CHAPTER 4

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One of the significant developments in the US over the past decades has been the revision of the literary canon that had once been white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant and predominantly male. This meant, not only the incorporation of female authors as well as writers of various ethnic minorities who were or would have been neglected or undermined previously, but also a radical change of direction in the selection process. The standards, be they aesthetic or philosophical, that had been employed as criteria in the old canon were readjusted, in the belief that literature should not only address itself to matters of transcendent human and artistic significance but also record ... the full variety of American life. Paralleled with as well as affected by the emergence of multiculturalism, this evolution made possible, among others, the flourishing of a powerful ethnic fiction by non-Anglo authors.

*Jasmine,* the 1989 novel by the Indian immigrant woman writer Bharati Mukherjee, must be considered among such a fiction. It recounts the Americanization of an Indian first-generation female protagonist and reveals how, while living out one’s ethnicity nowadays is easier in multi ethnic...
America, the path to Americanization for a non-Anglo is not without thorns. On the one hand, there are restrictions imposed by the ethnic group; on the other hand, the social decay presented by contemporary "puritan" Anglo-American mainstream brings disillusionment. As the novel proceeds between flashbacks of contrastive and conflicting portrayals of mutually alien cultures and locales, the tensions inherent in the process of Americanization of the Asians are admirably displayed. The changing cultural identities in the process of Americanization are examined in this chapter.

As a mirror image of present-day America, Jasmine exudes violence from beginning to end. However, it is not directed against any hegemonic cultural group such as the Anglos, but constitutes, in the candid, pseudo-picaresque narration by the protagonist herself of her Americanization, one of the harshest indictments of nothing less than the American way of life itself. One can find the variety of an argument that the mainstream reflected in the novel is a wasteland characterized by moral decay.

Written in the form of a confessional novel, Jasmine is the story of an Indian female protagonist, who is given the name Jyoti upon birth, but then is also called Jasmine, Jase, and Jane during various stages of her life corresponding to different men in it. Born and bred in India, she arrives in
the US as an adult. Since she does not come from an ethnic group victimized by the Anglo-Americans in the past or has not herself undergone discrimination while growing up, she is able to pose an uncomplexed, unburdened "novel" eye where her African-American or Native American counterpart would see nothing but racism and suffering. This is one aspect of the novel that distinguishes it from other ethnic novels, and makes for an entertaining work before all else.

Born as Jyoti in the small village of Hasnapur in the district of Punjab, India, Jasmine marries a progressive young Indian man named Prakash Vijh who then renames her Jasmine. While in India, Jasmine believes that being American is equivalent to being white, and when Prakash shows her a brochure for the Florida International Institute of Technology, Jasmine is surprised to see the diverse scenes of America. Jasmine also has a negative conception of the sexuality of American women, and she worries about Prakash studying there because of the hot blooded American girls. At this point in the novel, Jasmine is oblivious of the complexities in relation to the racial and ethnic identities in America, and rather conservative in her attitudes toward female sexuality, even though Prakash attempts to increase her comfort with her own sexuality.
Prakash views Jasmine as both a sexual being and his caretaker, but without relegating her to the extremes of the hyper sexual mistress looked down upon in India or the pure and chaste wife so deified in traditional Indian culture. Prakash respects her privacy and space.

Prakash aids Jasmine in her transformation from “Jyoti” to “Jasmine”. Jasmine both perceives herself as, and eventually becomes, the figure that Prakash desires to create. Prakash wanted to break down the Jyoti he had seen in Hasnapur and to make her a new kind of a city woman. He gave her a new name: Jasmine to delink to her present from the past. Jyoti or Jasmine shuttled between identities. Prakash’s renaming of Jasmine, is a sign of her new and modern identity that represents her initial migration away from traditional Indian customs and culture. Jyoti and Jasmine are two distinctly separate selves, yet Jasmine finds herself occupying both identities. The continuous debates, arguments, and quarrels eventually lead her to become Jasmine.

The fact that Prakash names Jasmine is significant, for it brings to light the question of agency in Jasmine’s formation of identity. Is an external force that prompts and develops Jasmine’s new identity, rather than Jasmine-herself experiencing an internal metamorphosis? While Jyoti is portrayed as a more “Liberated” woman when compared with Jasmine, she is
nevertheless in large part a male’s construction, thereby resulting in a paradoxical sense of agency. Jasmine is becoming a modern and freethinking woman, but this transformation occurs through the means of traditional Indian male dominance. The manner in which Prakash wishes to see and represent Jasmine results in the self that Jasmine eventually becomes, thus Mukherjee is depicting identity formation, as a complex process that is dependent not solely upon the agency of the individual, but rather also upon the agency of otherhood.

In an unexpected moment, Prakash is murdered, and Jasmine finds herself a widow at the age of seventeen. Heartbroken, she sets out for America to fulfill the lifelong dream that her husband once possessed of moving to the U.S. Prakash had taken Jyoti and created Jasmine in an alien land. While traveling, Jasmine meets Half-face, the captain of the ship, and at this point she has her first encounter with American racial categorizations. Jasmine is confused as to why Half Face’s nickname (“Bubba”) sounds somewhat Indian (resembling “Baba”) and she inquires as to whether the name does in fact have Indian origins. Half-Face replies back that “Bubba” is in no way an Indian name. In the ‘nigger-shipping business’ they don’t bother with last names. Half-face does not see Jasmine as Indian, but rather simply another black person he can treat with disrespect.
Finding herself without a place to stay and trusting Half-Face, Jasmine accepts his offer to allow him to accompany her. But the minute that they arrive at the motel, Half-Face reveals his true intentions and rapes her. Unlike Prakash, Half-Face sees her as a whore, “one prime little piece” whom he has but “one use” for. Suddenly Jasmine is recognized for nothing else save her existence as a sexual being, and after the actual rape itself: she becomes filled with shame and fear of her sexuality due to the manner in which Half-Face sees her. She determines to clean her body with the small wrapped bar of soap and to purify her soul with all the prayers she could remember, yet Jasmine finds that she cannot escape her new perception of sex, and thus turns to violence in order to express the conflict she is experiencing between the sexual identity she had with Prakash and that which she has with Half-Face. Jasmine then stabs Half-Face to death and in this act finds the strength to continue living instead of committing sati over the burned clothing of her husband. After the murder, Jasmine vows to start her own life in America, a life separate from the India and naive identity of her past. Interestingly, Jasmine expresses more of a transformation of self after this incident with Half-Face than she ever did with Prakash, who had acknowledged her as an independent and autonomous woman. For Jasmine, the trauma of her rape results in the greatest change in her identity; the
experience that breaks her down the most is also the one that builds her up and allows her to come into her own. Thus, Jasmine’s identity is paradoxically formed not through constructions alone, but also destructions of her existing self. As the novel progresses, this paradox will become a pattern, for Jasmine almost needs disruption in her life in order to grow as a person.

Jasmine then meets Lillian Gordon, the woman who provides her with a temporary home while teaching her how to “become American”, or at least begin the process of assimilation. Lillian is the next figure in Jasmine’s life to rename her, bestowing upon her the Westernized nickname “Jazzy”, a symbol of her entrance into and acceptance of American culture. When Jasmine moves in with Lillian, she learns how to walk, dress, and speak so that she will blend in more easily. Most Americans can’t imagine being white or actually born in the U.S. but rather it is the appropriation of cultural norms, of social behavior that defines what it is to be American. An identity that she has thought out of her reach for so long is suddenly a possibility, and she welcomes the transformations gladly. As Jasmine’s self perception changes, she moves toward becoming “Jazzy”, believing that Jasmine is a self of the past, but this past is one that never truly disappears, as Jasmine soon learns.
After she has collected herself and regained a certain degree of self-confidence, Jasmine leaves Lillian to move in with a traditional Indian family in Flushing, New York. Yet Jasmine soon finds herself stifled by the inertia of this home, for it is completely isolated from everything American. Jasmine feels as though she has simply wandered into a continuation of her former teenage days, and muses. She feels as though she had never left India and traveling all over world without leaving the familiar crops of Punjab. India, though hundreds of miles away, has manifested itself in the idealized America of Jasmine’s dreams, causing a tension between her new perception of herself as “Jazzy” and the “Jasmine” of her past. Thoroughly upset by what she believes to be a stasis in her progression towards a new life, Jasmine intensifies her attempt to separate herself from all that is Indian by trying to forget her past completely. As Jasmine builds her life in America, she longs to forget her past and all the horrific experiences that still haunt her. She feels that experience must be forgotten, or else it haunts. Yet experiences cannot be evaded, she inevitably finds that her past is a part of her individuality, and although she continues to run from it even after all of these years through the creation of new identities, it nevertheless interferes with her current state of consciousness. While Jasmine creates a new identity for every new situation, her former identities are never completely erased,
for they emerge in specific moments in the text and exacerbate the tension
between self perceptions, thereby causing Jasmine to create yet another more
dominant identity, different from all those that came before.

When the inertia of the Flushing home becomes simply too much for
Jasmine to bear, she proceeds with her migratory pattern and moves to New
York City to become the pair for an American family. When Jasmine moves
with Taylor, his wife Wylie and their daughter Duff, she creates yet another
identity based upon a new perception of herself. While living with the
Hayes’ family, Jasmine begins to master the English language, thereby
empowering herself to further appropriate American culture. “To speak
means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of
this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture... a man who
has language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by
that language. To fully learn a language is to appropriate a culture, for
language affords the means by which the identity is expressed” [1], thus as
Jasmine becomes more fluent in English, discovering the intricacies of
vernacular expressions she becomes more American. Taylor begins to call
her “Jase” and “Jassy”, Anglicized versions of her name that represent the

emergence of her increasingly westernized identity. Again, Jasmine is being renamed by a male figure, thereby suggests that she does not have a great deal of agency in the creation of her new self since Taylor constructs it for her. However, the notion of agency will become more complicated once Taylor and Jasmine become romantically involved, for Jasmine realizes that her transformation is for her own satisfaction, not only that of Taylor’s.

Jasmine’s comfort with English also provides her with a new perspective on America as well as a more familiar relationship with the culture as a whole. Language becomes Jasmine’s key to understand American culture and claiming it as her own, thereby allowing herself to be emerged as “Jase”, who possesses a completely different consciousness from the previous selves of “Jyoti”, “Jasmine”, or even “Jazzy”. The new consciousness of “Jase” is apparently more western and confident, filled with a desire to imbibe as much of American culture as she possibly can, without fear or regret. Jasmine’s perception of her race also changes dramatically in her time with the Haynes family. Taylor and his friends understand that Jasmine is South Asian, and they are interested in the specifics of her racial identity, although they still tend to assume associations when they should not.
Jasmine’s race is recognized as belonging to the South Asian community, as opposed to Half-Face’s racist generalization. Although she appreciates the efforts made by Taylor’s friends to engage with her on a level of racial specificity, Jasmine nevertheless wonders as to the nature of her role as a South Asian woman. Taylor’s friends essentialize Jasmine, falling prey to the orientalist habit of assuming knowledge of language of the other and expecting a certain “essence” (in this case knowledge of language) from her because of her South Asian background. Jasmine is expected to know languages associated with South Asia, regardless of whether it is in fact her specific dialect or of the general. Thus, Jasmine is correctly perceived as South Asian. She is still discriminated on a much subtler level. Taylor’s friends are interested in her because she is South Asian, for what she can do to them and for what she represents, which, in this case, make an entire, set of cultures and nations. Jasmine’s specific racial difference is recognized and embraced in this community of people, but her racial identity is now subject to the prejudice of incorrect distinctions instead of gross generalizations.

But even in the same apartment complex, Jasmine’s perception of her race transforms when the people viewing her change. In this particular situation, class politics exert a great deal of influence upon perceptions of
Jasmine’s race, while Taylor’s friends view Jasmine as a south Asian woman and ask her to help them translate academic documents and paintings. The other female caregivers in the building assume that since she is in the position of a “day mummy”, she must be from where they are from. Occupation (and its association with class) becomes the marker of race, while skin colour and ethnicity are suddenly of secondary importance.

Though Taylor is married, he and Jasmine begin a promising romance, which Jasmine enters warily, avoiding physical contact while trying to discern the manner in which Taylor views her sexuality. As she falls in love with him, she desires to change herself into the being of, Taylor’s admiration. The love Jasmine felt for Taylor on the first day had nothing to do with sex. She fell in love with his world, its ease, its careless confidence and graceful self-absorption. She wanted to become the persons (Taylor and Wylie) thought they saw... Not illegal, not murderer, not widowed, raped, destitute fearful... Jasmine suppresses her sexuality because she associates it with the shame and dread of her rape by Half-Face. Instead, she attempts to bury it under a change of personality: a Transformation into a woman who is confident and refined but somewhat asexual, and to a certain degree, the woman that she believes Taylor wants her to be.
As the relationship progresses, Jasmine cannot ignore her attraction to Taylor-nor he to her. Taylor views Jasmine as a sexual being, and he embraces her different ethnicity but without orientalizing her into an exoticized fantasy. Jasmine realizes that her desire to change for Taylor is not only unnecessary, but also born out of her passive inheritance. He didn't want to scour and sanitize the foreignness. She changed because she wanted to. At this point, Jasmine appears to be expressing a change in the nature of her agency, and it seems that she is taking full responsibility for the creation of her new identity. As compared to Prakash's creation of Jyoti, Jasmine thinks she is assuming a new identity because she wants to, and not only for the man and her life. While Half Face did in fact elicit a desire within Jasmine to change, it was a desire born out of a violent response to her rape. In contrast, when she is with Taylor, Jasmine's transformation seems to stem not from a reaction, but rather from her very own yearning for personal change.

Taylor views Jasmine's sexuality as a positive aspect of her identity. Jasmine begins to see her sexuality as something that she can be proud of. In New York apartment, Jasmine took a form of diffident alien with forged documents. She became adventurous Jase. Jasmine chronicles the vast differences in her identities: Jase was a woman who bought herself spangled...
heels and silk chartreuse pants. Jasmine lived for the future, for Vijh & Wife. Jase went to movies and lived for today. “In my closet hung satin blouses with vampish necklines, in my dresser lingerie... For every Jasmine the reliable caregiver, there is a Jase the prowling adventurer. I was thrilled to the, tug of opposing forces” [2]. In becoming Jase, Jasmine is increasingly comfortable with her sexuality, but again has not completely erased her past identity; some elements of gross Jasmine are retained in a reliable caretaker.

The relationship between Jasmine and Taylor ends rather abruptly when the past creeps up on her once again, appearing almost as a retort to her perceived control and agency earlier in the text. The past returns manifested in the murderer of her husband who has come to New York to find her. Sukhwinder, the killer, signifies Jasmine’s past literally stalking her; he symbolizes the leading role that Jasmine’s past plays in her present life, the inescapability of memory, and the boundless nature of time and space in the text. When Sukhwinder appears, Jasmine finds that her former selves of Jyoti and Jasmine (versus her current identities of Jassy and Jase) begin to emerge all at once, and her life suddenly becomes distorted by the different consciousnesses through which she now experiences the work.

Upon viewing Sukhwinder, Jasmine’s reaction illustrates the collision of her various former selves.

Jasmine loses even her agency of self-expression when the past enters her present through the figure of Sukhwinder, and her self-perception is suddenly complicated by the emergence of a manifestation of her former identity. Due to the simultaneous existence of the past and the present, memories of India and her current life in America, Jasmine is forced to view herself from the perspectives of “Jasmine”, “Jase”, and “Jassy” all at once. Unable to live with this plethora of conflicting identities and the self perceptions associated with each, stage, Jasmine flees to Baden country, Iowa to start her life over yet again.

Jasmine creates her final identity when she moves to Baden and meets Bud-ripplemeyer, an American banker who instantly falls in love with her. They eventually marry and Bud renames Jasmine “Jane”, yet another evolution of her name and sign of her new identity initiated by a male figure in her life. Bud is reminiscent of Prakash in the manner in which he views Jasmine, for he sees her as a sexual being as well as his companion. Bud differs from all of Jasmine’s previous lovers in that he is the first one to view her sexuality through the lens of his own Orientalist fantasy. The knowledge
of Bud’s orientalism indeed frustrates Jasmine, but at the same time gives her sexuality a kind of power, for she sees herself as a desired sexual being.

By simply being, who she is, she helps the relationship move forward and for Jasmine this progression is worth the price of essentialist stereotypes, at least at this point in her life. There is an echo of the paradox that was present earlier in the test when Prakash created Jyoti, where a seemingly antiquated gender-oppressive relationship becomes the very means by which Jasmine gains agency in the formation of her identity. Instead of denigrating her, Orientalism serves to imbue Jasmine with a sexual confidence she never had. Jasmine thrives on Bud’s Orientalist fantasy of her, and in essence his perception of her sexuality is what allows her to embrace her new identity, so she is able to “rejuvenate” Bud by being the sexual, passionate and powerful woman she now sees herself as.

Jasmine has almost totally appropriated American culture, and in Baden country, the community desires to make her familiar and sees her as assimilated, thereby allowing Jasmine to adopt a completely new identity with ease. The “Jase” of New York has now receded so that Jane may advance: She whispers the name, Jase, Jase, Jase, as if she is calling someone she once knew. Jasmine’s racial identity also morphs in Baden, for her difference is recognized but not comprehended or openly acknowledged,
nor are attempts made to understand the species of this difference. Rather, the Baden community attempts to westernize Jasmine so it may see her as familiar instead of alien.

In Baden, the farmers are afraid to suggest I'm different. They've seen the aerograms I receive, the strange lettering I can decipher. To them, alien knowledge means intelligence. They want to make me familiar. In a pinch, they'll admit that I might look a little different, that I'm a "dark-haired girl" in a naturally blond county. I have a "darkish complexion" (in India, I'm "wheatish"), as though I might be Greek from one grandparent. I'm from a generic place, "over there", which might be Ireland, France or Italy. I'm not a Lutheran, which isn't to say I might not be Presbyterian [3].

For the first time, Jasmine's racial identity is not comprised by way of her difference, but rather her similarity to that which is familiar to "American" for the Baden community. Her friends and neighbours attempt to diminish Jasmine's differences by describing her as though she were European and essentially Whitehall traces of her Indian ancestry wiped away. "They tell me I have no accent, but I don't sound Iowan, either, I'm like those voices on the telephone, very clear and soothing.

Maybe Northern California, they say” [4]. Once again Jasmine’s racial identity is contingent upon her environment and its other inhabitants, and in Baden she is seen as white, but in no way South Asian or African-American or Caribbean as she was perceived at other points in her life. Jasmine’s new perception of her race is an essential aspect of her identity as “Jane”, for when Jasmine perceives herself as being assimilated, she in fact becomes the “typical American” that she has always wanted to be.

Yet in characteristic style, Jasmine cannot remain in this stable life in Baden, for she desires more adventure and disruption, and she thrives on the presence of change in her life. The end of the novel finds Jasmine moving to California with Taylor, uncertain of what the future will bring but nevertheless confident in her decision to leave. Jasmine’s desertion of Bud for Taylor at the end of the novel suggests that she will create yet another identity for her new environment, wherever that location may be. This sense of movement at the end of the novel further reinforces the notion that Jasmine’s identity is forever evolving in relation to her surroundings; while, we, as readers, can infer that another identity of some sort will be created, we do not know the specific nature of the next permutation of “Jane Ripplemeyer”. Mukherjee causes the reader to feel the same ambiguity.

towards identity that Jasmine does, thereby aptly conveying the sense of uncertainty that is the essence of diasporic identity formation.

If we examine Jasmine’s continuous renaming throughout the text, we find that this process is reminiscent of the Hindu conception of reincarnation, or rebirth. This similarity presents an interesting paradox, for the juxtaposition of the modern diasporic condition against an ancient and traditional Hindu concept parallels the existence of conflicting self-perceptions with which Jasmine grapples throughout the course of the text. It is important to remember that Jasmine does not ever rename herself, for it is always the significant figures in her life that choose her name. Yet it is interesting that in describing her various identities, Jasmine says that she had a husband for each of the women she has been, Prakash for Jasmine, Taylor for Jase, Bud for Jane, Half-Face for Kali. She phrases the development of these identities in a manner which suggests that she has chosen a husband for each self, rather than her husbands themselves influencing the creation of Jasmine’s selves, the tension that results from this contradiction is indicative of Jasmine’s constant battle with the situations throughout the novel.

With each new identity Jasmine believes that she is acquiring more agency in its development. When Prakash renames her Jasmine, she describes this new identity as purely his creation, with almost no agency on
her part, but with Half-Face. Jasmine begins to create a new self in response to her experiences, as expressed through her violent behavior that she later characterizes as a representation of the goddess Kali. When Jasmine becomes Jase with Taylor, she emphasizes her agency in the creation of this new self. Taylor didn’t want to change her. She herself changed because, she wanted to. Finally, when she is with Bud, Jasmine describes the creation of Jane as a product of her desire to change; Plain Jane is all she wants to be. In Baden she is Jane. Almost Jane appears to have gained agency throughout the course of her transformations; the word “almost” suggests that there still is (and always will be) an element of herself that she does not have the power to change, and perhaps never will. Jasmine will always be disrupted, for destruction is the manner in which she ultimately transforms and recreates herself. Thus, in this text, agency is not equated with the individual’s total power to transform herself, but rather it is the ability to develop an identity that is based upon the perceptions and desires of others as well as destruction of the existing aspects of one’s identity.

Jasmine’s life is a perpetual process of migration from one place to another, from one identity to the next. Jasmine lives her life in the “interstitial space” common to diasporic communities, a space characterized by continuous movement and ambiguity, in which nothing was rooted
anymore. Everything; was in motion. America becomes as migratory as Jasmine herself, for while she once idealized America as the paradigm of unity and cohesion, she soon finds that each new city presents her with another aspect of American life, just as each new location results in the creation of another identity for her. Neither America nor Jasmine can ever be singular or whole, for they exist multiply, with each state on the map representing the possibility of a new self, in contrast with the *Mistress of Species*, in which America was presented as a general diasporic backdrop against which Tilo measured her identity, Mukherjee is recognizing that the relationship between environment and the diasporic figure are parallel and at the same time inextricably linked.

As mentioned before, Jasmine’s surroundings are liminal - they are characterized by an ever-changing uncertainty just as Jasmine herself is. Jasmine articulates this sense of impermanence when she describes what she believes to be the diasporic experience:

> We are refugees and mercenaries and guest workers; you see us sleeping in airport lounges...taking out for the hundredth time an aerogram promising...a passport, a visa, a laissez passer.... We are the outcasts and deportees... landing at the end of tarmacs... roughly handled and taken to waiting rooms..
We are dressed in shreds of national costumes, out of season, the wilted plumage of intercontinental vagabondage. We ask only one thing: to be allowed to land; to pass through, to continue...For us, there is only a slate and someone who remembers to write in chalk, DELAYED, or TO BE ANNOUNCED, or OUT OF SERVICE... What country? What continent? We pass through wars, through plagues...The zigzag route is straightest [5].

The metaphors and language used in this passage are all allusions to travel, to the temporary nature of the diasporic experience. Life is never on time, but rather always on hold, “delayed”, or en route to where it is supposed to be. Airport lounges become familiar and almost home-like locations while passports represent the key to all possible opportunities and waiting rooms symbolic of the process of living. Upheaval, insecurity, and ambiguity are the adjectives of the liminal state as well as the adjectives that describe Jasmine’s ever-evolving identity. As she says,

“I am caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness... We’ve stowed away on boats... we’ve hurtled through time tunnels. We’ve seen the worst and survived, like creatures in fairy tales, we’ve shrunk and we’ve swollen and we’ve swallowed the cosmos whole” [6].

[5] Ibid., p.100-101
[6] Ibid., p.204
Such is the experience of Jasmine in America and the diasporic figure for Mukherjee it is a never-ending sea of voyages whose non-existent ends promise opportunities but rarely deliver, it is a life of constant change and transformation.

Although this particular portrayal of the diasporic experience may appear rather negative, there is a textual moment in which Mukherjee affirms the possibility of agency for the diasporic individual. When Jasmine says, “we’ve swallowed the cosmos whole”, there is a certain power in her statement, suggesting that the nature of the diasporic experience is not entirely negative, for the individual does in fact gain something positive from the experience itself. To swallow the cosmos in its entirety and survive is a feat, yet that is exactly what Jasmine does when she endures “the worst”, and is subjected to the whims of a fate that batters her until she has “shrunk” and “swollen” and faced all that is in between. Though diasporic individual may travel a rather difficult “Zigzag route”, this difficulty is precisely that which provides her with the strength to continue along the path toward a destination that is always within reach but rarely truly tangible.

Indeed, the interstitial space is what allows for Jasmine to create her new selves, for within this liminal position, identity is as malleable as location:
In America, nothing lasts. I can say that now and it doesn’t shock me, but I think it was the hardest lesson of all to learn...Nothing is forever, nothing is so terrible, or so wonderful, that it won’t disintegrate [7]. The interstitial space is fluid, uncertain and temporary, and must be since it is “in between” the stable poles of traditional temporal and spatial progressions. Jasmine exists within this liminal condition, and she describes the sensation as akin to being”.... suspended between worlds [8].

Identity within Jasmine is flexible, constantly evolving and completely unpredictable. A far greater portrayal of the diasporic experience than Divakaruni’s The Mistress of Species, this text presents the complexities of identity and perception in a less idealistic manner. When compared to Divakaruni’s The Mistress of Species, Bharati Mukherjee’s Jasmine presents more vivid diasporic experiences. It represents the complexities of identity and perceptions in a less idealistic way. While Tilo embraces the multiplicity of her self-perceptions and various identities, Jasmine chooses completely to recreate herself in the face of conflict, resulting in multiple selves that do not exist simultaneously as they did for

[7] Ibid., p.181
[8] Ibid., p.76
Tilo, but instead interact with one another at different junctures in the text, with a constant progression to the next identity. Throughout her life, Jasmine has created many selves, and she is aware of the fact that she now has the power to continue to create even more identities. She wonders, “How many more shapes are in me, how many more selves, how many more husbands” [9] when Jasmine leaves Baden at the end of the novel, she embraces an uncertain future that parallels her identity. While Jasmine has, for the moment, ceased to be Jane Ripplemeyer, the reader does not know who she was or who she will become next.

“I realize I have already stopped thinking of myself as Jane. Adventure, risk, transformation; the frontier is pushing indoors through uncaulked windows.

Watch me reposition the stars....Time will tell if I am a tornado, rubble-maker, arising from nowhere and disappearing into a cloud. I am out the door and in the potholed and rutted driveway, scrambling ahead of Taylor, greedy with wants and reckless from hope” [10].

[9] Ibid., p.215
[10] Ibid., p.241
Jasmine believes that she possess the power to reposition the stars, to change her fate and consciousness as she chooses to, yet as we have seen throughout the text, this power is but an illusion, for Jasmine needs disruption and destruction of her agency in order to develop her various identities. Mukherjee’s romantic ending to what is a gritty portrayal of the diasporic experience suggests that we as readers must be more critical of the notion of agency and remember that in this text, identity is created and recreated by one’s surroundings, and not solely by one’s will. As Frantz Fanon describes it, “If I were asked for a definition of myself, I would say that I am one who waits; I investigate my surroundings, I interpret everything in terms of what I discover...[11]. Like Fanon, Jasmine possesses an evolving identity that is unpredictable and filled with possibilities, forever growing and changing with her every new environment and each passing moment.

Bharati Mukherjee is an Indian-born-American writer who has so far published three novels, two collections of short stories, some very hard-hitting essays, and two non-fiction books (both co-authored with her husband Clark Blaise). She has insisted on being read not as an Indian or

expatriate writer, but as an immigrant writer who’s literary agenda is to claim that America is being improved by new comers from the third world. She refuses to be marginalized as a writer of alien material, for she insists that her themes are central, not marginal, to the contemporary American society. Though her novel, *Jasmine*, supports her claim, demonstrating her evolving belief that “expatriation (is) the greatest temptation, even the enemy of the excolonial ones Third World author.” [12]

Her early work, like the novel *The Tiger’s Daughter* (1971) caused critics to locate her fiction under that elastic heading “Indian Writing in English”. It is a label that Mukherjee herself has never embraced - an identity which she appears to see as confining rather than defining, a means of marginalizing a group of writers, of confirming them as other, and thus making them mute.

Like V.S. Naipaul and Ruth Prawer Jhabvala & many writers, Bharati Mukherjee focuses in all her fiction, on the theme of alienation, and an exploration of the place inhabited by outsiders, by those who are considered Other-notably (Indian) immigrants or expatriates. More specifically, Mukherjee depicts all her outsiders as female, in a deliberate effort to focus

on the particular condition of female alienation in contemporary society, on the male/female dichotomy and the continuing colonization of female identity in contemporary patriarchal societies. Indeed the title of each of her three novels to date draws our attention to the gender of her protagonists. Moreover, the titles of her first two novels -The Tiger’s Daughter and Wife (1975) - also emphasize the colonized condition of her female protagonists who are defined by their position within a patriarchal system. Tara Banerjee is a daughter: Dimple is a wife, given in the titles of these novels, then, Mukherjee makes visible the restrictions imposed on her invisible protagonists. In Jasmine (1991), her third and most accomplished novel, there is a marked shift, a refusal to recognize those restrictions, a refusal to accept invisibility. Here the title of the novel identifies the protagonist, Jasmine, by name rather than by her relationship to a husband or a father, which in context suggests resistance to the imperial shackles. There is another progression that can be traced through these novels, too. While Tara Banerjee seems very much an ‘avatar’ (incarnation) of the author herself and Dimple Dasgupta seems to be a more general representative of Indian womanhood, Jasmine is depicted as a representative of all womanhood.

Mukherjee uses, as in The Tiger’s Daughter and Wife, Jasmine, the metaphor of a journey, through three continents, to emphasize the distance.
Jasmine, as extension of all womankind, has to travel in search of her true self and freedom from the confines of a dominant patriarchal culture. In Jasmine Mukherjee’s interest is the crisis of identity. While incorporating national and cultural identity, she focuses primarily on gender issues, on the position of women as other, alienated by the system of patriarchy from power structures and the right to self-determination. It is this aspect of the novel which can be considered for further discussion. A new approach is essential to study Jasmine as a female bildungsroman, as a novel which specifically traces the development of a female protagonist from childhood through various experiences and crises, into maturity and, more importantly, her self-identity and placement in the world. And this is not simply an imposition of western values on Mukherjee’s text; rather it is a recognition that Mukherjee is using and subverting a western genre which, for a woman educated in a Calcutta convent school and the United States, is inherently hers too.

Jasmine believes “there are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake one self. We murder who we were so we can reborn ourselves in the images of dreams” [13] and also the novel speaks of the exile. It belongs to the tradition of the literature of Immigration to America. It is a traveler’s

narrative and the movement is upward and onward. If life is seen as a
journey in Indian mysticism, Mukherjee uses the structural device to create
yet another story about the immigrants arrival in America. For Jasmine,
there is no going back: the only home is the one she creates for herself. She
stands on a uniquely constructed bridge connecting the painful past with an
optimistic vision of the future. Wandering between two worlds, she realizes
the American Dream with all its dangers as well as its possibilities.

The structure of the novel is rather entangled with regard to its use of
time and place. The story begins with Jasmine's past in Hasnapur, India and
jumps into the future. Between these periods, she moves to the present,
returns to the past in Hasnapur, then goes to the past in Europe and Florida,
back to the past in New York, and then, returns to the present again.
Geographically, it starts in India and moves through Europe to
America-where it also jumps back and forth from Florida through New York
to Iowa then finally moves toward California. Mukherjee intentionally
makes her heroine repeatedly leap around in time and space so as to
introduce a sense of instability into the novel. It could be said that *Jasmine*
is
no more than the narrative of Jasmine herself without any dimension.

Having lived through hideous times, Jasmine, in her journey of
survival, has accomplished the rare mission of transcending the boundaries
of a unitary self and identifying with all the nameless victims of gender, culture, class and imperialism. The narrative ends on a note of optimism where Jasmine is pregnant, and about to “re-position her stars” again, is ready to plunge into another life and another journey of transformation. The novelist proves herself a material positivist; where she creates such a character that loves life.