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Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*: The Trauma of Circumstantial Subjugation Experienced by a Woman in Home and Expatriation

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Identity politics driven by migration, Diaspora and exile have in turn mapped literary imagination and produced literary writings of distinct characteristics. Rushdie in his *Imaginary Homelands* states: 'Migrants must, of necessity, make a new imaginative relationship with the world, because of the loss of familiar habitats.'ⁱ This change of habitat often results in translational representation of Diaspora and displacement, both spatial and psychological. However, their diasporic condition, their sense of exile and alienation, their metaphoric existence and their efforts to seek replenishment by making symbolic returns to their origins bind all this writing into a unity. Rushdie comments that migration 'offers us one of the richest metaphors of our age.'ⁱⁱ He adds, 'Migrants-borne-across humans-are metaphorical beings in their very essence; and migration, seen as a metaphor, is everywhere around us. We all cross frontiers; in that sense, we are all migrant peoples.'ⁱⁱⁱ In her novels, Bharati Mukherjee has dealt with such moving metaphors of culture- their displacement, dislocation, mutation and translation.

Postcolonial transnational counter-textuality began by affirming the contestation between estrangement and search for identity. The counter-textual mood of anti-colonial or nationalist writing finds its resources in the transcultural restlessness of writers such as Salman Rushdie, Ben Okri, Michael Ondaatje and Bharati Mukherjee. However, Mukherjee's position is different from that of other writers of Diaspora. In the language of Jasbir Jain, 'Diasporic writers have worked variously with their material. Ondaatje moved from culture to culture, several others have accepted the Janus-faced hyphenated self, choosing to locate themselves in hyphen, yet others like Bharati Mukherjee have shed their pasts, if not as material, at least as professions about it.'^{iv}

Jasmine goes through a whole process of deracination, displacement and transformation; she wishes to settle down, a desire not in contrary to her continuous flaking of skin and continuous transformation. She is both complicit and resistant to the hegemonic notion of immigrant identity. Jasmine's self-propelled mission is thus inflected with some existential

angst, she is at the periphery and in a situation from where she attempts to re-direct. Her translational transformation is a result of continual negotiations between her past and her future; her indefinite projected future self can never fully escape her past inscriptions. For Jasmine, history has the perpetual sway on the present and the future. History also has certain impositions creating fissures and ruptures and, as a result, the self becomes plural and conflicting. Her survival depends amid ambiguities out of rootlessness and upon a strategy of negotiated journey of self discovery and transformation. According to Alam 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 origin.'^v

In Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, such sense of homelessness and rootlessness is hard-edged steadily with each occurrence in the New World. The writer directs her protagonist from the *origin* and *location* of her birth to the land of her exile. There is no sequential development of her journey; there is no easy changeover of identity, nor any tame acceptance of the time. Instead, Mukherjee's diasporic women characters struggle hard to occupy and absorb the translational space, they find in the location of their choice. Most of her fictions stress the dichotomy of growing up in two cultures. In the practice of an exodus and migration there is an unspoken ambiguity; the sufferings of dislocation are tinged with the hope of arrival and the opening of new locations.

The novel replicates Mukherjee's emancipator recasting of identity through racial negotiations in the dominant culture. Jasmine undergoes a series of turbulence in search of a home. Jyoti is educated over the protests of her traditional father, and in time marries a modern Indian husband, Prakash. Jyoti is re-named Jasmine by her husband. She undergoes major identity shifts, from feudal Hasnapur to urban Jullundhar. She shifts from her traditional cultural desire to have children early, a wish that is thwarted by Prakash's contempt: 'We aren't going to spawn! We aren't ignorant peasants!'^{vi} She develops an inner trauma out of the displacement: 'Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttled between identities,' she says, and '[...] I felt suspended between worlds.'^{vii} There is a horrible turnaround of the events; a turbulence of situation destroys her dream. Prakash is killed, by a bomb meant for Jasmine and hidden in a portable radio by Sikh terrorists. Jasmine vows to complete Prakash's dream, to go to his intended school in Tampa, Florida and sacrifice herself on the campus. She manages to sneak into America using forged passport papers.

There she is raped by her smuggler, after which she kills him and relieves herself from her earlier plans. Thus the first shock of the location outside her home is not cultural but physical. She arrives in America and that very moment she is compelled to commit murder for self-defence. The purity about the body is gone and she learns that body is just a covering which can be done away with when tainted and polluted- 'My body was merely the shell, soon to be discarded. Then I could be reborn debts and sins all paid for.'^{viii} Abandoning the past like a baggage she feels relieved and reborn: '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.'^{ix}

She is befriended by an American woman, Lillian, who helps her learn American ways she calls her 'Jazzy.' Mrs. Gordon supports and helps her to recuperate and transforms her totally. Within a week Jasmine sheds off her traditional shyness and dresses up on a jazzy T-shirt, skin-tight cords and snickers. With the change in clothes comes the change in the culture, so much so that the native traits of her persona begin to wane. With this change she moves from being a 'visible minority to being just another immigrant.'^xThis is another point of her dislocation before she plunges in to the continuity of translation and negotiation.

She moves to New York, gets attached to Prakash's old professor Devinder Vadhera and feels desperately that she has moved back to Hasnapur. She gets a green card and an au pair position in Manhattan. This allows her to complete her Americanization and gradually she gets used to the mainstream American practices by becoming an integral part of an American family and also by learning how to consume, which she does happily. But she finds here the life lived by Indians astringent, and prefers to work under Taylor Hayes, a Columbian Physicist, and Wylie Hayes, an editor in publishing firms, and their adopted daughter Duff. In the two years Jasmine is with them, the Hayeses separate and Taylor falls in love with her. As the Hayeses treated her as a part of their family, she feels that she had landed and was getting rooted.^{xi}

Even when the Hayeses separate, and Jasmine is reminded of the essential fluidity of America,^{xii} she is able to take the breakup of the family in stride, although she concedes that the hardest lesson of all she had to learn about America was that in this country 'nothing last.'^{xiii} The hegemonies that exist at home provide her with a useful perspective on the predatory effects of global governance. She internalizes the transformation myths and understands its role to survive in the New World. However, her husband's killer appears in New York as well, and she flees to

Iowa, where she marries Bud, a rural banker, becomes Jane Ripplemeyer, and adopts a Vietnamese refugee son, Du.

The novel closes as Taylor, her now-divorced former employer in Manhattan, asks her to come with him and his daughter to California, where Du has already gone. Pregnant from her time with Bud, she leaves him to be with Taylor in California. This is the simple story outline of the novel, but its unifying theme is Jyoti/Jasmine/Jane's mutability, her adaptation to conditions, expressed as a transformation from inert, traditional object propelled by fate to energetic, modern, cross-cultural and assimilated subject.

In *Jasmine* the woman narrator is in search of identity through diasporic transformation and mongrelization of self. Measured at the axis where a multiple displacements are negotiated, James Gleick's *Chaos*, quoted as an epigraph in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, inducts the reader into the world of the woman protagonist- not rounded, not smooth, scabrous. It is the predicament of the pitted and broken up, the twisted, tangled and intertwined.^{xiv} In *Jasmine* the immigrant soul experiences a confusing and twisted conglomerate of identity and does not quite want to quit. Instead, she embraces it for radical self-transformation. The metamorphoses are gradual, generating an appetite and energy. Jasmine constantly finds that she is never at home, that she is a perpetual vagabond and a perplexed nomad. She finds her differential sense about her own identity. Her compulsive obsession on her past has a rekindling effect. She cannot shrug off it all –her home and location. She survives in a series of split and discontinuous moments. Her Indianness gradually reduces to sign of signification only.

The psychic split in Jasmine does not terminate in the decision of accepting or not accepting the tradition; now the stress is on the excitement for life and a concern for a woman's right to live and to relocate oneself. The narrative treatment is an attempt to de-familiarize the traditionally acknowledged representation of an Indian woman. The collapse of the heroine's submission to convention aims to establish her independence and emancipation.

The protagonist of the novel thus, is both a victim and an agent in postcolonial context. Her disjunctions in a location of adversative unipolarity is synaptic and in between there is the diasporic ambivalence and trauma of displacement. The novel is an account of Jasmine's coming into her own as a woman destroying selves and superstructures in order to realize the potential self. She thus transforms herself with increasing rapidity. Jasmine's journey of self-discovery takes her from the feudal condition to her migrancy and exile in the West. This change is marked

by chaos and dislocations. In fact Jasmine experiences one chaos after another. Jasmine's violent substitution of self can be taken as a liberating move, chaotic and discontinuous but emancipatory.

In the novel Mukherjee has given her heroine a society that was so repressive, chaotic and traditional, so caste bound *genderist* that she could discard it easily.^{xv} The novelist therefore sets out to find metaphors and symbolic location for the re-incarnation of Jasmine and shows how Indianness in a woman gets horrible transformation as she moves towards Americanization and further away from her native resources. *Jasmine* is a story of the trauma of circumstantial subjugation experienced by a woman in home and expatriation. It too, is a story of a semi-feudal rural India where a mother has to strangle her baby girl just because she will be a 'dowryless' girl in the time of her marriage and also of an astrologer who menacingly sets the destiny of the others.

The transmigration of Jasmine is anti-centric and not simply peripheral. There is a definite emancipatory appetite in *Jasmine*. She develops an urgent assimilative urge and internalizes deterrents of human survival and with a radical defiance swerves far away from indigenous femininity to a greater self choice. She has learnt the art of living in becoming an ever-changing animation to slough off her formal identities and superstructure, acculturating to a new location and retaining her original self that is built at an impetus of the astrologer's prediction. She needs to resort to violent self-emancipation and substitute her temporal trauma to a substantive attitudinal change in view of falsifying the astrologer's prediction. The astrologer's prediction is a symbolic prompter of such violent denial of feudal periphery which demands disjunction and search for relocation.

Jasmine thus, intuitively understands the association between aggression and the annihilation of identity in an alien country. She feels marginalized and there is a postcolonial dread of subjugation in her every movement. From an essentially feudal structure as a subaltern, she emerges into a new whole. She wants to cheat stars; the astrologer's predictions have all come true. She has seen the horrible end of Prakash and the preparation for a self-immolation, is to assert her essential Indian femininity. It is to prevent any further fruition of the calamitous predictions by the astrologer. The transformation of the feudal wife Jyoti into the modern, English speaking Jasmine, unavoidably involves an aggressive initiation in Prakash's blood. And

perhaps the climactic flash of Jasmine's essential *femininity* occurs on the occasion of her actual violent rape by the 'Half Face':

For the first time in my life, I understood what evil was about. It was about not being human [...] It was a very simple, very clear perception, a moment of understanding that I have heard comes at the moment of death.^{xvi}

Jyoti would like to marry an English knowing man, for to have English as a language was to have 'more than you had been given at birth it was to want the world.'^{xvii} Living on the edge, on the margins, as it were, Jasmine plunges into the safe and unsafe expanses with almost a hazy assurance.

Here one can see a surge for emancipation, a desire to break the lock and boundaries. Here is a feminine soul not cowed down by tradition and superstition, prefers day light natural darkness and natural cloud to cheat fate. In killing the Half Face she experiences an epistemic violence that is also a life-affirming transformation. Although she is deeply ambivalent, she recapitulates the Eastern figuration of self as nothing. In the process of rapid exfoliation the negativity is coupled powerfully and culminates with the positive image of a destroyer. During her tenure as Duff's and Budd's care giver she is creative. Jasmine is a destroyer but, like Kali, she is also ultimately a preserver, and an agent of the life-force.^{xviii}

The novel in one sense depicts the psychobiography of a woman which specifically traces the development of a 'female protagonist through various experiences and crises, into maturity and, more importantly, her self-identity and place in the world'.^{xix} Jasmine's gradual process of metamorphoses (Jyoti-Jasmine-Jazzy-Jase and Jane) is propelled by recurrent lashes at her very structure of identity. As an Indian woman, Jasmine has to reinvent herself, even if it means relinquishing her past completely. It is however, the blending of the American and Hindu imagination-the two disparate imaginations-that helps visualize Mukherjee's unique craft defining the immigrant reality. It is difficult to know the immigrant reality of Jasmine because the fluidity of herself emerging from one experience to another erases the edges, if not the nucleus of her identity. The rapidity and the incomprehensible compulsion of altering relationships in America trim down Jyoti to a mere woman struggling to go on with life falling into fragments.

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