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Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*: Decolonizing Text or Postcolonial *Jane Eyre*?

Cover Page Footnote

The most heartfelt of thanks and gratitude to my postcolonial literature professor, Dr. Hebbbar, for her help and inspiration.

In her essay “Imagining Homelands,” Bharati Mukherjee dispels the idea of the traditional immigrant narrative, saying, “the national myth of immigration, the heart-warming saga of babushka-clad refugees climbing to the deck of the tramp steamer for a glimpse of the Statue of Liberty... is just that, an image out of aging newspapers or our collective pop-memory banks” (Aciman 1999). She goes on to state that her concept of immigration is that it is “made up of several conflicting parts,” reinforcing the idea that the immigrant identity cannot be pigeonholed into one type or description (Aciman 1999). This strong belief in the diversity of the immigration narrative is found time and time again in her novel *Jasmine*, a postcolonial text that looks at the shifting identity politics through the immigration journey of Jyoti, a young girl from India. Mukherjee establishes an overarching decolonizing narrative of an immigrant through Jyoti’s transition in identities throughout the course of her story, using the liminality of Jyoti’s identity as a means of deconstructing the immigrant myth. However, while serving as a decolonizing narrative, *Jasmine* falls into a few colonially-minded pitfalls of its own. While Mukherjee maintains her belief in the nuanced nature of the immigrant identity, she does not appear to remain entirely subjective in her assessment of the various types of immigrants in her novel; rather, she appears to clearly prefer a type of integration and assimilation as a “proper” means of existing as an immigrant. This complicates her success in portraying the nuances in diasporic identity as a means of deconstructing the immigrant narrative myth.

To make this case, however, it must be first argued that *Jasmine* can be referred to as a decolonizing text. When discussing decolonizing literature, I operate from the basic definition of a text that works against the colonial project of assimilation and undoing the colonial mindset that imposes hegemonic parameters of citizenship and identity upon a subject. From this base definition, I can argue that the liminality of Jyoti as expressed through her myriad of identities over the course of her narrative opposes a commonly held stereotype of the hope-filled immigrant seeking a better life, and in doing so, constructs an open narrative that is in fact decolonizing by its very nature.

One of the first and most apparent of ways that establishes nuance in immigrant identity narratives is presented in the novel is in Jyoti’s descriptions of her and her fellow travellers as “outcasts and deportees ... ferried in old army trucks where [they] are roughly handled and taken to... barely wakened customs guards await[ing] their bribe.” (Mukherjee 101) They exist as part of a “shadow world of aircraft” and harsh travel that is not accounted for in the prevalent immigrant story in which eyes alight at Ellis island and hopes and dreams are fulfilled upon entry (Mukherjee 101). Jyoti is ferried in on a shrimp trawler, forced to “numbed surrender to various men for the reward of an orange, a blanket, a slice of cheese,” raped, abandoned, and traumatized before she can arrive anywhere remotely close to stability (Mukherjee 121). This sequence of

events certainly contradicts any notion of the dutifully pleased immigrant. However, perhaps no element to *Jasmine* is more indicative of the plurality in an immigrant narrative than the frequently changing image and identity of Jyoti herself.

Throughout the course of her story, she goes from Jyoti, Hasnapuri sister and daughter, to Jasmine, wife of Prakash and future co-owner of *Vijh & Vijh*, and then on to Jase, the elegant New Yorker and caregiver, and finally to the Iowan Jane Rippelmeyer, future wife of “the pillar of Baden” and pregnant with his child (Mukherjee 213). While her transition from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jase to Jane could be argued as a natural progression of identity and growth, there is an element of reinvention and even rebirth in each identity that makes it seem like these names and women act as a multitude of potential immigrant identities, an active choice on Mukherjee’s part to avoid establishing a set of parameters onto the concept of an immigrant woman. For one, Jyoti herself says in reference to her identities: “there are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself. We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams” (Mukherjee 29). Her word choices of “rebirth” and “dreams” are significant, as is the use “remaking,” as this indicates that not only are the different chapters in her life new births and identities to her, but that perhaps each identity comes with a new set of dreams upon the rebirth (Mukherjee 29). This can be found in the sometimes-inexplicable disparities in desires that are found between these four identities. For example, how can we reconcile the Jyoti who proudly goes against her father, whose “face caricatured outrage” at the idea of her working for a living in telling him that she desired to be a doctor with the suddenly child-obsessed Jasmine who begs Prakash to have children, citing “a woman’s need to be a mother?” Where does the extravagant Jase, who spends money on lingerie and wants to take “a thousand courses... in science, in art, in languages” disappear to when Jane Rippelmeyer immerses herself in a life of loans, foreclosures, and rural domesticity (Mukherjee 51, 78, 180)?

This does not appear as a natural progression of desires through her changing circumstances, but rather as complete reinvention with every new identity that she takes on with a new name. When Jyoti murders Half-Face after he rapes her, there is an eerie calmness notable in the shift of events. The fear she experiences prior to and during the rape is replaced by a confident, even out-of-character moment of clarity during which, with no prior decision to do so, slices her tongue with a blade and kills her man. Her description of how she stood over him “naked, but now with my mouth open, pouring blood, my red tongue out” is a moment of allusion to the Hindu goddess Kali, who is often depicted with a red tongue sticking out and with a fiery rage in her eyes (Mukherjee 118). The shift in fear to confidence is perhaps indicative of her summoning the spirit of the goddess, or even becoming Kali in that moment, a theory that is later reinforced

when she thinks to herself: “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” (Mukherjee 197). Not only does she invoke Kali, she becomes her. If in that moment she is able to become another woman with another identity, the logic could follow that Jyoti adopts these new identities at every significant juncture in her life, all outfitted with their own desires and characteristics, just as her Kali was characterized by a sense of duty and vengeance. Kristin Carter-Sarborn argues that “Jasmine's violent substitution of self... could be recognized 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’... Jasmine's agenda could offer a counterdiscourse or model of resistance to those who would name and thus control her. She is a ‘tornado, a rubble-maker, arising from nowhere and disappearing into a cloud’ (Mukherjee 241), destroying all in her path as she chooses, including her old selves; her dream is a will to power” (Carter-Sarborn 577). Perhaps this concept of her dream being “a will to power” is the reason that our narrator, at the end of her story, after having been referred to sequentially Jane and Jase in the last few pages of the novel, is finally left identity-less and running ahead “greedy with wants and reckless from hope,” as all of her old selves have been decimated, leaving only the want to want. In this last sentence, there is no reminder of her unborn child or even of this supposed long-felt love for Taylor, as her true desire now is her right to desire at all, rather than being confined to the desires that have been attributed to the identities she has been given by the people and environment around her (Carter-Sarborn 577) (Mukherjee 241). She is not Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase or Jane, but a person fueled by hope in a very different and nuanced narrative than that of the neoimperialist image of the hopeful immigrant passing through Ellis Island on a boat.

Audre Lorde, in her speech *The Masters Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* speaks on what can be referred to as neoliberalism in saying: “if white American feminist theory need not deal with the difference between us, and the resulting different in our oppressions, then how do you deal with the fact that the women who clean your houses and tend your children while you attend conferences on feminist theory are, for the most part, poor women and women of Color?” (Lorde 2) In calling out the disparities in mainstream feminism, Lorde criticizes the subsequent need of the mainstream feminist movement for assimilation and the chronic desire to ignore differences between systems of oppression as they manifest between circles of race, class, and sexuality. If Jyoti, both a poor woman and a woman of color who cleans Taylor and Wylie's house while tending to their children, and her sequence of travels and displacements act as the new narrative of the diversity of immigration, then her identity itself, or lack thereof, exists in a decolonizing perspective, as she is a representative of

several narratives in several immigrant women, each with differing and even contrasting desires. At no point can the reader pinpoint stereotypical characteristics of the immigrant woman, or even of the Indian immigrant woman, as Jyoti/Jasmine/Jase/Jane acts as an amalgam of a myriad of identities. In writing a traditional story of immigration from India to the United States that has been penned countless times over the years, Mukherjee seems to purposefully avoid any kind of overtly concrete definitions of her heroine, who can then act as a one-person deconstruction of the aforementioned immigrant myth.

What I question, however, is whether Mukherjee, in constructing this decolonizing, self-liberating heroine as a representative of the third world woman, or “subaltern”, to quote Spivak, is herself becoming complicit in a kind of colonial mindset of her own (Spivak 78). I specifically refer to the three immigrant styles found in *Jasmine*: the nostalgia-riddled community of the Punjabi fortress, the mixed-culture “hyphenated” identity of Du, and the nearly genetically transformed identity of Jyoti (Mukherjee 222). In analyzing these three specific immigrant narratives and what they represent within the novel, I find that Mukherjee does not maintain objectivity in her representation of a myriad of immigrant-types. Despite the mission to deconstruct the immigration myth, she manages to establish a “right” kind of immigrant. To quote Carter-Sarborn again, “just as we must consider whether Jane Eyre, in her search for a new female domestic identity, is implicated in the violent repression of colonial subjectivity as figured by Bertha Mason, we also need to ask whether Jyoti-JasmineJane’s ‘discovery’ of an American selfhood covers up a similar complicity in the elision of the ‘third world’ woman Mukherjee’s narrator purportedly speaks as and for” (Carter-Sarborn 574-5).

To follow Carter-Sarborn’s example, let us consider Jane Eyre, Brontë’s strong-willed, arguably feminist heroine in relation to Mukherjee’s Jyoti. Jane questions patriarchal influences, boldly proclaiming: “women feel as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer,” and going on to highlight economic disparities in her social mobility as a poor orphan who then becomes a governess, and later on comes into a lot of money (Brontë 124). If Brontë’s project was to, even minimally, point out gender and class inequalities of 19th- century England, it is arguable that she succeeded. However, the colonial undertones of the novel cannot be ignored. To quote Spivak again, “Bertha Mason, a figure produced by the axioms of imperialism... the white Jamaican Creole... renders the human/animal frontier as acceptably indeterminate, so that a good greater than the letter of the Law can be broached” (Spivak 236). Put simply, the racial ambiguity of Bertha Mason contributes to a conflation of her madness (and otherness) and inhumanness. The madwoman who received her madness from the non-white,

Creole side of her family, is written off as “other” and is therefore deemed inhuman, and provides an acceptable excuse for Jane and Mr. Rochester to break the law and get married. Just as Brontë’s project towards highlighting social disparities has its imperial tendencies, I bring to question whether Mukherjee inadvertently echoes a Western narrative in her introduction of three immigrant types in the novel.

The first, as found in the Punjabi fortress of Professorji and his family, is the example of the immigrant who clings on desperately to the homeland, to the extent at which they do not incorporate themselves into their new land. Jyoti describes in detail the extent to which the family she is staying with strives to maintain their Indian culture, eating Indian food, watching Indian films so intensely and frequently that “Nirmala had exhausted the available stock of Hindi films on tape and was no renting Urdu films from a Pakistani store” within a year (Mukherjee 145). She describes in disparaging terms the feeling of isolation, a fortress into which English, and America, could not penetrate. To Jyoti, this life suffocates her as she “was spiraling into depression behind the fortress of Punjabiness” built by a family who was clinging onto an identity that Jyoti seems to find regressive (Mukherjee 144). This is echoed, later on when she says “I changed because I wanted to. To bunker oneself in nostalgia, to sheathe the heart in a bulletproof vest was to be a coward” (Mukherjee 86). Her language here, with “bunker” and “nostalgia” directly copies the language she uses in describing Professorji, Nirmala, and their family (Mukherjee 86, 144). This is a politically charged and subjective statement, indicating that attempts to cling onto the homeland were futile and regressive in integrating oneself as an immigrant. Working from the aforementioned established argument that Jyoti lacks one concrete identity and that her presence acts as a deconstruction of colonial identity by the author, then this statement may appear as a representation of authorial opinion as well.

When Mukherjee was asked in an interview “why some of the Indian women in [her] stories...avoid transformation or avoid the struggle against transformation,” she responded: “I’m looking for people who test their fates and then either discard or reclaim them, as opposed to those women...who never test the fates and who live according to rites and rituals” (Mukherjee and Edwards 114). For an author who appears to be broadening the scope on what it is to be an immigrant, Mukherjee inserts very specific ideas on what does not constitute a proper immigrant. Jennifer Drake argues that within Mukherjee’s narratives, “assimilation is cultural looting, cultural exchange, or a willful and sometimes costly negotiation: an eye for an eye, a self for a self. People mix with gods and goddesses, or become gods and goddesses, reincarnating, translating narratives of coherence,” as Jyoti does when she assumes the form of Kali (Drake 60). There is a violent exchange that requires volatility, mobility, and change on the

individual's part. This was not a part of Professorji and Nirmala's lives, and was therefore presented in a disparaging tone.

The other immigrant type Jyoti encounters is that of Du, who she describes as "hyphenated," in the sense that he mixed identities rather than truly transforming (Mukherjee 222). She says "I am amazed, and a little proud that Du had made a life for himself among the Vietnamese in Baden and I hadn't had a clue... I haven't spoken to an Indian since my months in Flushing. My transformation has been genetic; Du's was hyphenated... he's a hybrid, like the fantasy appliances he wants to build" (Mukherjee 222). While the hybrid hyphenation that Du represents is presented in a tone more admiring and loving than the nostalgic regressive nature of the Punjabi fortress, there is still a slight sense of superiority in the way that the narrator refers to Du. She refers to his hyphenation as fragile, and compares his hybridity with fantasy appliances, implying a lack of solidity and a sense of fiction to this kind of identity. What Mukherjee truly seems to approve of is this "genetic" transformation that Jyoti has undergone, a change in her very DNA that has incorporated her into this new country after a myriad of identities (Mukherjee 222).

This veers a little too close to the mythos of the American melting pot for comfort. Bharati Mukherjee says in the aforementioned interview that when she refers to identity, "it's not like a salad, in which every bit... retains its original shape and taste and there's only the salad dressing as a kind of mild flavor that makes all these bits acceptable, but a stew in the sense that the stewing process has changed everything; the broth has become what it is because every bit has given some of its juices, some of its taste. I'm looking for every side to break down in some way and constantly create a new whole" (Mukherjee and Edwards 112). While this reinforces her vision of immigration as constantly being informed by various perspectives and being some amalgam of all of them, there does appear to be an element of erasure to this kind of narrative. The interviewer neatly summarizes her metaphor in saying "in this broth, some degree of gain and loss is inevitable," which repeats Mukherjee's argument of the constant murder and rebirth of self in an immigrant (Mukherjee and Edwards 112). However, to come back to the original point, this stew or melting pot metaphor that she espouses seems to imply that there is in fact a "right" way to assimilate, and that those immigrants who do not follow this pattern of loss and gain are somehow lesser and not truly integrating into society. It seems inadvertently contradictory, as she appears to be deliberately attacking and deconstructing colonialist or neoliberal narratives of immigration, but advocating for a type of proper integration in a metaphor led narrative that has been historically Western driven. To reference Lorde again, "without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the

pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist” (Lorde 2). We must question whether Mukherjee, in attempting to decolonize and present this new narrative of immigration, has been promoting a type of assimilation that downplays the agency and importance of difference in a community, and of those who do not or cannot participate in this kind of cultural exchange. In the three kind of immigrants presented through Professorji’s family, Du, and the narrator herself, Jyoti-Jasmine-Jase-Jane’s type of integration is the most validated in comparison to the other two. What does it mean, then, when the most validated immigrant in the story is seen rushing off into the future because “it’s a free country,” abandoning the traditionalist and nationalist values of both cultures but simultaneously pursuing a freedom that has heavy overtones of the American dream (Mukherjee 239)? What is the transition here actually representing? Carter-Saborn puts it well in suggesting that “at the same time it embodies the mystical insight of the Other, Jasmine's ‘third eye’ represents a way of seeing that is ultimately transformed...[from] a backward ‘Indian village girl, whose grandmother wants to marry her off at 11,’ into the enlightened vision of ‘an American woman who finally thinks for herself.’ The book's selling power seems, then, to stem from its simultaneous exoticism and domesticability” (Carter-Saborn 575).

While the latter part of this critique is slightly more dismissive than my own, it echoes the question of whether Mukherjee is sanctioning some beliefs of assimilation as a proper means of adaptation in her decolonizing narrative through her endorsement of one specific kind of cultural exchange. As Bronte’s work had elements of colonial subjectivity, Mukherjee’s has its own components of Western thought, complicating the author’s project with its own postmodern colonial undertones. Further analysis is required to assess whether Mukherjee’s simultaneous deconstruction and endorsement of a type of immigrant narrative is truly contradictory or can in fact be reconciled. It is significant, however, to identify the interactions of various seemingly contradictory opinions or statements within postcolonial literature. As a genre that is so nuanced and difficult to pin down to a set of parameters that define its project as a body of literature, the true analysis of postcolonialism lies in closely examining the contradictions and complications.

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