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Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* : A Narrative for Redefining Identity and Subjectivity

Mounir Guirat[1]

Abstract

This paper argues that Mukherjee's *Jasmine* develops a new framework for understanding the relationship between the immigrant and the host country. Concerned with the positive rather than the negative experience of immigration, the novelist, through her heroine, Jasmine, goes beyond imposed limitations, regulations, and stereotypes and paints an optimistic picture of the immigant's continual transformation and growth in the host culture.

While there is clearly some measure of truth in Edward Said's contention that exile is "terrible to experience" because of the "crippling sorrow of estrangement," some novelists believe that exile can be chosen as an ultimate and appropriate alternative to experience a new life and forge another form of subjectivity (173). Bharati Mukhurjee, born in India and living in the United States, is one of those novelists as she chooses to celebrate the beneficial side of immigration/exile in her novel *Jasmine* (1989). Mukhurjee offers through this novel an optimistic view of immigration that subverts the stereotypical representation of the immigrant as a deracinated and alienated individual. This paper argues that Mukhurjee's commitment to a new cultural affiliation through her heroine Jasmine is but an attempt to give a new and positive representation of the postcolonial migrant/expatriate.

Exile literature foregrounds the necessity of finding and establishing an alternative space that can provide the immigrant/exile with the power and energy to survive and surmount his/her difficulties which are most of the time related to the anxiety and restlessness

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experienced far from the homeland. Most of the time the immigrant lives with that ''unhealable rift'' forced between ''the self and its true home'' (Said 173). He or she has to go beyond ''the deprivations felt at not being with others in the communal habitation'' in order to play an active role in the host country (177). Said argues in his essay ''Reflections on Exile'' that ''Exile is not, after all, a matter of choice: you are born into it, or it happens to you. But, provided that the exile refuses to sit on the sidelines nursing a wound, there are things to be learned: he or she must cultivate a scrupulous (not indulgent or sulky) subjectivity'' (184). The exile, then, should ''cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience'' (185). By so doing, he or she constructs a new subjectivity that is never fixed in its nature and essence.

In her essay ''Relocation as Positive Act: The Immigrant Experience in Bharati Mukherjee's Novels,'' Carmen Wickramagamage explains that the ''notion of immigration as exile from one's ''true'' home has come to be invested with contrary values through time'' (171). For many immigrants, immigration is but a negative experience of dislocation and displacement. But for ''some leading literary figures of the twentieth century [. . .] this separation of self from one's native place has appeared beneficial, even necessary'' (171). Wickramagamage mentions Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, Samuel Beckett, Vladimir Nabokov, V.S. Naipaul, Carlos Fuentes, Salman Rushdie, and Bharati Mukherjee. For many ''ordinary'' immigrants, immigration is ''deracination and dislocation''; for many others, like these writers, immigration is ''a second chance,'' an experience that resists any stereotypical definition (171).

It is this concern with the positive rather than the negative experience of immigration/exile that shapes the argument of this essay. Mukherjee's *Jasmine* is a narrative for a new belonging. It is a literal as well as a metaphorical journey in which the exile is offered the opportunity to shape and be shaped by the new cultural landscape. This negates the belief that any movement from one cultural space to another is always characterised by pain, alienation, and exclusion. There is, then, a clear attempt to give space and voice to a different conception of immigration that challenges the established and current stories which construct journeys of displacement and invisibility. Mukherjee defies the ''truism that the movement from one culture to another can only be experienced as a loss of cherished cultural moorings and cause for

permanent alienation'' (Wickramagamage 173). The novelist uses her heroine Jasmine to portray the necessity of entering into some kind of interaction with the American culture in a process of self-transformation and growth. In an interview with Geoff Hancock, Mukherjee states ''I don't think about my fiction as being about alienation. On the contrary, I mean for it to be about assimilation. My stories center on a new breed and generation of north American pioneers. I am fascinated by people who have enough gumption, energy, ambition, to pull up their roots [. . .]. My stories are about conquest, and not about loss'' (Hancock 37). Jasmine is an immigrant who fits this framework as she undergoes different experiences of transformation and growth.

There is a clear link between the life of the novelist and her novel as far as the question of exile is concerned. In an essay entitled ''Alter-Nativity, Migration, Marginality and Narration: The case of Indian Women Writers Settled in the West,'' C. Vijayasree states that Mukherjee is a ''Hindu by religion, Bengali by region, Brahmin by caste, American by choice, immigrant by status'' (123). Like many other immigrant writers, Mukherjee has left her homeland to become an exile, emerging as a new literary voice in relationship to India, her country of origin, Canada, her first host country where she experienced racism, and America, her last refuge that provides a better appreciation of the world of dreams and reality. Through these different spaces, Mukherjee has experienced cross-fertilisation and transformation at the level of her thoughts and behaviour.

Mukherjee's cultural journeys are translated in her novel *Jasmine* which foregrounds the importance and necessity of going beyond imposed limitations and regulations. The novel certainly relates to the extra-literary world experienced by the author as a post-colonial immigrant. Jasmine shows on many occasions that she is the mouthpiece of Mukherjee. Her beliefs and intentions convey important messages deeply related to the novelist's experiences. Before her relocation within a First world community, Jasmine is described as a Punjabi village girl where she is ''handicapped by gender and fate'' (Chua 57). She is born as the fifth daughter, the seventh of nine children. She is almost strangled by her mother since she stands as a new burden to the family. Jasmine states: ''But daughters were curses. A daughter had to be married off before she could enter heaven, and dowries beggared families for generations'' (Mukherjee 39). At the age of seven, an astrologer prophesies that she

will live a life of widowhood and exile. She refuses to submit to his prophecies, and she tries to defy him shouting: ''You're a crazy old man. You don't know what my future holds!'' (3). The astrologer turns angry; he strikes her, and she falls down, her teeth cutting into her tongue, and a twig causing a ''star-shaped wound'' into her forehead (3). In the prophecy, exile and widowhood just happen to her; they are the fate over which she has no control. She, however, manages to challenge it and impose her free will.

It is in this opening scene of the novel that the reader understands the conflict between determinism, preached by the Hindu astrologer, and Jasmine's free will. Jasmine, for instance, refuses to accept the wound on her forehead as an impediment to her marriage. She instead celebrates it as a source of inspiration and wisdom: '' ''It's not a scar,'' I shouted, ''it's my third eye.'' In the stories that our mother recited, the holiest sages developed an extra eye right in the middle of their foreheads. Through that eye they peered out into invisible worlds. ''Now I'm a sage'' ''(5). Considering herself a sage, Jasmine contemplates the possibility of discovering invisible worlds that transcend the customs and superstitions of her own village, Hasnapur. She forcibly refuses to be conditioned by the social and religious values of her own community and to be concerned with the necessity of finding a husband like her sisters. Resisting conformity and submission, Jasmine deviates from what is established in her village in an important move towards transformation and metamorphosis. In her book *The Ballistic Bard: Postcolonial Fictions*, Judie Newman argues that in ''rejecting a deterministic heavenly geometry in favour of free will, Jasmine opts for fluidity, turbulence and fracture'' (156). Embracing change means emerging from a life of torpidity and constructing a new conception and understanding of one's relation to the world. It is a process that causes ''turbulence and fracture,'' two characteristics that define the future life of Jasmine and weave her individuality and subjectivity. The heroine has an unstable, changing, and fluid identity revealed in the spilt between her past self and her present one and her continuous refusal to join the two.

Belonging to a family that is transplanted from Lahore to Hasnapur after the partition of the Indian subcontinent, Jasmine, named Jyoti when born eighteen years after the partition, witnesses her parents' displacement and restlessness. It is the experience of her parents, namely her father, that has convinced Jasmine ''of the fragility of the identities

that we think of as solid and permanent, as well as of the necessity to discover the code of right action that would facilitate life in the new location'' (Wickramagamage 175). Jasmine is aware of how her father is inextricably linked to his lost place Lahore. He is unable to adapt himself to his new environment simply because he retains himself ''within an uncompromising notion of identity that seems impermeable and shut off as a pitcher'' to any external infection with the harmful and noxious food, language, and culture of the new place of exile, Hasnapur (Wickramagamage 175). Her father's situation makes Jasmine defend the necessity of adapting one's self to change and looking for possibilities of interaction when put in a new location. She states: ''my father lived in a bunker. Fact is, there was a difference. My father was right to notice it and to let it set a standard. But that pitcher is broken. It is the same air this side as that. He'll never see Lahore again and I never have. Only a fool would let it rule his life'' (42-43). What is difficult and unacceptable for Jasmine's father is possible and positive for her. She accepts fracture, change, and growth, and she believes in the individual's potential and ability to undergo a significant metamorphosis towards a better articulation of integration in the new locations. Lost as a place, Lahore is not what captures Jasmine's mind; it is rather the possibilities and opportunities that one can enjoy in the new places of experience.

It is after her marriage at the age of fourteen to an enlightened and modern engineer, Prakash, that Jasmine enters an important phase in her life. Prakash educates her and renames her Jasmine, allowing her to go beyond her life as Jyoti. A city-bred husband, he pushes Jasmine to change. She states: ''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. He said, ''You are small and sweet and heady, my Jasmine. You'll quicken the whole world with your perfume.'' Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttled between identities'' (77). Prakash initiates his wife into the modern world and urges her to learn the English language as a preparation for any possible interaction with the world outside Punjab and India. They wish to immigrate to America, but he is killed by a Sikh bomber. As a result, the astrologer's prophecy of widowhood and exile comes true when Jasmine decides to fulfil her husband's dream of going to America.

Jasmine leaves her homeland behind contemplating committing suttee under some palm trees in the school that her husband had dreamed

of attending. Her illegal immigration to America for the sake of a form of widow sacrifice in Tampa, Florida signals the beginning of Jasmine's exile. It is a chosen exile because she refuses to go through self-immolation in India. America, then, ''appears reduced, in her eyes, to the size of a sanctified cremating ground upon which to fulfill the requirements of the mission that brings her there'' (Wickramagamage 184). Without her husband Prakash, America appears to have lost for her that lure and attraction. It is used only as a transitory space for her faithful wifehood.

Jasmine's journey to America is fraught with dangers. She finds herself obliged to act unvirtuously to get food and make her odyssey a success. Her contact with American culture shows from the very beginning the negative side of the host country. Jasmine is raped by Half-Face, a Vietnam veteran who helps her immigrate to America. Raped by this smuggler and therefore dishonoured, Jasmine thinks of the unavoidability of committing suicide as she no longer considers herself that pure and faithful widow. On second thoughts, however, she discovers that committing suicide is not the right alternative. What she chooses, instead, is a violent act of retaliation: she kills Half-Face. This courageous act reveals the significant changes that start to be voiced by a woman who comes to refuse ill-treatment, subjugation, and domination. Instead of carrying out her mission and fulfilling her self-immolation, Jasmine chooses another alternative by freeing herself from any stereotypical definition and bracing herself for her own life in America. She no longer identifies herself with the role of the Hindu woman who has to accept victimisation. Nothing is sacred after the experience of rape, and what is urgent is to contemplate transformation in a New World of fresh possibilities and opportunities. Jasmine says: ''With the first streaks of dawn, my first full American day, I walked out the front drive of the motel to the highway and began my journey, travelling light'' (121).

What defines the new life of Jasmine is no longer the past but the present interaction with a new culture that is, even though violent at the outset, offers better living conditions and chances. This is what Mukherjee concentrates on in her narrative. She aesthetically paints a positive picture of Jasmine's continual transformation and growth in the host culture. She even defends her choice of the New World where the individual can forge new identities and escape from the blinkered and stereotypical mind-sets formed by the Indian culture. Jasmine's journey,

''being voluntary, purposive and eventually successful, turns into a celebration of female fortitude'' (Vijayasree 128). The journey is successful the moment Jasmine changes her mind in America and foregrounds the necessity of going forward rather than sticking to the old-fashioned and backward traditions and customs. Vijayasree argues that it is this

> transcendence of victimization that Muckherjee projects through her heroine. Jasmine fights fate when her hopes are smothered early in life and she is condemned to a life of widowhood. She breaks the fetters of family, society and culture and crosses the seas to the distant dreamland of her dead husband, confronting oppression fearlessly and finally rising to face a new morning. (128)

No longer a passive and submissive Hindu wife, Jasmine constructs a new adaptation to the environment in which she finds herself. She is helped by a kind-hearted woman who illegally helps refugees. Her first American benefactor, Lillian Gordon, renames her Jazz, giving her as a result a new identity different from those of Jyoti and Jasmine. This shows the ongoing transformation and growth that Jasmine experiences the moment she moves to another cultural space.

Lillian Gordon wants to turn Jasmine into an American lady. She teaches her how to acquire and develop her new identity. Jasmine narrates

> Walk American, she exhorted me, and she showed me how. I worked hard on the walk and deportment. Within a week she said I'd lost my shy sidle. She said I walked like one of those Trinidad Indian girls, all trust and cheekiness. She meant it as a compliment.
>
> ''Tone it down, girl !'' She clapped as I took a turn between the kitchen and bath. I checked myself in the mirror, shocked at the transformation. Jazzy in a T-shirt, tight cords, and running shoes. I couldn't tell if with the Hasnapuri sidle I'd also abandoned my Hasnapuri modesty. (132-33)

This is the positive process of transformation that Mukherjee emphasises and that Jasmine appears to accept wholeheartedly, showing no scruples as she shakes off her Indian origin and identity. Feeling no doubt and hesitation regarding the morality and propriety of what she is

learning, Jasmine is completely devoted and committed to what she is acquiring in America. She obeys the command of Lillian Gordon with all possible effort and attention, giving as a result voice to her inner forces and impulses. With the help of Lillian Gordon, Jasmine takes advantage of the new places she visits trying out her ''American talk and walk'' (133). In one of the department stores, she sees her first revolving door, tries her first escalator, eats Dairy Queen as her ''first true American food,'' which has the power of ''healing food'' (133). Jasmine declares herself more impressed by the American culture than by what defines her as an immigrant of Indian origin. She denies her ethnic selfhood by trying to blur the cultural particularities and specificities that anchor her to her motherland.

America lures Jasmine with its promises. She endures because of her will and her desire to find a true place in the host country. She does not resist amelioration and acculturation. In her choice of exile, she also chooses new connections and commitments as well as a new set of affiliations that facilitate her integration and construction of alternative forms of subjectivity and individuality. Her understanding of human experience is far from the parochial views and attitudes of her country of origin. When she stays with the Vadheras in the little Punjabi enclave in Flushing for four months, she feels imprisoned and limited in her thoughts and behaviour. Her husband's Indian mentor, professor Vadhera, lives in a miniature India, and she is supposed to behave and clothe herself as a faithful Hindu window, an '' expectation that makes her realize how restrictive such tenacious clinging to home country requirements can be'' (Wickramagamage188). Jasmine expresses her anxiety and restlessness: ''I could not admit that I had accustomed myself to American clothes. American clothes disguise my widowhood. In a T-shirt and cords, I was taken for a student. In this apartment of artificially maintained Indianness, I wanted to distance myself from everything Indian, everything Jyoti-like. To them, I was a widow who should show a proper modesty of appearance and attitude'' (145). Jasmine, then, is not ready to lose all that she has learned and acquired in America. She is strong and determined enough to resist all the attempts by the Vadheras to put her back home through the national and provincial limits that define their life in America. Jasmine's experience with the Vadheras enables her to understand her situation better in the host country; she comes to understand the necessity and importance of forging a new

identity in tune with her new way of life as opposed to what she sees as the narrow, restricted, and repulsive Indian one. She clearly states: ''In Flushing I felt immured. An imaginary brick wall topped with barbed wire cut me off from the past and kept me from breaking into the future. I was a prisoner doing unreal time'' (148). Jasmine needs to escape as she cannot survive in a world which is no longer meaningful to her. It is no longer her world as she has become addicted to the American type of life.

America is a land without barriers for Jasmine; she feels she has a legitimate claim for the opportunities it offers. Wickramagamage points out that Jasmine's behaviour in relation to the Vadheras suggests two different alternatives as far as the situation of the immigrant is concerned. Immigrants, she explains can choose ''the hyphenated existence which makes some concessions to the new cultural environment, while retaining their allegiance to their primary ethnic community'' (188). The Vadheras and Du, Jasmine's adopted Vietnamese son, follow this option. Other immigrants, however, can opt for the ''unhyphenated American identity that she selects when she decides that no cultural verity or sentimental attachment to the ''homeland'' is too sacred to discard if it hinders her ability to respond meaningfully to the demands of the new cultural location she finds herself in'' (189). Jasmine refuses to position herself between two geographical entities. She does not look for an alternative geography that partakes of both India and America; instead she wants a place on the American map that she can call home. She does not contemplate returning to the homeland left behind. The heroine finds her place in the host country as she negates her cultural and linguistic memory. Displacement and exile enable her, then, to turn her back on her Indian communal life and shared cultural history ; she undergoes an enriching experience free from constraints and prescriptions that generally characterise the past life of the new immigrant. Culture for Jasmine is ''not a site of origins and ancestral roots, of birthrights and blood rites, but rather as one of transposition and translation'' (Seyhan 19). That is why she does not show any conscious effort to resist her assimilation and integration in the new social and economic life of the host land.

Jasmine's advantageous interaction with her new location is confirmed when she gets a job as an au pair, a care-giver, to Duff, the adopted daughter of an academic couple, Taylor and Wylie Hayes, working at Columbia university. She states: ''I became an American in

an apartment on Claremont Avenue across the street from a Barnard College dormitory. I lived with Taylor and Wylie Hayes for nearly two years. Duff was my child; Taylor and Wylie were my parents, my teachers, my family'' (165). In New York, Jasmine manages to continue her integration into the American society after escaping from the Indian life that the Vadheras follow in Flushing. Her employers encourage her and give her another name, Jase, which is the incarnation of another experience in life. Jasmine introduces important changes in the life of the couple as Wylie decides to leave her husband. The former thinks that Jasmine could provide the right affection and support to her husband and Duff. Jasmine is, then, not only shaped by the American type of life but also shapes and changes the life of the people around her. For instance, when she decides to leave to the Midwest after recognising a neighbourhood hotdog vendor as the Sikh fundamentalist who assassinated her husband, Taylor rejoins her in Iowa. He is in love with her, and he has become dependent on her, unable to survive in New York, his home.

In Iowa, Jasmine is the common-law wife of a small-town banker Bud Ripplemeyer. She is known as Jane Ripplemeyer, a new position that signals her initiation into a new life different from Jase, Taylor's beloved. When Bud is shot by a farmer and becomes paralysed, Jasmine feels more important. She takes care of both him and their adopted boy Du. She is also pregnant with his child. The heroine occupies a central role in her family and in rural Elsa county, refusing to be treated as that non-white who has to occupy a pre-determined place. In Elsa county, Jasmine fights to blur the boundaries between what is white and non-white, between the self and the other. Muckherjee's heroine ''refuses to accept as a given the identification of American culture with a particular color, region, and religion [. . .]. What she hopes for, and works to bring about, is the collapse of the very distinction between the ''visible'' and the ''invisible'' through genetic transformation'' (Wickramagamage 191). A mature wife, jasmine makes human transformation possible through self-possession and determination.

Knowledgeable and strong enough, the pregnant Jasmine decides to leave her husband when Taylor invites her to join him in his Westward journey across America. Jasmine finds that the crippled husband stifles her inner impulses and potentials; and in order to go on with her life, she has to believe in herself and in her ability to shape and be shaped by the

New World. She does not have to live the life of torpidity and sluggishness. When Jasmine "moves westward to greater freedom and self-actualization, she is merely acting in the time-honored American tradition of lighting out for the territory ahead" (Chua 59). Mukherjee's character succeeds in going beyond the dilemma of being "caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness" (Mukherjee 240). The choice she makes enables her to free herself from the domination of the past and to foreground the importance of discovering new frontiers. She states: "Adventure, risk, transformation: the frontier is pushing indoors through uncaulked windows. Watch me re-position the stars" (240). This is the American Jasmine who has the power to decide her fate and to contemplate the possible happiness and prosperity not as an other but as an autonomous self.

Mukherjee's contribution to the literature of exile is aesthetically exemplified in the construction of new patterns and dimensions of identity. She shapes the new immigrant as a new self capable of undoing any stereotypical or blinkered definition. Mukherjee's heroine is a character of change and transformation. She is Jyoti, Jasmine, Jazzy, Jase, and Jane. She is in a constant interaction with the New World, giving the idea of relocation a positive sense and freeing herself from the interstitial space in which the immigrant is always located. Mukherjee's immigrant is someone who should follow suit and embrace the subject position of autonomy and freedom. It is from that position that s/he can construct his or her own subjectivity and individuality away from any form of cultural ghettoisation. The novelist proposes this positive and optimistic definition of the South-Asian immigrant as a means of showing the necessity of empowering him/her. One of the best known South-Asian American writers, Mukherjee makes it clear that the South-Asian immigrant should not be treated as an exotic outsider but as an active insider. She upsets, as a result, the conventional stratification that defines the relationship between white and other, centre and margin. Both Mukherjee and Jasmine, Indian-born and Hindu, have succeeded in challenging the racial stereotypes that underlie the dominant culture.

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