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Fluid Identity: Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

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A ubiquitous term taken for granted, *identity* is an intrinsically psycho-social concept with multifarious temporal and spatial connotations. Defined generally as “who or what somebody is” the term is derived from the French word *identité*, which has its etymological roots in the Latin noun *identitas*, -*tatis* itself a derivation of the Latin adjective *idem* meaning “the same.” Thus essentially comparative in nature, it emphasises the sharing of a degree of sameness or oneness with others in a particular area or a group at any point of time. Psychology and Sociology relates it to an individual’s concept of his self in relation to his own self and to the community, country or culture he belongs to. As affiliations to these systems and the systems themselves are susceptible to alterations, it appears to agree with the Foucauldian version that negates a fixed identity. According to Foucault, there is no unified rational subject with a fixed identity, but a multiple identity emanating out of different modifications of the self that generate others. The Foucauldian claim that there is no essential identity, but only a moving in the grip of power relations in and through which individuals continually constitute themselves seems to be the mark of the postcolonial scenario where nothing remains forever. Thus it can be argued that individuals are free to traverse, or float through identities. Thus one’s identity is not based on innate self, but is a construct undergoing modifications that the milieu, time and culture demands and hence in flux (Foucault 443). Philosophers like Immanuel Kant and Rene Descartes held identity as singularity transcending environmental and personality changes. Foucault’s de-definition of the self and identity marks a radical shift from the prevalent understanding of the self as a fixed entity. Bharati Mukherjee, the prolific writer who has transcended the confines of space is experientially equipped to delineate the fragmented, incomplete identities of her protagonists who are always in a flux. Problematics and the politics of identity hover over her fictional world occupied by the “new nomad who is disinterested in getting rooted” (Toffler 74). The mobility of diasporic woman offers her multiple identities, which if one is not intent on a forward movement, may lead to schizophrenic conditions. Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* is the quintessential postcolonial individual who remains always incomplete, and always looks forward to a frontward movement.

Jasmine charts the uneven and adventurous route of an immigrant from the remote corner of the Third World to the West, taking impetus from one disaster to another. In immigrant vocabulary *home* has more connotations than a mere dwelling place: it is where one belongs to, his national, cultural and spiritual identity, the soil that nurtures him, his language, his security and part of his consciousness. *Jasmine*, the eponymous heroine, begins her immigration and experiences her first the culture shock and a feeling of novelty that an immigrant feels in Jhulunder itself when marriage acquaints her to a pattern of life dissimilar to her traditional, unsophisticated rustic life. The first shift in space, from the village to the city, consequent on her marriage demands a change in her deeply ingrained attitude of the patriarchal role assigned to woman as the procreator. The “no-dowry, no guests Registry Office wedding” (75) plucks her

from the feudal values and transplants on the soil of democracy and new thinking with a new name Jasmine. “Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttled between identities”(77). Her life with Prakash was like a dream from another life. The “celebrate America” stamps on the letter of admission that Prakash received instilled in her hopes of challenging the astrologer who “life times ago. . . foretold her widowhood and exile(3). It is perhaps this unconscious fear and the desire to transcend it that enables her to tread across the globe unmanned: “If we could just get away from India, then all fates would be cancelled. We’d start with new fates, new stars. We could say or be anything we wanted. We’d be on the other side of the earth, out of God’s sight”(85).

The passage from India to America through enigmatic routes renders many a shocking experience to the young widow of Prakash. The Jyoti of Hasnapur is dead with the massacre of her husband. But the urge to continue the creation of life begun by Prakash and the decision not to return to Hasnapur and feudalism propels her forward: “Prakash had taken Jyoti and created Jasmine, and Jasmine would complete the mission of Prakash”(97). The fact that even her widowhood does not shield her from lecherous men like Half-Face shocks her. “Phantom[ing] her way through three continents” she manages to finish a part of Odyssey. America has both marvels and disillusionments in store for Jasmine. On the streets she sees more greed and more refugees like her. New York seems to her the archipelago of ghettos seething with aliens. Like Dimple of *Wife* she feels cheated by America and feels she has come to America so late.

While incidents abroad bewilder her, the queer nature of the typical Indian house in America too does not fail to shock. Despite the all-Indian, pious atmosphere of the Vadhera house, Jasmine experiences and witnesses only alienation. Flushing is not the downtown of the dreams Jasmine had conjured from the aerogrammes back in Jhulundar. The revelation that the renowned Professorji of Prakash, who implanted American dreams in him, is not a professor but only an importer and sorter of human hair shocks Jasmine who has not liberated herself from the Indian ethos that bestows much respect to gurus. That the hair from some peasant’s head in Hasnapur can travel across the oceans and save an American meteorologist’s reputation is news to her. It establishes for her the phenomenon of rootlessness and motion for humans and their hair: “nothing was rooted anymore” (152).

Fleeing from the limbo of Flushing her next location seems to Jasmine a paradise. As the experience with America grows the exposure to exotic ideas and patterns of life also becomes greater. At the Hayes, her next station, the fact that Duff is an adopted child cannot be comprehended by a still novice Jasmine: “I could not imagine a non-genetic child. A child that was not my own, or my husband’s struck me as a monstrous idea” (170). Adoption is as foreign to her as the idea of widow-remarriage once upon a time in India. The nakedness of men and women in the hostel rooms of Claremont Avenue make her wonder whether there is any shame in that country. The Hayes in fact has been a wonder house for Jasmine. It introduces her to alien lifestyles. Hailing from a culture of close family relationships her response to Duff’s sleeping alone in a room points to her own trouble of never having slept in a room alone until she got to America. Duff becomes the only American at that time she is capable of totally understanding and Jasmine becomes a wise adult without an accent for the child.

Nurtured by and still lingering in an atmosphere of matrimonial fidelity Jasmine is shocked to hear the parting of Wylie and Taylor. She learns another difficult lesson: “In America nothing lasts. . . . Nothing is forever, nothing is so terrible or so wonderful that it won’t disintegrate” (181). Yet Jasmine’s response to the exotic environment and culture is of a positive nature, perhaps, because she is not curtailed by persons, institutions or obligations. Culture-collision does not cause a breakdown of the immigrant psyche of Jasmine. It adjusts to America for she

wants to emerge as a success. Jasmine is a person who refuses closure, and continually remakes herself as she wants to emerge as a success. Life in America often seems like a whirlpool to her: "I feel at times like a stone hurtling through diaphenous mist, unable to grab hold, unable to hold myself, yet unwilling to abandon the ride I'm on!" (133). Unlike Dimple of *Wife*, she does not let dilemmas discourage her for she is willing to face the fact that life in America is quite dissimilar to her past. Exhibiting remarkable resilience that enables her to adapt to every changed situation, Jasmine sees her past as a net, the kind of safety net travailing trapeze artists of her childhood fell into when they were inattentive or clumsy (*The Middleman* 98). She is determined not to immure herself for the hope instilled by "Vijh and Wife" transmutes throughout her life.

However accommodating they are, "the link with their cultural past can hamper the acculturation process of the immigrants even though they may realize that they have to shed all their inherited social, religious and cultural prejudices" (Tikoo 222). There is always an unconscious cultural hangover though Jasmine does not allow it to obstruct her future. Even after imbibing American culture, traits of Indian culture break through again and again. Since she is still shackled to Indian ethos, the stories she tells Dulf as the Day Mummy are full of demons and mortals. She admits that Bud has courted her because she is alien, darkness, "mystery and inscrutability" (200). As the partner of Bud she waits supper for him as Indian wives never eat before their husbands. Like a dutiful Indian wife she takes care of the invalid Bud. Jasmine keeps herself uncontaminated by association with Indians at Iowa except for the two doctors at the infertility clinic. Yet unpleasantness of her foreignness confronts her for the first time when another woman at the clinic repeatedly hints at her unAmericaness by the comment, "you probably don't know what a Ricky Roll is" (33). In Baden the farmers are afraid to suggest her difference. Yet the dichotomy is that an Indian woman will not let one man impregnate her before marriage and run away with another man, the father of an adopted child. Cohabiting with Bud, the prospect of unwed motherhood does not disturb the already altered attitude.

Jasmine does not allow the tug of cultures to supersede the urge for assimilation. The traditional images of the Indian wife and widow are cast off in spite of the occasional memory of the astrologer's prophecy that surfaces with every dislocation. The sanctity associated with marriage and motherhood does not hinder Jasmine as she slides easily into the lives of Bud and Taylor. Breaking down all limiting aspects of the past she graduates from vulnerability to power. The expatriate writer often combines the past with the present to recreate a future. All writings conceive a "living present" and a past which was "present before." There can be two relational configurations in such narratives: the assimilatory and the disintegratory. While the former follows "a characteristic paradigm of beginning with rootlessness, repression of the past and an overt acceptance of the present, the latter begins with a feeling of loss, passing through various shades of nostalgia and culminating into schizophrenia" (Asnami 93). A synthesis of tradition and modernity, the past and the present, the East and the West equips Jasmine to carve enough space for her even in an alien environment

Marriage and consequent cultural transplantation lead Jasmine also to a crisis of identity. In fact for Jasmine it is not a question of identity but multiple identities. As the narrative shifts between the past represented by India and the present represented by America, one journeys through the different "life times" in the protagonist's unique life. When Jane Ripplemeyer reflects on her life from the transit location in Iowa she sees it as a series of separate life times. The very first words of the novel are suggestive of the multi-faced, multi-named protagonist: "Life times ago" (3). These are constructed out of identity shifts the protagonist experiences as

she traverses through disparate geographical locale like the Punjab, Florida, New York, Iowa and finally towards California. As Diane Moon Sauter comments, “Mukherjee’s book explores the post-colonial experience of a woman in transit” (37).

For Jasmine each of her identities is inevitably linked to a man, a space and a time. Past, present and future coalesce with magnificent incoherence in the narrative pattern. As Jyoti she remains an intelligent village girl of Hasnapur bound by native culture, as Jasmine she spreads her wings as a young wife of an upwardly mobile man in the city of Jullundhar, as Jase she becomes a cultural refugee in the US with a developing sense of self and as Jane she is determined to be successful in the alien land. She has a man for each of these identities: “Prakash for Jasmine, Taylor for Base, Bud for Jane, Half-Face for Kali”(197). By giving the protagonist more than one name Mukherjee “subverts the notion of a fixed uniform subject. Simultaneously the narrator’s plurality of names helps to mask her ethnic difference and enables her to survive in a hostile alien land” (Leard 390).

Directly or indirectly historical conflicts in the Indian subcontinent determine the problematic constitution of the shifting individuality of Jasmine. Relocation for her family started even before the birth of the protagonist. Christened Jyoti as the unenviable fifth daughter, the seventh of the nine children of a post-partition-riots-affected farmer in an inconsequential village of Punjab, her first shift occurs at fifteen with marriage to an ambitious, budding engineer who has dreams of migration to the U. S. The alliance with Prakash offers Jyoti much more than her expectation, the change is manifested in the name Jasmine. It is not an identity that is thrust on her as a necessary attribute of traditional marriage, but a *Pygmalion* like re-flowering. In fact her new identity encourages her to break with the unsophisticated past, to transcend the doomed prophecy of widowhood and exile.

“Suspended between identities” (77) and corresponding to two different worlds Jasmine exhibits the grip of the past and the lure of the future. While Prakash transforms her to a new kind of city woman Jasmine feels eclipsed by the maid’s eleven year daughter who had been married off later than her and already had had a miscarriage. While marriage makes city-born, educated heroines of Mukherjee in other novels suppressed and dependent, the not-so-educated village vassal turns to be a jasmine. Not only temperamentally and physically but economically also she has been becoming self-reliant. Marriage opens new vistas of life and experience to Jasmine. It is marriage that introduces her to the dreamland of America. But before the seventeen year old bride can embark on a new life of new fate and new stars, the dream of “Vijh and Wife” is shattered by a bomb-blast that widows her. The gender role as a wife comes to a sudden, cruel end. The author skillfully parallels the Khalistan Movement that widows her to the Hindu-Muslim riot that displaced her father.

Widowhood, a curse for Indian women, fails to impede the amelioration programme initiated by her husband. Dead Prakash seems to be equally forceful in exhorting her from every corner of the grief-stricken room to think of their dream. The realisation that there is no dying but only ascending or a descending, a mooring to other planes, fuels her forward journey. Jasmine carves out a new life for herself as the widow who is determined to undertake the aborted plan of her dead husband. Jyoti would have crawled back to the widow’s hut to be alienated by others, but Jasmine is bound for the West.

The marvellous dexterity with which Mukherjee launches an inexperienced, widowed, village girl as an illegal alien in America is commendable though it goes beyond the comprehension of the readers. Her illegal status can be seen as an extension of an existence that began in the shadow of a political refuge back in Hasnapur. Without the crutches of money,

education and men, Jasmine evokes the pathetic world of the exile in one of the most poignant passages of the novel. Dressed in shreds of out of season, national costumes, sleeping in the airport lounges clutching to the photograph of happier times they are as Jasmine recalls, “the outcasts and deporters...landing at the end of tarmacs, ferried in old army trucks where we are roughly handled and taken to roped-off corners of waiting rooms where surly, barely wakened customs guards await their bribe” (101). They can only sneak in for the zigzag route is the safest for them. Even in the boat she feels limited by the coarse peasant identity. Yet she phantoms her way through three continents and feels renewed as a recipient of an organ transplant. Sitting in Iowa Jane wonders whether Bud, an American citizen, has ever seen the America introduced to her by Half-Face, the captain of the contraband trawler that landed her up in Florida.

Jasmine realises that “there are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself. We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams” (29). With the tragic encounter with Half-Face, who takes away her chastity as cost for the illegal transportation, Jasmine is on the threshold of the death of one more identity and the birth of another. For the first time, she recalls, she understands the true nature of evil. The act of the ritual cleaning of the body reciting prayers that she recollects from the cremation of Prakash and her father stands for the symbolic death of the Indian wife. The rape by Half-Face contaminates not only her body, but her mission as well. But the sense of the unfulfilled mission prevents Jasmine from balancing her defilement with her own death. With the firm determination not to let personal dishonour disrupt her mission, she transforms herself to the destructive Kali who demon-like drives the knife into the rapist. Witnessing two deaths in three months Jasmine feels herself as death incarnate. “The transformation from a helpless victim to a blood-devouring goddess Durga is instant” (Dimri 75).

The second murder parallels the first self-protective murder of another beast in Hasnapur as a young girl. With this homicide she becomes the avenging goddess Kali. With the murder she enacts another death, the death of the old self through the symbolic burning of her dishonoured clothes, and out of the ashes a new self emerges. Stuffing her suitcase with the old clothes she lits pyre to her failed mission for Half-Face has defiled it. With the destruction of her only mission to conduct *sati* at the very place that Prakash wanted to stand in the campus, Jasmine enters her first full American day and begins her journey travelling light. The traumatic rape and the subsequent murder further alienate her from the Indian image of a wife. It destructs the mental and moral constraints trailing from the old culture and she steps into the new world unburdened by cultural imperatives as a missionless drifter.

With little English and less formal education Jasmine floats in the challenging world of America though at times memory takes her to the past she left behind. The past does not fill her with nostalgia, but it equips her to encounter future boldly. As a young girl Jyoti had witnessed her father’s emotional entanglement with the Lahore past. Even in his domicile in India he refused to speak Hindi considering it the language of Gandhi who approved the partition of Punjab. Holding fast to Lahore ghazals and longing for news from Pakistan he lived in a bunker. But Jasmine has learnt from the mistake of her father and realises that nostalgic attachment to the past is destructive to the present.

Spatial dislocation implants a new identity on Jasmine. The Jasmine who emerges out of the ashes of the *patni* is a survivor. The hospitality and advice offered by Lillian Gordon, her protector, guid, propeller and facilitator, equip Jasmine to recoup physically and emotionally. With a low tolerance for reminiscence, bitterness and nostalgia Gordon guides her by her principle “let the past make you vary, but do not let it deform you” (131). Trained by her to walk

and talk American, Jasmine feels slightly better than the Kanjobal women who found Gordon's a safe garrison in the hostile territory. With Hasnapur sidle she abandons her Hasnapur modesty also. The march towards self-actualisation that has begun with the death of the old self accelerates by acculturation to American pattern of thinking and living.

The trip to the Vadheras can be equated to an immigrant's voyage back to the mother country. During the five months stay in Flemmings Jasmine realises her distance from the land of her birth. The Indian ghetto is actually a survival strategy by recreating the lost culture. But exposed to the lure of the West, with no plans to return, Jasmine spirals into depression behind the fortress of the artificial Punjabiness. Though it provides her security, it constantly nags her of her illegal alien status and Indian widowhood. Constrained by the dependent status she feels her chances of survival blocked out. She cannot adapt her American deport in the artificially maintained Indianness: "I wanted to distance myself from everything Indian, everything Jyotilike" (145). With no desire to continue like a ghost hanging on Jasmine decides to leave the professor. The transition from the Vadheras to the Hayes suggests her mutation from Jyoti to Jase.

Through "the narative technique of alternately highlighting one or the other of the 'mutations' in the heroines identity," (Padma, "From Acculturation" 163) Mukherjee details the different stages of her life in the meandering course through the terrains of India and America. The early phase shows her experience of the agony of the uprooted people through the experience of her displaced father. In America she no longer identifies with the artificially maintained Indianness. Jyoti disconnects her from her family, Jasmine distances her from India. Thus the familiar gets decentred and becomes uncongenial to her aspirations. The exuberance of the new world is emphasised by juxtaposing the claustrophobic Indian life of Jasmine with the Vadheras and the unrestrained life at the Hayes. At the Vadheras she feels deteriorated like an Indian wife who cooks, shops, cleans and caters to the old people. Though older and more complex than the Jasmine of the Middleman story this Jasmine too succeeds for both believe that "to bunker oneself inside nostalgia, to sheathe the heart in a bulletproof vest, was to be a coward" (185). Hence she alters her identity from a dependent, illegal-alien widow to that of an independent care-giver.

The garb of au pair instills a sense of dignity and self-reliance which influences her attitude more positively to American life and culture. The willing adaptation to Sam the iguano is highly suggestive of Jasmine's readiness to forge an identity of her own. The act distances her from Indian girls who never hold large reptiles on their laps and affiliates more to Sam for both are away from home. The job at the Taylors makes her more American for she considers them as her teachers and family. The liberal attitude of the Taylors who serve biscuits to a servant elevates her sense of self. The urge to mould a new personality springs involuntarily: "I wanted to become the person they thought they saw; humorous, intelligent, refined, affectionate. Not illegal, not murderer, not widowed, raped, destitute, fearful" (171). In Flushing she lived defensively amidst documented rectitude. But at the Hayes she becomes a flowing river that takes in everything in its stride--the language on the street, on the T.V, at the dinners. In the march towards assimilation, the squatting fields of Hasnapur recede fast.

The designation "care-giver" makes her feel like a professional. The new phase gives a new name too: "I like the name he gave me: Jase. Jase was a woman who bought herself spangled heels and silk chartreuse pants"(176). With every change in identity there is a marked progress in the assertion of the self too. While Jyoti would have saved and Jasmine lived for the future, Jase lives for today. Profligate squandering becomes her way of breaking from the parsimonious

ghettos of Flushing. For every Jase the reliable caregiver, there is a prowling adventurer Jase. The tug of opposing forces only thrills her. Though she is just an au pair, the status of an oriental expert further brightens the future of Jasmine to a level unimaginable for a school drop-out. For the American professors interested in the East it is not her formal education, but her experience that counts. With Wylie away, her life has a new fullness and difference. In her exploration of the city in the company of Duff, Jasmine rises to the level Wylie wanted her to achieve. "The graduation from a care-giver to the beloved of Taylor distinctly shows her novel, uninhibitive approach towards life" (Dimri 74).

While her future is brightened by the love of Taylor, just as the bomb-blast back in India killed her one identity and started her exile, the accidental encounter with the same Sukhi who shattered her dream world sets Jasmine once again on the move which inevitably demands a change of place and identity. The repressed fear of the astrologer's prophecy follows her with greater force as she leaves for Iowa in fear. It is not a fear of death, but a fear of endangering the people whom she loves. The confrontation with the Indian past and the American present goes beyond her control.

From a sense of liberation the narrator heroine is compelled to go in hiding. But once again beauty and brain enable her to change her identity as well as that of the banker Bud Ripplemeyer. In retelling the past Jane Ripplemeyer is cohering the meta "I"s to the mega "I." She is reconstructing her self out of the segmented identities. The space where Jasmine "achieves her identity is not geographical: she builds her identity in narrative spaces as she pieces together her story" (Sautter 43). Mukherjee dexterously makes Jane reflect on her own identity as a giant long-playing record with millions of tracks, each of them a complete circle, with only one diamond-sharp microscopic link to the next life and only God to hear it all. Jasmine believes that extraordinary events can jar the needle-arm and jump tracks and deposit a life into a grove that has not been prepared to receive it. Everything in the protagonist's life follows this unpredictable scheme.

The needle that jumped the track of New York fits into that of a teller in Ripplemeyer's bank in less than a month from New York and into the life of the banker. She assesses herself not as the cause but the catalyst that separated Karin and Bud. Yet Jasmine even while cohabiting with Bud is afraid of too much attachment for she feels it unwise. Life in Iowa too fails to shelter her from the astrologer. When Bud is shot and permanently crippled by a farmer whom he denied a loan Jane feels herself responsible as Jasmine felt at the death of Prakash. Further the incident makes her diffident for she thinks that Karin, the American ex-wife of Bud, would have been able to avoid the tragedy. Assessing the past and present Jane finds herself fitting into the identity bestowed on her by Karin: "I feel responsible. For Prakash's death. Bud's maiming. I'm a tornado, blowing through Baden" (206).

Carrying Bud's child, remembering Prakash and refusing to settle down, the narrator heroine is seen looking nostalgically to the past waiting for the mail though she left New York without a forwarding address. Her present life as a live-in-companion to the small town banker who never questions about her past is another step on the road to self-discovery. With Taylor and Duff back to her life she is not inhibited by the present as she is not leaving behind but feels going ahead: "I'm going somewhere" (214). The disclosure that she had rehearsed the scene so many nights signals her attachment to Taylor. She has already stopped thinking of herself as Jane. As she repositions her star she is not sure which identity she will stick on to. But with Taylor she will no more be a nomad in hiding.

Jasmine blooms from a diffident alien to an adventurous Jase and an American spirit. The Jase scrambling ahead of Taylor, greedy with wants and reckless from hope, is far removed from the illegal alien who launched on the shores of America surviving many a tribulation, many a rape. Identity is not something that is given to her by her culture, but something she discovers as she journeys. It is not restricted to those given by the men in her life alone. Jasmine reconstructs her identity as she moves from one culture to another, one disaster to another, one locale to another. She makes her own identity by creating a world by grasping personal history through reconstruction. "Faced with a loss of identity at each stage, Jasmine manages to evolve a new identity at each stage" (Nityanandam 76). Her true identity emerges at last: "Adventure, risk, transformation: the frontier is pushing indoors through uncaulked doors" (240).

When marriage transports Jyoti of Hasnapur to Jullundhar, widowhood moves Jasmine from Jullundhar to America. Each of these transfers demands a price too. Unconventional marriage alienates Jyoti from her single friend of Hasnapur, Vimala, who has been holding her marriage off because of their horoscopes. Widowhood completes the separation for Vimala does not want her happiness to be marred by the mother and daughter widowed by a bull and a bomb. Dida, the old relative of Pitaji, blames Jasmine's marriage at the government office and the consequent modern life for the terrible tragedy. Yet Jasmine emerges not as a tragic character but as a true heroine who is determined to write her own horoscope, with no reference to the stars but her own will to explore infinite possibilities new avenues which enables her to build up supportive relationships with Gordon, Wylie and later with Du and Karin.

Violence is inseparable from the variegated life times of Jasmine. Every dislocation in her life is centred round violent incidents. The postpartition riots permanently scarred Pitaji whose death incidentally is caused by the violent attack of a bull. Violent historical upheavals in the country have its reverberations in the remote village of Hasnapur as well. The Khalistan movement does not spare the life of Jyoti's Masterji who introduced the children of the village to the world outside. The same group of fanatics removes her vermilion mark and makes her an exile. Jasmine to her dismay finds that cruelty and associated death trails after her to the distant lands as well. At the Flemingo Inn Jasmine has her encounter with evil in the form of Half-Face. Though rape, the worst form of violence on woman, momentarily disrupts her mission, Jasmine does not allow it to supersede her determination to survive. Encounter with the unpleasant only emboldens the timid, inexperienced village girl to emerge as Kali. Her transformation elevates Jasmine from an illegal alien to the coveted position of an oriental specialist-cum-au pair. But once again the memory of the tragic past surfaced by the sight of the fanatic Sukhinder removes her from the haven of security to the uncertainty of Iowa till her encounter with the banker Bud. In Iowa it is not her Indian past that haunts Jane Ripplemeyer, but the frustrated farmer who shoots Bud and transforms him to a permanent invalid. Yet the spirit that is hardened by adversity refuses to be cowed down by any action or friction. It is this resilient spirit, coupled with her will to survive that rejuvenates the life of Jasmine.

While *Wife* traces the psychic breakdown of an Indian wife in America and the concomitant deep culture-shock leading to neurosis, *Jasmine* is Mukherjee's magnum opus of assimilation. Having experienced hideous times in her arduous journey for survival Jasmine has accomplished the rarity of transcending the boundaries of class, culture and gender. When the liberally brought-up, western-married Tara of *The Tiger's Daughter* still harbours traditional norms of wifhood and the college educated Dimple of *Wife* becomes an emotional wreck in America despite her association with feminists like Ina Mullick, it is through the village girl Jasmine that Mukherjee asserts the resilient power of woman. A peep into the life of Jasmine reveals that she

has been marked for success. Jyoti's yearning for independence, respect and success as a lady doctor with own clinic in the gender discriminated society of early childhood marks the beginning of the struggle for self-actualization. English education under the Masterji, however rudimentary it is, too signals her future. The Hasnapur Jyoti who told the astrologer "you don't know what my future holds" (3) is all set to make her own future as the novel ends. The heroic encounter with a dog, the rejection of a marriage fixed by her father, and the fascination for the electric switch in a friend's house reflect the protagonist's confidence to progress towards the realization of her potentials. She stands as an antithesis to the other girls with no individuality: "Village girls are like cattle: whichever way you lead them, that is the way they will go" (46). Trained by Prakash to look beyond the traditional horizon, introduced to the American way of life by Gordon and confronting the fluidity of American life, Jasmine realises the inevitability of attitudinal change corresponding to outer change in cultural habits. Not only her roles and names change, but her values and personality too undergo a similar mutation as she comes to terms with the new environment. But the rebirth, like birth itself, becomes painful and demands a death.

To Mukherjee "assimilation is a cultural looting, cultural exchange or a wilful and sometimes costly negotiation: an eye for an eye, a self for a self" (Drake 60). Uprooting and re-rooting are as painful, difficult and exhilarating as death and rebirth. The entire life of the protagonist can be seen as a series of deaths and rebirths. Her birth itself marks a rebirth. Wishing to spare the fifth daughter the pain of dowry-less bride or the status of a dependent spinster, her mother had attempted to strangle her to death. Jane recalls: "My grandmother may have named me Jyoti of light, but in surviving I was already Jane, a fighter and adapter" (40). Though widowhood mandates her to a lonely miserable life, she refuses to be curtailed within the walls of her hut, and is reborn as a young illegal refugee in America with the extraordinary decision to immolate herself in America. The rape and the following murder in self-defence compels her to abandon the mission that transferred to the alien soil, which culminates in the death of the Indian self too. She is reborn as Jase for survival. Just as a cat has several lives in the traditional Indian belief Jyoti has several lives, each a development on the former. Mukherjee brings in the image of the broken pitcher again to emphasise the rebirths of Jyoti.

Jasmine deconstructs binaries about race and resists categorisation. The novel actually describes the contours of multiculturalism. Jasmine fulfils Mukherjee's claim that "immigration is a two-way process and both the whites and the immigrants were growing into a third thing by this interchange and experience" (Chandra 130). The helping hand of Gordon and the democratic attitude of the Taylors imprint in Jasmine an image of America as a wonderland and to erase the scars left by Half-face. While America teaches her to live with ease and confidence despite her colour and the undocumented status, Jasmine gives back care, love and concern for those who rely on her. Duff, Du and Mother Ripplemeyer are witnesses to the unconditional love exhibited by her. Even Karin is forced to admit that she is not a gold digger but a giver. The stay in Iowa provides emotional crutches to the crippled Bud who rejuvenates to life. Her constructive tendencies can be seen in the effect her presence has on the small town of Baden. While the older Americans are forced to accommodate Jane's difference, she reciprocates by attempting to become a part of their way of life. Seized by a need to belong she closely identifies with the adopted Du, a Vietnamese, from whom she learns the lesson of survival. In fact Du's farewell provides her the emotional courage to leave Bud without any guilt.

Using different assumed identities as milestones marking personality growth Mukherjee "establishes naive Jyoti's metempsychosis into a culturally homogenised Jasmine" (Padma, *Issues* 151). Hailing from a self-effacing culture, she becomes a self-asserting personality. She

exhibits the indomitable will to escape the constrictive stereotyped roles and thereby replacing the annihilation of personality by the triumph of personality. Forgetting the nightmares of the refugee both Jasmine and Du think of assimilation as their means of survival. But salvation for them lies in the fact of coming to terms with the monsters and mastering the demons out there which are in fact projections of the mind. The process of taming internal demons is constant and demanding. Jasmine is reminded of her own demons of Sukhinder, to confront her future with confidence. The card that she receives from Taylor with an extraordinary address evokes a sense of liberation from the fears out there: "It is the face of a poet or a philosopher, the face of a woman who has come to terms with all the Sukhis and Half-Faces out there and is no longer afraid" (208). Hence she marches forward determined to reposition her stars.

Separation from home, culture-shock, problems of alienation and assimilation form the matrix of immigrant writing. The degree of estrangement, essentially individualistic, depends on various factors like education, background, nation and culture of the immigrant as well as the receptive capacity of the host country. Failure to forge new ties instead of the severed ones leads cultural transplants to remain as eternal aliens. After *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Wife* where Mukherjee recreates the pain and the hurt of the exile, "the absolute impossibility of ever having a home, a desh," (Blaise, and Mukherjee 287) she moves to focus on changing identities and establishment of emotional affinity with the host culture in *Jasmine*. Endowed with an undaunted spirit and determination Jasmine marches towards Mukherjee's dream of assimilation. The journey towards this goal is as jerky and tumultuous as her voyage across the continents. Yet, like a phoenix she survives many mutilations and deaths as success is her goal. While the other protagonists are curtailed by their past, Jasmine uses it as a constructive force to build up a new identity. Her essential Indianness with its exuberance of love and care and an adaptive mentality equip her to create enough space for her. It is by following a path of "inner liberation that she succeeds in integrating herself to American way of life" (D'Souza 10). Transcending the constraints of gender, class and culture Jasmine fulfils Mukherjee's dream of an American family which no longer consists of whites alone but where everyone is an eternal alien. Jasmine attests Laing that "our relatedness to others is an essential aspect of our being, as is our separateness, but any particular person is not a necessary part of our being" (17). Jasmine is Mukherjee's banner of the postcolonial individual who refuses to be closed in by spacio-temporal paradigms but becomes a fluid identity.

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