CHAPTER III

THE IMMIGRANT CONSCIOUSNESS IN JASMINE

For me experience must be forgotten, or else it will kill.

Jasmine 33

Bharati Mukherjee insists on being read not as an Indian, or an expatriate writer, but as an immigrant writer, whose literary agenda is to claim the America that is being improvised by newcomers from the Third World. In her essay "Immigrant Writing," Mukherjee poses a challenging question:

All around me I see the face of America changing .... But where in fiction, do you read of it? Who, in other words, speaks for us, the new Americans from non traditional immigrant countries? ¹

Mukherjee's self-definition underlies her refusal to be marginalized as a writer of alien material, and her insistence that her themes are central - not marginal - to contemporary American society. "I'm writing about the here and now of America," she claims. Her novel Jasmine published in 1989 after Mukherjee moved to the United States in 1980, supports this claim. If expatriation is the great temptation and enemy of the "once-third-world author,"² the preferred state of immigration or assimilation as it is described in Jasmine requires nothing less than the extinction of the "once-
third-world" self. For the immigrant there are only two possibilities in Jasmine, either the ghetto where ethnic identity is tightly secured by a minimal interaction with the outer alien world - an option which has its obvious shortcomings as seen in the novel Wife - or assimilation into the dominant white culture, requiring nothing less than the radical rupture with the past.

While Tara and Dimple, the protagonists of The Tiger's Daughter and Wife become isolated, rootless aliens because of their ambivalent attitude to their native tradition as well as to the culture of the new world, Jasmine enjoys the assimilated status of immigration by a sheer will to bond herself to her adopted land. Caught in the dialectic between the Third World and the First, between the past and the present, Jasmine does not attempt a resolution by a complex synthesis; she simply dissolves the claims of the past. The motto of the novel is clear:

There are no harmless, compassionate ways to make oneself.

We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams.³

Jasmine, the fascinating heroine of Mukherjee's third novel, stands as an example of the "fusion" the novelist claims is occurring now:
Immigration was a two-way process and both the whites and immigrants were growing into a third thing by this interchange and experience.4

When Bharati Mukherjee sets out her critical agenda in the introduction to Darkness, she describes her stories as ones of "broken identities" and "discarded languages," but nevertheless these identities are fired by a passion and a "will to bond (themselves) to a new community." Tracing a development through Mukherjee's fiction, from her early novel The Tiger's Daughter to Jasmine, one finds that this community is, ever increasingly, a celebration of what the author obviously considers the spirit of America, a spirit that defies homesickness and nostalgia in order that one may savour the "exuberance of immigration."5 The immigrant gets to enjoy her transformation from a nervous resident (or illegal) alien into a full-blown American and is able to justify her choice of homeland by fitting into the New World with aplomb. The identity that Jasmine eventually emerges with exemplifies the characteristics of a whole new breed in United States the "ethnic" who is also "American." The process of finding this identity of course is a matter of intense struggle - with the self, with tradition, with the wonders and horrors of a new culture, with growing aspirations, hopes, and desires. As Bharati Mukherjee has pointed out about her immigrant characters, "Although they are often hurt or depressed by setbacks in their new lives and occupations, they do not give up."6
The immigrant experience, Mukherjee firmly believes, may be analogized as a series of reincarnations, deaths of early existences followed by rebirths full of promise. As stated in the introduction to Darkness this is borne out more consistently "as a set of fluid identities to be celebrated."

Despite the epigraph from James Gleick's Chaos, Jasmine is very orderly; what is being ordered is a new identity. The novel is inscribed in what Adrienne Rich has called "the old American pattern, the pattern of the frontier, the escape from the old identity, the old debts, the old wife, to the new name, to the 'new life.'" The reader is led from one consciousness to another as the illegal immigrant woman from the farmland of Punjab, blazes a trail of identities (Jyoti-Jasmine-Jase-Jane) on her way to the frontier of California, "greedy with wants and reckless from hope." Mukherjee states in an interview:

The village girl Jyoti becomes Jasmine, then turns to Jase, also into Jane. She is a pioneer in the true sense. I am going to make mistakes. I am going to try out many new identities.

The protagonist's chameleon identities match her changing locales: Hasnapur, Jullundhar, Florida, Queens, Manhattan, Iowa. The concept of transformation itself changes to reincarnation as one moves from Tara to Dimple to Jasmine; it seems as if Mukherjee concludes that a gradual and gentle transformation is not spirited enough for the sweeping adaptations that are required of the immigrant who wishes to belong to the world she
has chosen to be in. Mukherjee explains her perception of violently changing identities by calling upon the Hindu belief in reincarnation, and the existence of alternate realities.¹⁰

This accounts for the protagonist's speedy and spectacular progression from Jyoti to Jane, from the farmland of Punjab to the other farmland in Iowa, which is the core of the novel. Mukherjee endorses what Adrienne Rich calls the "two powerful pressures in present-day American culture: one is the imperative to assimilate; the other, the idea that one can be socially 'twice-born.'"¹¹ *Jasmine* seems vibrant with Bharati Mukherjee's reverence for the autonomy of the individual.

Mukherjee lived in Canada from 1966 to 1980 as an "unforgiving queen of bitterness,"¹² since there was no welcome for her in the land of adoption. Ultimately she risked everything - a stable career as a full professor, material and marital stability - to immigrate to the United States, where she found her voice again. Diasporal dream figures prominently in all her fiction, but its treatment after settling in America seems to be more assured and more comprehensive in its coverage of the many moods of expatriation - nostalgia, frustration, and hope than in the Canadian phase of her life where uncertainty and despondency prevailed. Mukherjee, "the clear eyed but affectionate immigrant in American society," who pays a glowing tribute to America as a country where "there is a kind of curiosity and exuberance"¹³ offers a glaring contrast in her pained outburst:
In Canada I was frequently taken for a... shoplifter, frequently assumed to be a domestic and praised by astonished auditors that I did not have a singsong accent.¹⁴

The year 1984 is a turning point in Mukherjee's sensibility and style. She is freed of the debility of expatriate nostalgia by the astringencies of life in the New World. This does not in any way mean that the novel Jasmine is autobiographical. Mukherjee herself has typified her social determinations as bourgeois. In "Immigrant Writing" she alludes to her "Brahminical elegance" as constituted by "top family, top school, top caste, top city."¹⁵ Consequently, her own background in real life is worlds apart from that of her poverty-ridden heroine Jasmine, living in a shabby dwelling devoid of minimum amenities like water and electricity. The similarity therefore is, to use Bharati Mukherjee's words, in "the shape of her life" and her "desires."¹⁶

By this time - 1984 - Mukherjee also records in the introduction to Darkness that she is no longer the aloof expatriate writer using "a mordant self protective irony." As one of the post-colonial writers, she steers clear of Naipaul's love-hate relationship to his roots, Kureshi's impassioned decrying of racism and Cowasjee's defeatistic acceptance of a 'nowhere man' status. Mukherjee's acknowledgement of her indebtedness to Bernard Malamud at this stage has already been referred to and is of great significance in her evolution from an expatriate to an immigrant writer.
Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* carries the same title as one of the best stories in *The Middleman and Other Stories*. The earlier "Jasmine" told of an Indian girl from Trinidad who came to Detroit by way of Canada crossing the border at Windsor in the back of a grey van loaded with mattresses and box springs. Jasmine works first in an Indian owned motel, then as an au pair. By the end of the story she has learnt to see herself, as she makes love to the man whose child she takes care of, as "a bright pretty girl with no visa, no papers, and no birth certificate. No nothing other than what she wanted to invent and tell ... a girl rushing wildly in the future," an American with an American's freedom to shape her own destiny. Mukherjee confesses that the character would not die:

I am intrigued by that particular kind of survival. I didn't know when I finished the story that it would become a novel. It was just that this was a character that I fell in love with ... she became a deeper, more complicated character in my head, over the months, so I had to give her a society that was so repressive, traditional, so castebound, genderist, that she could discard it in ways that a fluid American society could not.

For the rich novel that has grown from that story, Mukherjee has shifted the narrative into the first person and placed her heroine's origins in the Punjab rather than Trinidad, where the added weight of tradition makes the character's love affair with the possibilities of America all the more
exhilarating. The novel projects Punjabi society and contemporary Indian history as perfect sites for potential Third World emigration.

A wholly apt epigraph from James Gleick’s Chaos inducts the reader into the world of Jasmine:

The new geometry mirrors a universe that is rough, not rounded, scabrous, not smooth. It is a geometry of the pitted, pocked, and broken up, the twisted, tangled, and intertwined.

That Jasmine is set down for a violent transformation is evident in the first words of the novel, which describe a scene of foretelling:

Lifetime ago, under a banyan tree in the village of Hasnapur, an astrologer cupped his ears - his satellite dish to the stars - and foretold my widowhood and exile. I was only seven then, fast and venturesome, scabrous-armed from leaves and thorns.

"No!" I shouted. "You're a crazy old man. You don't know what my future holds!"

Which one of them is right? Jasmine’s description of herself as "scabrous-armed" echoes the words of the book’s epigraph. By contrast, her sisters, whose arms are "butter smooth" (J 4) are unprepared to undergo the
processes of radical change. When she mockingly rejects the astrologer's prediction, the astrologer chucks her hard on the head, and she falls. Her forehead is marked with a star-shaped scar, which her sisters see only as a liability. Jasmine, however, shouts defiantly that it is her "third eye," (J 5) that enables her like sages to see the invisible. Mukherjee uses an archetypal image (Shiva's Third Eye) which gives her protagonist a wide and true perspective of life; she learns to look back to the past "without bunkering herself inside nostalgia." (J 185) For her, even memories become a sign of disloyalty. She learns to look into the future with pain and hope and when she embarks on her journey to America she is full of expectations and has a goal in sight. It is as if like Shiva she has swallowed the cosmos whole. As she puts it so emphatically at the end of the novel:

Du and I have seen death up close. We've stowed away on boats like Half-Face's, 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. (J 240)

The scar portends her endless transformation, "It glows, a spotlight trained on lives to come." (J 21) It becomes a symbol of her arrogant refusal to be sealed by her fate.

Born as "Jyoti" her name reflects the ironic refusal of the dark world she inhabits, a world without hope or salvation. Daughter of a man who is
driven from his affluent house in Lahore to a life of ignominious poverty in the remote Punjab village Hasnapur during the partition riots, Jasmine has early acquaintance with the heart-wrenching agony of people uprooted from their homesteads. The fifth daughter and seventh of nine children in the family, Jyoti is a survivor. This quality, perhaps more than any of the other traits associated with her, remains constant. Having survived her mother's attempt at female infanticide, as well as her sniping she is constantly made aware of her misfortune as a dowryless daughter. She excels in her studies. Her desire to learn English is dimly perceived by everyone as her "wanting the world." (J 68) The only forms of freedom she enjoys in this world are when she steps out into the fields for her early morning ablutions and when she amuses herself by reading the books given to her by her English language teacher. However, as "light" Jyoti transgresses the world of fate, darkness, and death. She is a singular character, superior to the other peasant women who cannot fend for themselves. In a village scene the village women are caught as their morning toilet ritual in the fields is interrupted by the arrival of a mad dog; interestingly, while adult women, hardy peasants "crouch" or "crab crawl" (J 48-49) Jyoti dramatically fights the dog and rescues the other from danger. Being a survivor and a fighter, she is less like the Indian women who "fell into wells," and "got run over by trains." (J 36) From the very beginning she is delineated as a rebel against blind beliefs and superstitions. An image that Bharati Mukherjee associates with her rebellious spirit is the carcass of a small dog that she encounters as a child. The protagonist does not want to become broken in body and spirit like the dog:
Suddenly my fingers scraped the soft waterlogged carcass of a small dog. The body was rotten, the eyes had been eaten. The moment I touched it, the body broke in two, as though the water had been its glue. A stench leaked out of the broken body, and then both pieces quickly sank.

That stench stays with me. I’m twenty-four now, I live in Baden, Elsa County, Iowa, but every time I lift a glass of water to my lips, fleetingly I smell it. I know what I don’t want to become. (J 5)

Bharati Mukherjee also shows Jyoti repudiating centuries-old ugly Indian tradition of marrying after checking the boy’s horoscope. After the death of her husband, Prakash, her grandmother upbraids her and says:

If you had waited for a man I picked up none of this would have happened. I am told you called him by his proper name. It is very clear. You were in the saree shop to buy something you could not afford to celebrate a separation from your husband and his desertion of India to make money abroad. God was displeased. God sent that Sardarji boy to do that terrible thing.

Jasmine blazes forth, "Dida, ... if God sent Sukkhi to kill my husband then I renounce God. I spit on God." (J 98)
She demonstrates her strong will by fending off a matchmaker and her parents' attempts to marry her off to a Ludhiana widower. Free to marry whom she pleases, she is attracted intellectually to Prakash before she even meets him and elopes with this gentle, kind, intelligent young man committed to modern ways. It is Prakash who effects her transformation from Jyoti to Jasmine. He tries to redeem her from her fatalist complacency. Prakash Vijh, Jyoti / Jasmine's Professor Higgins is her prime mover, encouraging her to recognize herself as a victim of a "feudal power structure," so as to emancipate herself from it. Thus, the first nodal point of change is Jullundhar, Punjab, where Prakash, Jyoti's husband, turns her away from the feudalism of her village, Hasnapur, and sets her on the emancipating path of self-assertion and self-reliance, America's self-proclaimed virtues. In the traditionally feudalistic Punjab, in an environment of fatalism, casteism, and classism, the power of speech is usurped by the dominant male figures. In the family-centered society, these figures are the father, the brothers, and eventually the husband. Jasmine is trained by Prakash to fight, to argue if she does not agree with him - to want for herself, a lesson she learns when she later empowers her voice with speech. Prakash insists that she is too young at the age of fifteen to become pregnant and so turns her away from the traditional role of the good Hindu wife content with babies and housekeeping. Jasmine demonstrates her initiative by running a Ladies Group Raffle in their building and selling detergent for a commission. In order to defy fate and to escape mediocrity Prakash himself dreams of escaping to America to study at an American University and be a private entrepreneur. Though
Prakash is killed in a terrorist attack before he can take off for the engineering school in Florida. Jasmine, infected by her husband's dreams, resolves to carry on his legacy.

Thus, in the portrayal of her immigrant heroine, Mukherjee reinforces images of the Third World Woman who is constrained by her gender and by the 'backward' culture and economy of the Third World. It is a world peopled by warring, superstitious women, by fortune tellers, by victims of social injustice and religious factionalism, by a nostalgia-ridden father who still dreams of returning to Lahore, by aspiring young men who waste their lives learning to be trained technicians, by a young groom who instills in his young bride the dream of emigrating to America. The endless repertoire highlights Jasmine's difference so that she can be constructed as the perfect agent of immigration. The lonely widow who seeks liberty and loves English fails to realize her desires in her own society - she has no other option but to emigrate.

Jyoti-Jasmine spends all her husband's savings on a fake visa to America. Oddly enough, her goal is to commit 'sati' on the campus of her husband's would-be school; in her suitcase is her husband's brand new suit and a white sari of the traditional widow, both of which she intends to burn along with herself. Her plan of committing 'sati' is a gesture of protest, a despairing girl's desperate bid to do something to express her anger at fate's cruel thwarting of her husband's diasporal dreams. If it is just giving up on life, she could have committed suicide in Hasnapur itself. The daring of the
young rustic girl in undertaking this hazardous trip abroad is a measure of her innate affinity to the American ideal of fearless enterprise. As stated by Davidar, "Some people were meant to be American even if they never leave their village in Punjab. At heart they are American. It is a desire for more, more, more." She travels in an anonymous airlines and then travels from Europe in a cargo boat that carries other immigrants to the United States.

With Jasmine’s odyssey into self-exile and illegal entry into the Florida backwater, begins a tale that is fraught with struggle, violence, wonder, despair, survival, and transformation. The dismal view of the Florida swamps that she gets on her first entry into America, "Eden’s waste: plastic bottles, floating oranges, boards, sodden boxes, white and green plastic sacks tied shut but picked open by birds and pulled apart by crabs," (J 107) seems to be an appropriate backdrop to the horrible fate awaiting her. Jasmine’s strong will, her ability to survive the worst, and her initiative, prepare her for her encounter with the deformed captain Half-Face, a war veteran, in whose ship she is smuggled into America, and who rapes her after her arrival in Florida as an illegal immigrant. Half-Face treats Jasmine merely as a sex object and has only generic names for her, "honey," "baby," "prime little piece." The incident witnesses Jasmine’s silent power to transform her self-image as Lakshmi, goddess of domestic bliss, to Kali, the war goddess. Outraged by the violation of her person, she assumes attributes of Kali, becoming "death incarnate," (J 119) by slicing her tongue and murdering her rapist.
Hitherto a victim of violence, Jasmine now becomes an agent of violence. Violence is the other face of power. Jasmine kills in order to live. In violent destruction may lie the seeds of creation and Jasmine's recourse to violence on the threshold of the New World is also a life affirming transformation:

For the first time, in my life, I understood what evil was about. It was about not being human .... It was a very simple, very clear perception, a moment of truth, the kind of understanding that I have heard comes at the moment of death. (J 116)

Jasmine is thus released from her traditional identity as a de-sexed widow soon after she arrives in America, because in being raped by Half Face, murdering him, and walking out of the motel in full possession of herself, she has already transgressed all the norms she would have been expected to live by in her native village. Brinda Bose observes:

In Mukherjee's fiction, a woman's sexual freedom often functions as a measure of her increasing detachment from traditional sexual mores and, correspondingly of her assimilation in the New World through her rapid Westernization/Americanization.20

America saves Jasmine from Yama: "I thought, The Pitcher is broken. Lord Yama, who had wanted me, who had courted me, and whom I'd flirted with
on the long trip over, had now deserted me." (J 120) By laughing at Jasmine's mission of death and rendering it impure, the American rapist in Florida liberates her from tradition. Though Jasmine comes to America with the crazy notion of erecting a funeral pyre for her dead husband's clothes on his intended University Campus and burning herself on it, the notion of sanctioned suicide - 'sati' - is rejected. Instead of burning herself, she throws her suitcase into a trash can and sets it on fire behind the motel. Thus, it follows that when a self-immolating Third World woman is an immigrant to America, she has nothing to preserve of her identity, which is symbolic of and synonymous with oppression. Both the ethnicity and the womanhood that she identified with are now discarded so that Jasmine may now see herself within the circle of a new "American" woman.

Jasmine's reincarnation as an avenging Kali thus becomes a bid to find a foothold in the American way of life. Both Dimple and Jasmine are gradually led into the notion that if circumstances require that they do more than merely escape, they must do so to save themselves. For both, murder becomes an acceptable signifier for discarding nostalgia and starting over; it is neither the end nor even merely the means to an end; it is a beginning. However, unlike Dimple Dasgupta in Wife who loses sight of reality as she sinks into the world of television and kills her husband as he complacently eats a bowl of cereal, Jasmine has a goal in sight. It is a goal born out of despair, anger, and frustration at the violence of traditional
customs as well as progressive, modern societies. The novel's cover jacket praise by the Baltimore Sun for the Ballantine edition of *Jasmine* is not surprising: "POIGNANT....The story of the transformation of an Indian village girl, whose grandmother wants to marry her off at 11, into an American woman who finally thinks for herself!"

Once the home country has been relegated to the recesses of rejected memory, and the new life is looked forward to with hope, the process of defining a new identity can begin. Henceforth, Jasmine can define her own desires, unhampered by conventional duty or morality. Further, if a progressive immigrant's identity is a matter of shedding Old World baggage and clothing, *Jasmine* begins her first morning in America by travelling light, "With the first streaks of dawn, my first full American day, I walked out the front drive of the motel to the highway and began my journey, traveling light." (J 121) She is now one on whom the names of Jase and Jane can be inscribed.

It is Lillian Gordon, a kind Quaker lady who rescues Jasmine from a dirt trail about three miles east of Fowlers Key, Florida. Viewing the world's misery as a challenge to her ingenuity, Mrs.Gordon's home is a place of refuge for outcastes and illegal aliens. It is here that Jasmine recovers, in stages, her self. Initially, as an illegal, postcolonial immigrant, she must by choice become voiceless, invisible, and indistinguishable,
adapting an American way of talking and walking. Lillian Gordon teaches Jasmine to walk and dress like an American, and also gives her an American nickname "Jazzy." Donning a T-Shirt, light cords, and running shoes, Jasmine abandons her village sidle, as well as her modesty. She is eased into a new insight into life by Lillian Gordon's most practical and humanist approach that makes life possible for everyone:

She (Lillian Gordon) had a low tolerance for reminiscence, bitterness or nostalgia. Let the past make you wary, by all means. But do not let it deform you. (J 131)

A valuable lesson that enables Jasmine to recover mentally and physically. Jasmine appears to be happy to wipe out most of her history, except for occasional memories of her slain husband Prakash. She has no sentimental longing to return to her homeland; she has the spirit of the true immigrant.

Lillian Gordon sends Jasmine to Queens, New York, where Jasmine contacts an Indian professor, Mr. Vadhera, who was well disposed to her husband Prakash. The Vadhera family in Flushing provide her a home, no questions asked. Jasmine's American clothes along with her new name "Jazzy," must be set aside when Jasmine moves in with the Vadheras who expect her - a widow - to dress and behave modestly. Mukherjee gives no name at all to Jasmine during her stay in the immigrant Indian
community. Instead, the novelist uses phrases that critically sum up the Flushing ghetto in which Jasmine finds herself - "fortress of Punjabiness," (J 148) and an "apartment of artificially maintained Indianness." (J 145)

The Vadheras live in their own insulated world. Devinder, now "DAVE" Vadhera, never faces the reality of his failure to prosper in America; he hides behind his pretence-title "professorji." He is frozen in a lie intended to cover up his humiliating and ghoulish job as a sorter of human hair in the basement of a cheap hotel - hair that could well come from Jasmine's own village. His plight invites no outrage from the ironic and composed Jasmine. Certainly, there is little sympathy, little solidarity on the basis of their shared predicament as immigrants.

Nirmala Vadhera, the young wife, is caught between two lives, one in America and the other endlessly rehearsed on videotapes of Hindi films she watches - she dreams of both, having neither. Mrs.Vadhera's insatiable appetite for Hindi films is a pointer to the network of video outlets available in the United States for Indians who prefer to isolate themselves from the English speaking people of the dominant culture. The immigrant culture itself is split between the educated younger generation working in the United States and their older parents who complain of non-traditional authority patterns. In India, where the groom's mother is a virtual "tyrant"
in the house, each woman in turn waits patiently for her opportunity to rule over her daughters-in-law. Food is viewed by the old folks, Vadhera's parents, as a deserved compensation for what America has deprived them of - traditional authority patterns, and the grandparents' right to play with their grandchildren. Nirmala fails to get pregnant. Branded as a widow, Jasmine is but a "servant" who cooks and accompanies the elders. She has to entertain elderly Indian visitors with tea and an assortment of snacks, "Sundays were our days to eat too much and give in to nostalgia...."(J 146) The Vadheras hide from facing their new immigrant identity behind such superficial symbols of "Indian" culture. In this stultifying atmosphere, where "Flushing was a neighborhood in Jullundhar,"(J 148) Jasmine finds herself gaining weight and sinking into depression:

In Flushing I felt immured. An imaginary brick wall topped with barbed wire cut me off from the past and kept me from breaking into the future. I was a prisoner doing unreal time.  
(J 148)

From her perspective, the Vadheras are cast in a one-dimensional world of nostalgia and inertia. In marked contrast, Jasmine declines the opportunity to maintain a continuity with her past:

I changed because I wanted to. To bunker oneself inside nostalgia, to sheathe the heart in a bulletproof vest, was to be a coward.  
(J 185)
She concludes from observing the Vadhera family's total immersion in preserving the old ways of an Indian lifestyle that they are afraid to lose their grip on anything because of fear that they may lose everything.

Jasmine explains her own inability to identify with the Vadheras. Had she been "a different person with a different set of experiences," her stay with them "would be life-affirming, invaluable, inexpressibly touching." (J 162) Prakash's struggle to make something more of his life than fate intended and her own ardent desires - "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" (J 85) - is too deeply etched in Jasmine's mind to allow her to get engulfed by insularity. As she decidedly states, "In this apartment of artificially maintained Indianness, I wanted to distance myself from everything Indian, everything Jyotí-like." (J 145)

Faced with the option of total silence within the regimental and studied maintenance of superficial rituals and cultural adherence in the Vadhera's household, Jasmine chooses independence and self-reliance. In Mukherjee's novel Wife, the protagonist Dimple too becomes a prisoner of the ghetto in Flushing, Queens, and being an educated and thinking woman, she is unable to accept this existence. Jasmine finds New York to be an "archipelago of ghettos seething with aliens," (J 140) but unlike Dimple she does not sink into depression, madness, and murder. Unlike the
Vadheras "who had retired behind the ghetto walls" (J 145) she cannot bear the incongruity of being a housebound young widow in a city and culture where possibilities are supposed to be endless, and longs to explore the new land which she has by now equated with "real life." (J 143) Having learned to "walk and talk" American, she grabs every opportunity to become American and to prove to the world what "a girl from swampy backwater could accomplish." (J 160) Individual desire propels her away from the confining roles of gender in the immigrant ghetto. "Can wanting be fatal?" (J 126) is her appeal to the reader. Sucheta Mazumdar notes:

For immigrant women arrival in America can be liberating.
Societal norms of the majority community frequently provides greater personal freedom than permitted in Asian Societies.21

Change and adaptability then are the key to survival. Unlike her predecessors Tara Banerjee of The Tiger's Daughter and Dimple Dasgupta, the protagonist of Wife, Jasmine - the successful immigrant - has the instinct.

Having learnt the invaluable lesson, "Nothing was rooted anymore. Everything was in motion," (J 152) Jasmine refuses to die "in this limbo," and pleads with Mr. Vadhera to get her a green card because a "green card was freedom." (J 149) In exchange, he buys Jasmine's silence for his shame. A week later, Jasmine calls on Lillian Gordon's daughter, Kate Gordon-
Fieldstein in Manhattan. A particularly apt symbol for the immigrant experience is Sam, the marine iguana, whom Jasmine meets in the "simple, ample, plain, functional, frugal, even spiritual" (J 161) apartment of Kate. They are both exiles from a home that can never be reclaimed and Jasmine feels an immediate fellowship with Sam. Out of his habitat and painfully ugly, he like Jasmine, is a long way from home. The iguana suggests ways in which one's identity can be misread and changed in the process of immigration. As Jasmine observes him being carried into the room she is confused, "Sam was an animal I couldn't name. A small dinosaur? A giant lizard?" (J 162) Jasmine holds the reptile in her lap, something she would never have done in India, and is amazed at her own transformation:

I picked him up and held him. Truly, I had been reborn.

Indian village girls do not hold large reptiles on their laps.

They would scream at the swipe of a dry tongue, the basilisk stare of a beady eye. (J 163)

In addition to the cultural transformation required of all immigrants, the immigrant to the United States must also cope with a shifting world in which nothing, not even the landscape, remains unchanged. This is represented by the developer's purchase of the Flamingo Court Motel, scene of Jasmine's rape, and Lillian Gordon's property which served as a place of refuge for the Kanjobal Indians and illegal immigrants. The developer transforms the sanctuary into a holiday resort, a hotel, "hell turned into
paradise." (J 139) Such fluidity, viewed by Jasmine as very American, makes her observe:

It is by now only a passing wave of nausea, this response to the speed of transformation, the fluidity of American character and the American landscape. I feel at times like a stone hurtling through diaphanous mist, unable to grab hold, unable to slow myself, yet unwilling to abandon the ride I'm on.

(J 138-9)

Straddling two cultures, Jasmine undertakes a journey that from this moment involves a physical, an emotional, and a strongly intellectual awakening. The process is fraught with questions, doubts, and bemusing acceptance of the intriguing and often puzzling aspects of the American culture. Lillian Gordon's daughter, Kate, guides Jasmine to her new home in Manhattan where a young, liberal couple, Taylor and Wylie Hayes, employ her as an au pair and nanny to their adopted daughter Duff. Taylor, a physics professor at Columbia University, names her Jase, and during her two years with them she becomes an American, "I became an American in an apartment on Claremont Avenue across the street from a Barnard College dormitory."(J 165) Wylie and Taylor accept her for who she is and treat her as an equal. In contrast to the Vadhera family, class and gender rigidities are relaxed. The experience of an almost idyllic state of family life with Taylor and Duff affirms to Jase the indefatigable nature of the human
will to acquire and sustain a space of its own. She begins to fall in love with Taylor's world, the seemingly magical world of middle-class Americans:

I began to fall in love... with what he represented to me, a professor who served biscuits to a servant, smiled at her and admitted her to the broad democracy of his joking, even when she didn't understand it. It seemed entirely American.... I wanted to watch, be a part of it. (J 167)

Jase begins to love and admire the American world, "its ease, its careless confidence and graceful self-absorption." (J 171) She appreciates not only this freedom but also the self-worth she experiences perhaps for the first time. By offering her a "home," and by approving her command of the English language, including her accent, Wylie and Taylor facilitate the initiating moment of her passage into the New World. She is reminded that her knowledge of English is not only adequate to make her be a part of the city-bred Taylor's universe of humour, but that it is also good enough to make her qualified to participate in New York's world of unlimited opportunity. Jasmine gradually overcomes her fear of "losing" English which had haunted her ever since she moved into the Vadhera household. As "Jase" she is empowered as a subject of the West. She finds employment as a translator of Indian languages and is thus able to enjoy economic freedom and experience the spirit of American urban life, "Language on the street,
on the forbidden television, at the Haybes' dinners, where I sat like a
guest... all became my language.... The squatting fields of Hasnapur receded
fast." (J 174) Jase is an Americanized woman who wears "spangled heels
and silk chartreuse pants," and with considerable pride observes,

Jyoti would have saved.... Jasmine lived for the future, for Vijh
& Wife. Jase went to movies and lived for today.... Profligate
squandering was my way of breaking with the panicky,
parsimonious ghettos of Flushing. (J 176)

She lives with considerable recklessness blowing most of her salary in
stores along Broadway.

Wylie calls her Duff's "caregiver" - a term that thrills Jase. She was
not a maidservant, she was "family" and she was "professional." Jase finds
herself falling in love with Taylor, who shares many qualities of Prakash;
he is unfailingly kind, never condescending, and proud of her achievements.
She states, "I wanted to become the person they thought they saw:
humorous, intelligent, refined, affectionate. Not illegal, not murderer, not
widowed, raped, destitute, fearful." (J 171) Yet, stresses Jase, Taylor did
not try to change her, "He (Taylor) didn't want to scour and sanitize the
foreignness. My being different from Wylie or Kate didn't scare him. I
changed because I wanted to." (J 185)
This period in Jasmine's life is the most restful, and comforting, emotionally and psychologically. Intellectually, however, it is a phase of close observations, inner monologues, silent reflections, and a keen involvement in her new environment, even while exploring the new avenues opened to her by the modern value systems. The Hayes family confirms for her that in America nothing really lasts forever - the hardest lesson for her to learn. Fluidity is apparent to her in the ease with which Americans slough off spouses and adopt children. Wylie suddenly decides to leave Taylor and take her chance at "real happiness" (J 181) with an economist named Stuart Eschelman. To Jasmine, growing used to a world where cause and effect sequences are indispensable to a logical explanation of events, Wylie's "reasonless" abandoning of Taylor and Duff is inexplicable:

There was no word I could learn, no one I could consult, to understand what Wylie was saying or why she had done it. She wasn't happy? She looked happy, sounded happy, acted happy. Then what did happy mean? Her only chance? Happiness was so narrow a door, so selective? (J 181-2)

Instead of fate or destiny or an unknown power being responsible for a family's break-up, she witnesses an American woman deliberately choosing to leave. When Wylie and Taylor are divorced, Jase comments that in America, nothing is so terrible or wonderful that it would not disintegrate;
monuments, agreements, even families must constantly undergo transformation. Taylor's behaviour after his wife leaves him is also a part of growing up for "American" Jase who cannot help comparing Taylor's behaviour with that of an Indian husband:

He acted forbearing even when aggrieved. Prakash would have slugged and raved. Prakash would have been impossibly possessive. He would have put in new locks and bars on the outside of the front door to the apartment. The Claremont codes still bewildered me. (J 183)

Jasmine's inner deliberations reflect an immigrant woman's emotional adherence to her traditional beliefs even after imbibing American culture and being exposed to the modern value systems. Duff is an adopted child and Jasmine who cannot imagine a non-genetic child views it as a monstrous idea, "Adoption was as foreign to me as the idea of remarriage." (J 170).

Jasmine encounters other unfamiliar customs she cannot reconcile herself to, such as Duff, a small child, sleeping in her own room:

"... Where will Duff sleep?"

"Her room, of course."

"Not with me? .... Who will I sleep with?" I asked.
The reply that she elicits from Wylie is very American, but rather foreign to Jasmine, brought up in a Punjab Village, "What you do on your own time is your business.... But show discretion for Duff's sake. I hope you understand." (J 172)

With infinite care Mukherjee sketches her protagonist's gradual transformation but there is a conflict between Jasmine's two selves, one still holding fast to traditional values of life and the other an adventurer in a capitalistic culture. As she so succinctly puts it, "For every Jasmine the reliable caregiver, there is a Jase the prowling adventurer." Unlike the other immigrant domestics - Letitia from Trinidad and Jamaica from Barbados - who hang suspended between the two worlds, Jasmine thrills "to the tug of opposing forces," and prays that her job as Duff's "day mummy" would last forever. (J 176-7)

The ironies of life however pursue Jasmine in the reappearance of the Sikh assassin, Sukhwinder, who had murdered her husband in India. Jasmine, reminded of her illegal status, cannot call the police or seek justice, even as she could not in an earlier instance when Half-Face had raped her. Fearing that her presence in the household may jeopardize the safety of Taylor and Duff, she resolves to cut short her odyssey with them and seek sanctuary away from New York in Iowa where Duff was born. By her own admission, at this point in her life, she had "bloomed from a diffident alien with forged documents into adventurous Jase" and
assimilated the American spirit. (J 186) Her life had "a new fullness and chargedness to it." (J 184) She was "getting rooted." (J 179)

In Baden, Iowa, she is fortunate to run into Mother Ripplemeyer, a Lutheran of German stock, who offers to find her employment in the bank owned by her son. Mukherjee's use of friendly people ready with their advice and assistance whenever required by the central character has to be probably understood as a tribute the author wishes to pay to American generosity rather than as a flawed narrative device. As Mukherjee says, "My characters are survivors. They have been helped as I have, by good strong people of conviction." Bud Ripplemeyer, the fifty-year old banker is swept off his feet by the Indian Princess; six months after working as a teller in his bank, she yields to the desired identity of the narrator, Jane Ripplemeyer, the unmarried partner of a white banker who has divorced his wife for her. Her Americanization is complete.

Jane accepts the almost prearranged, tailor-made itinerary of a certain predictable way of life with Bud. She says and does nothing to challenge the authority of the white American male. She makes no mention of her past because it is unacceptable to Mother Ripplemeyer and Bud is uncomfortable with her tales of Hasnapur. Bud is simply enticed by her because she is "glamour, something unattainable." (J 199) Jane observes:
Bud courts me because I am alien. I am darkness, mystery, inscrutability. The East plugs me into instant vitality and wisdom. I rejuvenate him simply by being who I am.

(J 200)

Adrienne Rich observes that the desire to be "twice-born" can demand various things, "a change of name, change of accent, avoidance of trouble, deference to white men, and complete negation of the past." Jane complies with this demand and is expected to eventually become Bud's wife and the mother of their expected child.

In the role of a chronicler Jane witnesses the slow decline of the American farm. What makes Iowa similar to Punjab is that existence in both places is frequently interrupted and shattered by violence. Dispossessed farmers kill themselves; one of them shoots Bud and cripples him. It is interesting to note that in describing the particular farming practices on Bud's farm Jane uses the first-person plural for the first time, 'We're Puritans' (J 237) thus identifying herself as an American. Her social quest has always been "to belong to that tribe" (J 197) which contains Mother Ripplemeyer and Lillian Gordon who "represented... the best in the American experience and the American character." (J 137)

Handicapped as a result of a shooting by Harlan (a disgruntled farmer to whom Bud had denied a loan), Bud slowly sinks into a
self-centred existence in which the most natural feelings of sexual passion have to be artificially created. Ready to sacrifice her own happiness and dreams, Jane finds herself a "caregiver, recipe giver, preserver" (J 215) caring for a crippled man and carrying his child. Mukherjee creates a vital female figure in whom critics see the force of the Hindu Trinity, "I feel so potent, a goddess," (J 12) says Jane. As the female Brahma, she is her own creator, pregnant with new life; as caregiver, she matches Vishnu, the preserver; as Siva's counterpart Kali, she has killed the demon Half-face, her rapist. Jane's patience with Bud mollifies even Karin, his ex-wife who had earlier in her dream assigned to Jane the identity of a 'tornado', leaving behind a path of destruction. (J 205) The valuable lesson that Jane has learnt that in America nothing lasts, fortifies her in warding off guilty feelings about usurping Karin's place in Bud's heart. However, though she has learnt to adjust to a new set of values she has definitely not shed values altogether. Her analysis of the situation shows that there is a clear distinction in her mind between living with someone separated from his wife and deliberately breaking up a home, "Bud would have left Karin or twisted in mid life until he dropped. I was a catalyst. Not a cause." (J 200)

Though appearing self-possessed, patient and caring, Jane, as we discover her through her interior monologues, is seething. Likening herself to a 'tornado' (J 206) she wonders about the changes that are yet to reshape her destiny, "How many more shapes are in me, how many more selves,
how many more husbands?" (J 215) Bud prefers not to discuss her Indian past and this increases her sense of isolation and loss. At this juncture she rebuffs the overtures of love made by young Darrel, their neighbour and feels sorry for him for being tied down to farm work tending pigs, while his heart is set on going to some big city and getting rich the easy way. Darrel's self-pity culminating in suicide shatters her and Bud's desperate plans to legalize their relationship by marriage adds to her gloom. Jane realizes she will be lonely despite Bud's presence, "I'll be lonely here, with Bud or without him." (J 223) Earlier she had reflected at her sense of alienation:

I feel abandoned, almost betrayed. I used to feel so secure, being alone on the farm with Bud, in the winter; now I feel deserted, except for Du, who rarely talks. (J 207)

The very land America that had taught her to become the 'speaking person' now makes her feel 'millennia old' She seeks to translate her 'wants' and 'dreams' into a reality. Even in the more liberated landscape of America there are "potholed and rutted" (J 241) driveways where a Third World immigrant woman like Jane sharing a living-in relationship with Bud and pregnant with his child encounters the underlying biases and assumptions with which mainstream America isolates the Third World "You." By other men of Baden she is mistaken for an Asian bar girl and labeled as a whore. Mary Webb expects her as an Indian to be into channeling, gurus, and out-
of-body experiences. Jane also finds herself struggling against culturally ingrained gender-based stereotypes.

The reader has time and again encountered Jyoti-Jasmine-Jase Jane's desire to escape the burdens of the past, the complications and contradictions of continuity. In Baden, Jane hardly gets or sends out much mail - "I rip myself free of the past," she says. (J 208) Recalling the stench emanating from the carcass of a dead dog that she carried as a young girl in Hasnapur, Jane says, "I know what I don't want to become." (J 5) What follows witnesses the emergence of a superior, intensely privatized character very much in charge of her life. As Jane grows more confident in her powers to shape a new identity for herself she is able to express her desires more candidly:

Rain, rain, I say, the same way I find myself praying, letter, letter from New York... a letter will come from New York.
Taylor will find me somehow, sometime. (J 208)

Since the end of all quest should be the challenging of energy in the right direction and not passive acceptance of all situations, Jane has to reclaim power and utilize it by making up her mind to escape from constrictive stereotyped roles. A caregiver's life is a good life, a worthy life, but not a full life.
Knowing what she does not want to turn into, Jasmine-Jane retains those values of her Hindu heritage that sustain her life in America - a strong faith in the importance of individual self. This enables her to survive, to discard debilitating aspects of traditional customs, to open herself to change, to desire and hope, values which are typically American, born of fluidity and speed of transformation, qualities of both the American character and its landscape. Mukherjee's Hindu appreciation for transmigrations, enables her character to accept the "enormous psychological and social dislocation" which becoming an American requires.

Taylor's arrival at this juncture is a welcome relief to Jane and it culminates in her decision to reject her earlier intention of staying with the crippled Bud and to leave with Taylor, grasping at yet another chance at happiness. Her remark, "The moment I have dreamed a thousand times finally arrives," (J 237) clarifies for us that it is not a rash abandonment of responsibilities. Jasmine herself asserts,

I am not choosing between men. I am caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness. (J 240)

She is not merely choosing between men; she is symbolically asserting her right to try and reposition the stars instead of passively accepting her fate:
Watch me reposition the stars, I whisper to the astrologer who
floats cross-legged above my kitchen stove. (J 240)

There is also a sincere concern that the astrologer's prediction should not
take a toll of Bud's life, "I think sometimes I saved his life by not marrying
him." (J 12)

In a way this decision is a resonant response to the courage she
admires in her adopted son Du who takes charge of his life and decides to
live with his sister in California, and also to the cowardice of Darrel who
tries to run away from the problems of life by committing suicide. In
keeping with the lessons that America has taught her she need not
condemn herself to a life she does not particularly want. "I want to do the
right thing," (J 239) she remarks. She has survived the worst in American
life and is now free like an American to choose her place in Taylor's life.
Jane's linking her life to that of Taylor should be seen as a validation of her
avowed belief, "Treat every second of your existence as a possible
assignment from God," (61), a reaffirmation of the courage she mustered in
killing the mad dog saying, "I was not ready to die." (J 56) Brinda Bose
comments,

While freeing herself from duty, however, she does also reject
the man who had renamed her Jane and had refused to
acknowledge her roots; she chooses Taylor who loved her
Indianness, so perhaps this is an indication that having
worked out the complications of a new identity, Jasmine is now ready to come to terms with her past.25

As she scrambles "ahead of Taylor" (J 241) she becomes truly Americanized, not just in peripheral social or cultural mores but in a primal "intensity of spirit."

An interesting point made by Liew-Geok Leong in the essay, "Bharati Mukherjee," in International Literature in English: Essays on the Major Writers, needs consideration:

The voice of Jasmine, surprisingly articulate and assured, is not always believable, given her background and circumstances; it is her creator's voice that takes over and speaks for her, the result perhaps of too close an identification with the subject.26

Mukherjee attributes to an under-privileged immigrant woman (Jyoti-Jasmine) the dispositions and options available to an Indian woman privileged by class and education (Jazzy-Jane). Jyoti-Jasmine's formative years are spent in the village of Hasnapur - a place untouched by western influence. She has some knowledge of English and is a sixth grade drop out. How then does she acquire the consciousness of Jane, someone who is an alien in the Punjabi ghetto, who is at home in the place of middle-class
white women? Jane is unbelievable when she makes literary allusions to *Jane Eyre*, *Great Expectations*, and *Pygmalion*. The allusions are a direct product of Mukherjee's "anglicized life," attending "an elite school for girls run by Irish nuns who followed a heavily British and European curriculum."  

In Baden, Iowa, Jane's life runs parallel to that of her adopted son Du. She who could not imagine a non-genetic child like Duff, fully assimilates herself into the American family life when Du Thien, a fourteen year old Vietnamese from a refugee camp walks into Bud's home as their adopted son. Du and Jasmine are silently united in a relationship of strong identification: they have both undergone the experience of Third World violence, and share a common legacy of suffering and survival - "They had both hurtled through time tunnels, seen the worst and survived." (J 240) Together they watch, with unspoken disgust, a racially biased TV news item of an INS bust of illegal Mexican labourers in Texas. The racism to which Du is subjected in high school by his teacher Mr. Skola has already been experienced by Jane. Their experience and acute awareness of violence is perhaps their strongest bond. When Jane confesses to him that she has killed a man, he surprises her with his response that he too has killed and, in fact, more than once. His apparent detachment and unwillingness to listen to Jane's lurid stories of India may possibly be to gain control over his life in America at the earliest. His refusal to confront violence does not mean
that he is not tough. He is able to stand in 35 degree cold in a Hawaiian T-shirt while the native Iowans are in coats and Du had never before seen snow. Samir Dayal observes, "His toughness, like that of Jasmine, is an externalization of his will to live; his denial, like Jasmine's, is an expression of his survival instinct." Jane endorses this view when she says Du is "a real yogi, always in control." (J 18)

We have already seen how Jane in her desire to be assimilated, to be "twice-born" carries on only with her own new life, escaping from the burdens of the past, from a life of continuity: "Let go just one thing like not wearing our normal clothes, or a turban or not wearing the tikka on the forehead - the rest goes on its own down a sinkhole." (J 29) While Jane, as the willing immigrant is triumphant that her transformation has been "genetic," Du remains a defiant immigrant who refuses to become a total American inspite of his genius for scavenging, adaptation, and appropriate technology. Unlike Jane, Du develops contact with other Vietnamese in Baden and retains his hyphenated identity - "Vietnamese - American." The "hybrid" Du leaves Iowa and its imprisoning milieu and departs for the frontier to seek his own sister and to work on behalf of his Vietnamese family and community in America. Jane, on the other hand, decides to forsake a predictable life of security with Bud, and accepts Taylor's offer to go to the West towards an unknown future.
In a significant way, Jasmine continues the story of the Bengal Tiger's daughter and Dimple. In *The Tiger's Daughter*, Tara Banerjee Cartwright returns home to realize the impossibility of repatriation. The novel ends with Tara in a car surrounded by a mob, immobile in her class privilege. Gurleen Grewal remarks:

The dislocation and the entrapment of gender and class in *The Tiger's Daughter* gives way to the relocation and emancipation of the Indian woman in Jasmine whom we see, in the novel's last scene, heading for the car that will transport her to the California frontier. Freed from the constraints of gender but endowed, like Tara, with the comforts of class, Jane is mobile.

Unlike Dimple in *Wife*, Jasmine has graduated from vulnerability to power. Dimple is a taker while Jasmine has learnt to give. She is a vital, life-giving force to Bud, Taylor, Duff and Du - they all love her and depend on her. She learns how to reinvent both herself and the American Dream. Dimple finds the loss of old culture neither exciting nor exhilarating. In America she is lonely, desolate and disillusioned on all planes - physical, mental, and emotional. Jasmine, on the contrary, has broken away from the shackles of caste, gender, and family. As a willing immigrant she stands poised on the American Dream confident that she can freely refashion her life by obeying
its dictates. One applauds the heroine's tenacity and her determination to belong.

Mukherjee's ethnic women are, as she says, "between roles....There isn't a role model for the 'Jasmine' or the 'Dimples'. They have to invent their roles, survive and revise as best as they can." While they survive and revise, they either remain suspended between two worlds like Dimple and Tara, or like Jasmine choose between them in order to find a space to inhabit in the New World which holds promise of a new selfhood. Jasmine's life is a whirlwind like the lives of most immigrants to start with. However, she breaks away from her ethnicity in order to absorb the new culture and in doing so gradually acquires "an intensity of spirit and quality of desire" which, according to Mukherjee is being "American in a very fundamental way."
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