Chapter I

Rewriting Paradigms of Immigrant Identity: Bharati Mukherjee’s

*Jasmine and Desirable Daughters*

Bharati Mukherjee is an established voice of the Indian diaspora in North America. She has a prolific critical and creative career that has spanned over thirty years. Mukherjee has engaged in redefining the idea of diaspora as a process of gain. This is contrary to the conventional perspectives that construe immigration and displacement as a condition of terminal loss and dispossession, involving the erasure of history and the dissolution of an "original" culture.

Mukherjee has chosen to describe herself “... as an American writer in the tradition of other American writers ...” (*Darkness*, Intro, xv). She has revealed through various forums that it is the cultural narrative of America that has provided the enabling site for her identity transformations that she celebrates in her fictions. Mukherjee thinks of America “as a place of constant change.” She observes: “... change is the norm here. We expect change. Every other country I’ve lived in values fixity, and regrets change” (Edwards 163). The desire for change endemic in American culture, corresponds with the “third space” and “in betweenness” associated with diaspora.

In 1989 Mukherjee expanded on “Jasmine,” a short story in *The Middleman* into a novel. It is about an exuberant Trinidadian girl who becomes an illegal immigrant to America. The resilient and adventurous heroine of this short story fascinated Mukherjee so much that she continued to think about Jasmine until the Trinidadian teenager became “a deeper more complicated character” in her consciousness (Connell 1990 Interview 19). She further developed the story’s plot to make it a more absorbing fiction about inventing and re-inventing a self through immigration in America. She complicates the character of Jasmine and her situation by transplanting her from the limited but relatively fluid world of Trinidad to “a society that was so repressive, traditional, so caste-bound, genderist, that she could discard it” more easily(1990 Interview 19). Mukherjee replaced the omniscient narrator of the short story with the first person narrative of the heroine in the novel. This also signifies an important shift in the authorial attitude. Fakrul Alam has pointed out that the character of Jasmine has been fashioned to show Mukherjee’s belief in the “necessity of inventing and re-inventing one’s self by going beyond what is given and by transcending one’s origins” (109). This statement affirms Mukherjee’s project of “becoming” *American* by unlearning and relearning cultural tropes and transgressing socio-cultural norms.

The novel *Jasmine* begins with a 24- year-old pregnant Jane Ripplemeyer facing a dilemma. She cannot decide whether to marry a middle-aged crippled bank manager, Bud Ripplemeyer. She indulges in reminiscing her life from India to America, from childhood to adulthood.
The novel consists of her memory of the past as well as the present. It is a continuous process of how she constructs an identity, then deconstructs it in order to build a new one. This pattern is carefully enacted in the novel. Rather than a chronological narration of the heroine’s personal history, the novel superimposes her experiences of different times and in different places. She collapses her memories in India into her life in America and showcases various identities she adopted. Such an incessant transformation of self/identity is made possible in the interstices between the intersecting times and spaces.

In narrating her past, Jane Ripplemeyer goes back from an agricultural community, Baden, in Iowa to her childhood as an Indian peasant girl Jyoti. She travels in her memory back to her birth place in a poor village, Hasnapur, in Punjab, in the north-west of India. Mukherjee foregrounds Jasmine’s new life in Iowa as the novel’s central plot, weaving in the stories of her upbringing, brief marriage, and migration to America. The flashbacks of the narrative determine how one comes to understand “Jane,” Iowa’s version of the girl from Hasnapur.

The novel depicts Jyoti Vigh growing up in a semi-feudal, rural, and patriarchal society, set against the violent historical backdrop of post-independence, post-partition India: her family comes to settle in their village after the events of 1947 that make them outsiders in their ancestral city of Lahore. Jasmine’s family suffers an acute sense of loss and displacement that defines the post-partition, postcolonial condition. They were uprooted from their comfortable, upper-middle class lifestyle in Lahore. They had previously owned land and shops in Lahore, lived in a sprawling home, and were respected for their family name. Now they are forced into “a village of flaky mud huts.” Jasmine narrates how this loss of home, homeland, and status plagues her family:

Mataji, my mother, couldn’t forget the Partition Riots. Muslims sacked our house. Neighbors’ servants tugged off earrings and bangles, defiled grottoes, sabered my grandfather’s horse. Life shouldn’t have turned out that way! I’ve never been to Lahore, but the loss survives in the instant replay of my family story: forever Lahore smokes, forever my parents flee. (41)

Jasmine’s parents are forced into an exile, that her father in particular never comes to accept. It makes her mother distrustful and pessimistic. Jasmine describes her father’s perpetual attachment to Lahore in the kurta he continued to wear, Pakistani radio broadcasts he listened to, and his disgust for anything not related to Lahore – including the mangoes, women, music, and Punjabi dialect of the Indian side of the partition (42). Haunted by his imagined, suspended-in-time Lahore, Jasmine’s father clearly exhibits the symptoms of exile-as-trauma.

In an article in the New York Times Book Review, Mukherjee observes about exiled writers: “By refusing to play the game of immigration, they certify to the world, and especially to their hosts, the purity of their pain and their moral superiority to the world around them. In some obscure way, they
earn the right to be permanent scolds” (“Immigrant Writing” 29). She underlines the traumatic experience of migration. Mukherjee continues: “Lacking a country, avoiding all the messiness of rebirth as an immigrant, eventually harms even the finest sensibility” (29). In a similar vein Cathy Caruth also observes: “. . . the [traumatic]