigration, particularly immigration to America, is a crucial step to be taken in any move to remake oneself in the light of one’s desires” (109). In her essay “Two Ways to Belong in America,” she describes her immigrant experience as, “America spoke to me – I married it – I embraced the demotion from expatriate aristocrat to immigrant nobody, surrendering those thousands of years of ‘pure culture,’ the saris, the delightfully accented English” (273). What Mukherjee suggests in her works and interview is that cultural assimilation and rejection of hyphenated identities are the only ways for Asian Indians, or for that matter any immigrant, to wipe off their invisibility in America. However, the process of acculturation is violent and traumatic for Mukherjee. It is violent because it involves a deliberate rejection of one’s roots, past traditions and heritage to adopt and assimilate the dominant culture. The conscious annihilation of one’s selfhood thus takes place through psychological and physical violence, which, in turn, enables individuals to refashion their identities.

Violence thus becomes a catalyst in fabricating immigrant identity in Mukherjee’s fiction, particularly in one of her early works, *Jasmine*. Published in

1989, the novel replicates Mukherjee's celebratory tone of violent refashioning of identity through radical negotiations in the dominant culture. *Jasmine* weaves the story of an illiterate Punjabi girl who comes to America to self-immolate herself in the name of her dead husband. She is raped the day she lands in the United States and finds herself totally ostracised in an all-white neighbourhood. However, through her chanced encounters with good-intentioned people in America, she completely transforms herself from an ignorant, helpless immigrant to a confident working woman, an unwed mother, a reckless lover, and in the end, "greedy with wants and reckless from hope" (*Jasmine* 214). She denies the material comforts of her domestic life and succumbs to the mysterious calling of adventure by eloping with her former lover.

The novel has been very well received in the United States for its rhetoric of hope. However, postcolonial critics like Inderpal Grewal, Deepika Bahri, Gurleen Grewal and others have critiqued and questioned the positive self-conceptualisation of identity formation in *Jasmine*. They see the ambiguous representation of the protagonist both as an instance of the narrator's complicity with the American cultural logic of agency and choice in identity construction and as a self-reflexive move to critique the internalisation of Western culture. Analysis of the ambiguity in the novel would require us to consider the rhetoric of American "exceptionalism" which makes the United States a unique, liberal, "redeemer" nation, a place where individuals could carve out their identities through hard work, agency and determination. The aim of this paper is to apply the above rhetoric to explore the ambivalence of identity and subvert the notion of agency in Mukherjee's diasporic novel, *Jasmine*.

Jasmine has a large and popular readership. It is a common book recommended in the English Departments across the United States. Inderpal Grewal talks about the variety of reader response (both in U.S. and India) to this novel. Surveying the readers' reviews in Amazon.com website, she finds out that the responses conform to the victimised image of Asian women. Most American readers find the story "of the plight of a woman in India" to be "real." One writer affirms, "Women are oppressed and must learn to survive" (qtd. in Grewal 73). Another reader echoes similar sentiments, "[the novel] paints a disturbing picture of traditional India: the caste system, the miserable status of women, the horrors facing a widow, the overall poverty and pervading corruption, the religious wars" (73). Though most readers were fascinated with the story of "traditional" India and the "horrors" of living as a woman in a Third World country, some read the novel as an exploration of the American dream and a "good story on the transformation of people" (73). One reader wrote that the "story of how a young Indian girl becomes an American is intriguing" and another observed that the novel depicted "a real girl" who was "seeking a new self-definition" (73). Only one reader from Kolkata mentioned

that she liked the book because it portrayed a moving picture of the hardships of immigration experience in America which was contrary to what she had heard about America. However, that response seems to be an anomaly because even the *Baltimore Sun* blurb emphasised that the novel is “Poignant... heart rending.... The story of the transformation of an Indian girl, whose grandmother wants to marry her off at 11, into an American woman who finally thinks for herself” (qtd. in Grewal 72). The reader-responses highlight how cultural binaries are created and located within the discourse of American exceptionalism and neoliberalism and how the established cultural logic perpetuates the victimisation of Third World women that I will discuss later. The responses also bring into question Mukherjee’s intention in representing her female protagonist as a helpless Indian woman whose path of individuation happens through her effort to “become” American.

Critics like Fakrul Alam have pointed out that the character of Jasmine has been fashioned to show Mukherjee’s belief in the “necessity of inventing and re-inventing one’s self by going beyond what is given and by transcending one’s origins” (Alam 109). The quote affirms Mukherjee’s project of “becoming” *American* by unlearning and relearning cultural tropes and transgressing socio-cultural norms. This compulsion to Americanise is criticised by postcolonial critics like Feroza Jusuwalla who says:

Bharati Mukherjee definitely seems to have found her ‘haven’ in the United States, but with this comes an obsequiousness, a pleading to be mainstreamed.... This new generation of South Asian writers are ex-colonials, twice colonized, like the twice born Brahmins, oppressed by their European education and by their hunger to be Americanized. (Qtd. in Parekh 285)

The “hunger” or the intense desire to “become” American is also critiqued by Inderpal Grewal in her book chapter, “Becoming American: the Novel and the Diaspora” where she argues that this internalisation of dominant identities is a common phenomenon among diasporic writers like Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Amitav Ghosh. Grewal notes that Mukherjee’s novel promotes:

American nationalism as a neoliberal political vision of democracy in which ethnic identities are produced and racism overcome through choice and individual will and acts. Even though the protagonist in *Jasmine* encounters many kinds of violence in the United States, the country offers her something that India cannot, which is the *choice* to reinvent herself. As Mukherjee has said, immigrants have a privilege ‘of not only inventing your biography, but also deciding for yourself... *choosing* your homeland.’ (69)

It is this “liberal” America, where identity could be a choice that forms the core of Mukherjee’s Americanisation. In Mukherjee’s worldview identities remain frozen in countries like India while it is fluid and flexible in the United States. She continuously delineates America as the *New* world of hope and progress in contrast to the *Old* world (India) of stasis and oppression in the novel *Jasmine*. The binary is problematic not only for its arbitrariness but also for dehistoricising South Asian communities. Inderpal Grewal rightly critiques such a perspective:

The novel’s lack of any specificity regarding the lives of South Asian women in a particular period, or of the complexities of the history of modern South Asia, allows the discourse of tradition and modernity to replace the complex histories of postcolonial India as well as the problematic of historiography. (70)

Mukherjee’s problematic representation of the two nation-states harks back to Said’s notion of Orientalism as a Western/hegemonic discourse that facilitates and authenticates the power hierarchy within the “Self/Other” model. Said’s argument is, because the West/Occident is normalised as a referent of modernity/progress/technological advancement, that the Orient exists as the regressive Other that is incapable of bringing about its own progress (*Orientalism* 7). Said’s theory can be applied to the (re)presentation of the “Third World women” in Western feminist discourse which is crucial to understanding Jasmine’s transformation in the novel.

The notion of universalising oppression in the name of gender is criticised by several feminists including Judith Butler. In her seminal essay, “Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire,” Butler writes:

That form of feminist theorizing has come under criticism for its effort to colonize and appropriate non-Western cultures to support highly Western notions of oppression, but because they tend as well to construct a ‘Third World’ or even an ‘Orient’ in which gender oppression is subtly explained as symptomatic of an essential, non-Western barbarism. The urgency of feminism to establish a universal status for patriarchy in order to strengthen the appearance of feminism’s own claims to be representative has occasionally motivated the shortcut to a categorical or fictive universality of the structure of domination, held to produce women’s common subjugated experience. (5)

The phrases “universal status for patriarchy” and “women’s *common* subjugated experience” point out a homogenising mission of feminism to create an illusory bond among women (as the repressed group) across culture, race, ethnicity, class, religion and sexuality. The urge to identify with other women and to empathise with their oppression is almost a syllogism of what Theresa A.

Kulbaga calls “nationalist discourses and affective responses that positions the United States as the geopolitical center of freedom, choice, feminist empowerment, and human rights” (508). In her essay, “Pleasurable Pedagogies: *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and the Rhetoric of Empathy,” Kulbaga talks about Azar Nafisi’s mission to create a globalised rhetoric of freedom and choice for Iranian women based on her understanding of the neoliberal philosophy of America. Her empathising discourse strengthens “U.S. nationalist and imperialist fantasies concerning women’s rights and rescue. Importantly, these fantasies are intimately bound up with neoliberal feminism’s production of empowered subjects through discourses of consumer freedom and choice” (qtd. in Kulbaga 511). Kulbaga points out that the narrator in the novel embarks upon a totalising mission to create an illusion of freedom for her female students (whom she calls her *girls*) through the act of reading Western fictions like *Lolita* and *The Great Gatsby*. Through identification with such fictional characters the narrator’s students can truly find their “authentic” selves and can escape from the reality of their daily oppression. However, identification as a persuasive strategy becomes problematic when Nafisi constructs binaries between democracy and totalitarianism, between America and Iran based on American “exceptionalism” and neoliberalism. Kulbaga explains that “the narrator’s analysis of *Lolita* as a theory of totalitarian power is striking, both in its evocation of U.S. nationalist rhetoric and in its mobilization of rape as a metonym for women under the Iranian regime” (513). As the narrator observes, “*Lolita*’s image is forever associated in the minds of her readers with that of her jailer. *Lolita* on her own has no meaning; she can only come to life through her prison bars” (qtd. in Kulbaga 513). This statement imaginatively connects *Lolita* with the Iranian women (who, the narrator feels, are imprisoned within the Islamic totalitarian regime) and Humbert, her oppressor, with the Islamic Republic. As Kulbaga insightfully points out, by “Constructing the United States and Iran as opposites, she reproduces for her students in Tehran the nationalist myth of American exceptionalism” (514). The narrator consolidates this claim when she writes, “We in ancient countries have our past – we obsess over the past. They, the Americans, have a dream: they feel nostalgia about the promise of the future” (qtd. in Kulbaga 514).

The definition of America as a country which promises a brighter future is shared by Mukherjee in her novel. As Inderpal Grewal has mentioned, “even though the protagonist in *Jasmine* encounters many kinds of violence in the United States, the country offers her something that India cannot, which is the *choice* to reinvent herself” (69). And it is in this continuous effort of deconstructing and reconstructing selfhood that *Jasmine* encounters violence in every step of her identity formation.

The incidents of the novel show that *Jasmine*’s life is a continuation of violence. It creeps into her life before her trans-Atlantic migration in the form

of her mother's attempted infanticide. Jasmine was born with a "ruby-red choker of bruise" around her throat and "sapphire fingerprints" on her collarbone (*Jasmine* 40). Jasmine's mother, a victim of patriarchal oppression, wanted to spare her daughter from the tyranny of living as a girl child in a lower middle-class Sikh family in India. To Jasmine, this infanticide is nothing horrific. She sees it as a manifestation of her mother's strong love for her and therefore can easily say that her mother loved her so much that "she tried to kill me, or she would have killed herself..." (52).

This act of violence, however, acts as a catalyst in representing India as a dark and repressive force. Mukherjee shows India (as Nafisi shows Iran) as the combat zone, a land of entrenched violence, and thus perpetuates the stereotype of a "Third World" in Western minds. She manifests in her novel what Edward Said argues about the status of colonised people in his seminal essay, "Representing the Colonized," where he says, "... the status of colonized people has been fixed in zones of dependency and peripherality, stigmatized in the designation of underdeveloped, less developed, developing states, ruled by a superior" (223). Therefore, by representing India as a backward, regressive nation where identities remain frozen (Grewal 66), Mukherjee is legitimising Jasmine's migration to the US to refashion her selfhood.

The novel indicates from the very beginning that Jasmine's life is marked for violent transformation. At age seven, with "scabrous arms" in contrast to her sister's "butter smooth" hands, Jasmine rejects the prediction of the village astrologer that she will be widowed at an early age and suffer the pain of exile. Her act of defiance in a patriarchal society leads to a violent reaction from the astrologer who shoves her hard on the ground. She falls and a sharp stick punctures a hole in her forehead, leaving a permanent star-shaped scar. Symbolically this may mean that Jasmine is born to reposition her stars by rejecting the traditional fatalism of Indian society.

Indeed, Mukherjee's novel shows that Jasmine is born to be a non-conformist and her defiant attitude invites violence in her life. Unlike her sisters, she does not get married early, studies at the local school and strives hard to pick up the English language. "To want English," she says to her brother, "was to want more than you had been given at birth, it was to want the world" (*Jasmine* 68). Her love of English steers her to marry Prakash, a young Punjabi with a modern outlook who protests against India's feudalism by not making Jasmine pregnant at fifteen. Prakash makes Jasmine aware of the fluidness of her identity in India. He renames her Jasmine from her christened name, Jyoti, to enable her to "break off the past" (77). Prakash inspires her to challenge destiny, empowers her to continue her self-education even after marriage (an act which seems quite revolutionary in the novel), and instils in her the desire to relocate in America, which to him, is a land of hope and freedom. Thus Prakash tempts the adventurous spirit of Jasmine and empowers her to

make the decision of migrating to the US, where she encounters both physical and psychological violence.

After Jasmine's marriage and her brief spell of happiness, violence again creeps into the novel in the form of sectarian aggression in Punjab. Following the colonial strategy of separatism (the divide and rule policy of British imperialism), Sukkhi, a friend of Jasmine's brother, Hari-prar, and his militant group demand a separate *khalistan*.² They are violent fundamentalists who reject the "rational peacemaking counsel of Prakash" (Dayal 69) and dominate the area through fear and aggression. They symbolise the dark and repressive forces of feudal India. They humiliate Jasmine's former teacher for advocating enlightenment and "peaceful change towards modernity" (Dayal 69) and accidentally kill Prakash in a bomb explosion just before his migration to America as an engineering student.

Shattered by the sudden violence of her husband's death and robbed off her dream to escape from the "tyrannical" clutches of India's feudalism, Jasmine decides to migrate to America, not to reaffirm herself, but to commit *sati*³ on the campus of the University of Florida where her husband was admitted as a student. This decision is seen as problematic by Gurleen Grewal who feels that Jasmine's desire for committing *sati* in America can be misleading to a Western audience, who may think that *sati* was "practiced as a matter of routine and choice by contemporary Hindu widows" (188). Spivak illustrates the paradox of Sati very well in her seminal essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" where she says, "between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third world woman' caught between tradition and modernization" (306). Here Spivak characterises the "shuttling" as a violent process of acculturation that defines and limits gender identity. This construction of the "Third World woman" as a monolithic *lack* in comparison to their western counterpart is seen as suspect by postcolonial feminist scholars. Deepika Bahri defines this group in connection and opposition to the Western world. She writes,

Drawn in broad strokes within a global framework, 'Third-World women' are typically seen as an undifferentiated group uncomplicated by the

² *Khalistan* comes from the word *khalsa* or purity. During the 1980's a section of the Sikh community wanted a separate land of their own, which they called *khalistan* or the land of the pure. This idea is not harboured by the Indian Punjabis anymore. However, some expatriate Punjabis still feel the need for separate statehood of their own.

³ *Sati* was a funeral practice among the Hindus in medieval India in which a recently widowed wife would immolate herself on her husband's pyre. This was seen as a sign of ultimate loyalty of a Hindu wife. This practice was officially banned by the then Governor, William Bentinck, in 1829 in collaboration with Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar.

heterogeneity that characterizes their conceptual counterpart ('First-World women') in the more developed world. Oppression is then seen as a 'Third World' preserve, and 'Third-World women' reduced to objects of consumption for a developed world which can implicitly and complacently reaffirm its superiority to the rest as the 'norm or referent.' ('Response: A World of Difference' 523)

The "formulaic fixity and invariability" (Bahri 523) of the so-called "Third World" women thus reaffirms the Western stereotype that women in developing or poor nations are sexually repressed, poor, uneducated, unconscious of their rights and privileges, victimised, and tradition-bound. What is implicit in this assumption is the image of the "First World women" as educated, modern, progressive, "having control over their bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions" (Bahri, "Feminism in/and Postcolonialism" 213). The "strategic essentialism" (to borrow Spivak's terminology) of the "First" and "Third World" women is both limiting and dangerous in feminist discourse. It not only creates uncomplicated homogenised groups of women, one repressed and the other liberated, but also legitimises the subordination of one group by the other through the rhetoric of mission, charity and help. Thus it creates "projectional fantasies of the Euro-American self as the desirable norm, to represent women of colour as being in need of rescue" (Bahri, "Response: A World of Difference" 527). Spivak very evocatively terms this fantasy as a phenomenon of "white men saving brown women from brown men" (qtd. in Bahri, "Response: A World of Difference" 527).

The construction and (self) victimisation of "Third World" subject play an important role in Jasmine's transformation. The narrator tries to convince us that Jasmine can only create individuality through her transatlantic migration and not in her homeland which is riddled with oppression, tradition and nihilism. She therefore needs America to *rescue* her from her *hopeless* situation. Armed with the fantasy of hope, Jasmine chooses expatriation over homeland and family, squanders all her savings in procuring a fake passport and comes to America as an illegal immigrant.

To a postcolonial reader, Jasmine's journey in America is ambiguous in its intention. We are given a very disturbing picture of how illegal immigrants are transported to the shores of America by "agents" who relish humiliating and violating the self-respect and modesty of helpless people. The immigrants are seen as "outcasts... strange pilgrims visiting outlandish shrines... ferried in old army trucks... and taken to roped off corners of waiting rooms where surly, barely wakened customs guards await their bribe" (*Jasmine* 101). The first thing Jasmine sees when she reaches the shores of Florida are "the two cones of a nuclear plant... against the pale unscratched blue of the sky" (107). The disturbingly dystopic image of a violent and ruthless America is one of the

ambiguous sites of performance that is constantly used in the novel. Even though we, as readers, are not able to read America purposefully at first, gradually we realise that America is needed to construct a stage where identities are performed and repeated as necessary.

The performance of immigrant identity is mapped through the trajectory of violence that reaches a zenith when Jasmine lands in Florida where she is required not only to give up her history but also her body when she is raped by Half-Face in a motel room in Florida. Mukherjee problematizes the nature of violence here. Half-Face's aggression is stylised as an art form in the novel: "His leg flew waist high in a show of kick and the door [was] thumped closed" (99). It seems that he is almost an artist performing the "ritual" of rape on the "exotic" Jasmine. Similarly, Jasmine metamorphoses into Kali, slicing off her tongue and dripping blood on her violator's body, when she murders Half-Face in the same motel room. Without commenting on the morality of her crime, Mukherjee contends that Jasmine shows individual agency by murdering her rapist and thus begins her first emancipatory journey towards self-assertion. However, readers discover a blatant contradiction in Jasmine's move. Jasmine cannot avenge her rapist as an ordinary mortal. She has to take recourse to some mythic, divine presence (Kali) to pull up her bravado before committing the act. Moreover, her overbearing strength to wipe off evil from this earth is very short-lived and immediately after the murder, she feels that her "body was merely the shell, soon to be discarded" (*Jasmine* 108). Commenting on this symbolism, Susan Koshy observes that

The moment of Jasmine's initiation into America is symbolized by her incarnation as Kali, the uncontained divine female energy of destruction and creation. Kali is the dark double of the Asian American love goddess of white fantasy, in whose form Jasmine passes undetected through America and through whose sexuality the romance with America can be secured. (141-42)

The psychic split in Jasmine's self exorcism reminds us of Anzaldua's concept of *mestiza*/hybrid consciousness. In her seminal essay, "La Conciencia de la *mestiza*" she writes, "To say that you are afraid of us, that to put distance between us, you wear the mask of contempt. Admit that Mexico is your double, that she exists in the shadow of this country, that we are irrevocably tied to her..." (91). Koshy's naming of Kali as the "dark double" and Anzaldua's claim of Mexica as America's "double" can figuratively be tied to Jasmine's psychic split to recreate herself in the mirror image of the dominant white culture. Her incarnation as Kali thus becomes an initiation act, a rite of passage into the *New* world of hope and desire.

Commenting on the violence of cultural assimilation, Adrienne Rich points out, "in their quest of a 'middle-class standard of life,' non-Anglo-Saxon

immigrants are conditioned to change your name, your accent, [not to] make trouble, defer to white men, and be ashamed of what you are” (qtd. in Gurleen Grewal 191). Mukherjee’s Jasmine complies completely with this attitude when she meets her “American Godmother,” Lillian Gordon. Gordon warns Jasmine, “Let the past make you wary, by all means. But do not let it deform you” (*Jasmine* 131). Inspired by her, Jasmine literally buries her past by wearing western clothes and shoes, adopting an American accent and a different style of walking, accustoming herself to different food habits and becoming financially independent.

The immigration experience in Mukherjee’s novels often involve the Gramscian notion of “complicity” whereby colonial domination is legitimised through mutual consent of coloniser and colonised and by instilling feelings of shame and self-hatred in the psyche of the colonised. It is therefore often seen that immigrants from colonised nations are complicit in the hegemonic culture to “free” themselves from the inherent shame of being the colonial “Other” and re-establish their identity in the foreign soil. Mukherjee’s corroboration of the immigrant experience and her rejection of cultural anamnesis thus make her complicit to the dominant culture of white America. She herself claims that *Jasmine* is a novel of an American immigrant who finds a new identity by “deliberately deracinating herself” (Connell, “Interview” 8).

Jasmine’s deracination is vividly portrayed in her multiple names. She was born as Jyoti, a traditional Hindu girl in a village in India. Her progressive husband rechristens her as Jasmine to wipe out her feudal past. In America, Jasmine becomes Jase in the Wylie household where she works as a “caregiver” (instead of a servant), and in the end she becomes Jane to Bud Ripplemeyer who is bewitched by her oriental beauty. The change in names suggests a psychic violence in her as she symbolically murders her previous identity again and again to recreate a new one. Some postcolonial critics like Jennifer Drake have thus likened her “rebirths” to the revolutionary process of decolonisation as described by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* where Fanon says, “Decolonization is always a violent phenomenon... without any period of transition, there is a total, complete and absolute substitution” (17). Though this comparison is too far-fetched as there is nothing revolutionary in Jasmine’s name changing, yet the act of her deleting former identities does suggest psychological violence in the novel.

Mukherjee, however, suggests that Jasmine’s violent “substitution of self” (Drake 70) can be identified as a liberatory gesture which achieves “that kind of tabula rasa which characterizes at the outset all decolonization and which institutes a new language and a new humanity” (Drake 71). The author’s theorisation of the gendered postcolonial self closely follows the “colonial fantasy” described by Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*:

It is implicit that to speak is to exist absolutely for the other. The Black man has two dimensions. One with his fellows, the other with the white man.... That this self division is a direct result of colonialist subjugation is beyond question.... The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness..... (18)

The above quote reminds us of Spivak's claim in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" that voices at the *periphery* cannot be located at the *centre*. Therefore, Jasmine has to subject herself to phallogocentric ventriloquism in order to make herself heard in the hegemonic White culture. Critics like Jennifer Drake have suggested that Mukherjee's Jasmine undergoes a "recolonial" process where she has to shuttle between identities and mimic the role of an ideal immigrant to recast her identity (79). Her double mimicry of performing the Western stereotype of third world woman makes her both complicit and resistant to the dominant culture. Jennifer Drake, however, believes that Jasmine's easy acceptance of "another's interpellation with little difficulty is explicated in the text as a symptom of the liminality of the third world subject" (80). Hence, instead of creating a positive transformation of selfhood, Jasmine's violent murdering of her past makes a colonial complicit whose existence depends on her acceptance of the hegemonic culture.

Her unassuming complicity makes us question how far she exercises agency and free will in her relationship with men. Throughout her American Odyssey, Jasmine has multiple relationships with heterosexual white men who recreate her in their own image. Thus Susan Koshy writes, "In *Jasmine*, the heroine's reliance on gaining power through men and through her use of her exotic sexuality make it problematic to define her empowerment as feminist" (141). When Jasmine goes to Manhattan as a caregiver in the Wylie household, her sole purpose is to make herself acceptable to the family and desirable to Taylor. She says, "I fell in love with [Taylor's] world, its ease, its careless confidence and graceful self-absorption. *I wanted to become the person they thought they saw...*" (171; emphasis added). This makes us aware that Jasmine's declaration that "I changed because I wanted to" (185) is a paradox of feminist agency where individual choice is prioritised over cultural constructs. Jasmine's transformation thus can be read as a response to the dominant culture – she enacts the expectations that others (men) have for her and (re)creates her selfhood in their image and fantasy.

Moving from the Tyler household the novel next focuses on Jasmine's journey to Iowa where she changes from Jase to Jane. Iowa is the place where Jane encounters violent realities. She witnesses how the usually placid farmer, Harlan, turns violent on Bud Ripplemeyer, the banker from Iowa, after being turned down by him for a loan. He shoots Bud in the back and then commits suicide. Jane also hears the story of the nameless Osage man who tortures his

wife to death and then “hangs himself in his machine shed” (*Jasmine* 156). Violence in Iowa, however, is presented in ambiguous dialectics. The narrator insinuates that despite these violent occurrences, the American people are resilient in their hope and have optimism for the future. Therefore, through violence the trajectory of everyday life with its usual ups and downs unfold in Jane’s life and she tries to carve out her identity in the image of her dreams.

Her individuation and agency is once again a suspect in her relationship with Bud. In the intimacy of their relationship we see Bud calling her Jane, and not Jasmine. She says, “Bud calls me Jane. Me Bud, you Jane.... Plain Jane is all I want to be. Plain Jane is a role, like any other” (26). Her conscious split between who she is and who she has to be become more intense in her sexual role-playing with the physically handicapped Bud which, in turn, reveals Bud’s incapacity to know her or satisfy her fully. The narrator writes:

After I prepare him for bed, undo the shoes, pull off the pants, sponge-bathe him, he likes me to change roles, from caregiver to temptress, and I try to do it convincingly, walking differently, frowning, smiling.... Now I must do all the playing, provide the surprises. I don’t mind. (31-32)

But her matter-off tone is rendered ambiguous by the last statement of this chapter where Jane lies awake listening to the deep breathing of Bud and muses, “This night I feel torn open like the hot dry soil, parched” (33).

Jasmine/Jane’s internal rumination speaks of her consciousness in role playing. She knows that she has to play into the male desire and accentuate her exoticism in order to survive and assimilate in the *New* world. Her transformations are all in response to the demands of her male consorts, “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” (*Jasmine* 175).

In Jasmine/Jase/Jane we see a complicitous exoticism of the “Third World” women. Jasmine’s identity creation is dependent on her Otherness which she manipulates to create *power* in her relationship with men. Differentiating between exotic and foreign, Mukherjee writes, “There’s a difference between exotic and foreign.... Exotic means you know how to use your foreignness, or you make yourself a little foreign in order to appear exotic” (qtd. in Koshy 132). Therefore, in Mukherjee’s definition of feminist agency, Jasmine is empowered with the choice of identity creation because she knows how to use her exotic appeal. In one of her interviews, Mukherjee explains the source and meaning of Jasmine’s sexual power in the following words:

Jasmine is a woman who hopes.... Also she wants to please. That’s the feminine quality in her that doesn’t jibe with American feminist rhetoric. Yet she’s the one who, unlike... or far more than Wylie, or any other American woman, manages to leave a futile world, make herself over, pick

up men, discard men, and make money. She's an uneducated village girl... [who] can make a life for herself. So she's an activist – or a woman of action – who ends up being far more feminist than the women on Claremont Avenue who talk about feminism. (Qtd. in Koshy 146)

Mukherjee's problematic description of agency and power explains Jasmine's ambiguity in refashioning her identity. She is more desirable than her white American counterparts because she nurtures the desire to "please" her men and yet "by the criteria of autonomy established by American feminism – controlling men, making money, and having a career – Jasmine outperforms her American feminist counterparts" (Koshy 147). Mukherjee's conflation of agency and competition for white men is further articulated in her definition of feminism which she sees as very different from "Western" feminism that she calls as imperialist, accusing western feminists of being willing to impose "ready-made" solutions to the problems facing immigrant Asian women in North America (Connell 28; qtd. in Alam 12). She claims that she would "enable [immigrants] to control their fates than make them mouthpieces of white, upper-class feminist rhetoric" (Alam 12). However, what remains hidden in her assumption is the notion of American exceptionalism that allows her characters to "control their fates" in the *New* world of hope and therefore her definition of feminism becomes a paradox of agency and control, the very notions of identity creation that Jasmine embraces and performs through her role-playing as the exotic Other.

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