CHAPTER-III

RECREATING THE SELF

(JASMINE)

Bharati Mukherjee being considered as an expatriate novelist has been widely acknowledged as a voice of Expatriate-immigrant sensibility. It is the story of Punjabi peasant girl reinventing herself in the Western world. It suggests the idea of mixing the eastern and the western culture, as seen in the life of the young Hindu woman who leaves India for the U.S. after her husband’s murder. The focus of this chapter is to examine the shifting images of woman protagonist Jasmine and her struggle towards transformation. Mukherjee has depicted her character in search of America citizenship who wishes to drift towards American materialism.

Bharati Mukherjee sketches similarities of two cultures and admits that, “I am in fact writing about America more than about dark-complexioned immigrants. My focus is on the country on how it is changing minute by minute. My stories explore the encounter between the mainstream American culture and the new one formed by the migrant stream. “I am really writing about the joining of two cultures. Many expatriate writers are destroyed by their duality. I personally feel nourished by it”(2). The protagonist Jasmine reinvents herself in the Western world. The notion of mingling the cultures of the East and West is depicted by the
life of Jasmine. Mukherjee says “Jasmine contains the shape of my life and my desires. But no incident is at all autobiographical”(33). Jasmine may not be the replica of Bharati Mukherji’s life, but she could not resist pouring in certain elements of real life in the novel. The novel begins with opening sentence and discusses the importance of the words “lifetime ago”. It is related to the theme of re-creation of self. This theme plays vital role. The village astrologer under a banyan tree foretells Jasmine’s widowhood and exiled life. Astrologer’s prediction becomes true in the life of Jasmine.

Jasmine, the title character and narrator of Bharati Mukherjee's novel, was born approximately 1965 in a rural Indian village called Hasnpur. She tells her story as a twenty-four year old pregnant widow, living in Iowa with her crippled lover, Bud Ripplemeyer. It takes two months in Iowa to relate the most recently developing events. But during that time, Jasmine also relates biographical events that span the distance between her Punjabi birth and her American adult life. These past biographical events inform the action set in Iowa. Her odyssey encompasses five distinct settings, two murders, at least one rape, a maiming, a suicide, and three love affairs. Throughout the course of the novel, the title character's identity, along with her name, changes and changes again: from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jazzy to Jassy to Jase to Jane. In chronological order, Jasmine moves from Hasnpur, Punjab, to Fowlers Key, Florida (near Tampa), to Flushing, New York city, to Manhattan, to Baden, Iowa, and finally is off to California as the novel ends. Jasmine is seven years old. Under a banyan tree in Hasnpur, an
An astrologer forecasts her eventual widowhood and exile. Given the traditional Hindu belief in the accuracy of such astrological forecasts, this is a grave moment in the young girl's life. It foreshadows her first husband's death and even her move to the isolated Iowa farm town of Baden. The action shifts, at the end of the first chapter, into the most recent past tense. This clues the reader into the narrative strategy of the novel. The twenty-four-year-old Jasmine currently lives in Baden, Iowa. The next four chapters provide details about her current situation. It is late May during a dry season, which is significant because the farm community relies on good harvests. She is pregnant. Bud, her partner, became wheelchair-bound some time after the onset of their relationship. Bud wants Jasmine to marry him. The neighbor boy, Darrel Lutz, struggles to run his family's farm, which he inherited after his father's sudden death a year before. Darrel entertains the idea of selling off the farm to golf-course developers, but Bud, the town's banker and thus a powerful figure to the independent farmers, forbids it. Bud has close, though sometimes strained, ties with all the farmers. Though change in technological, social, and sexual seems inevitable, Bud resists it. Du, Jasmine and Bud's adopted Vietnamese teenaged son, represents this change. He comes from an entirely different culture than his sons-of-farmers classmates.

Jasmine describes her introduction to Bud and their courtship, introduces her would-be mother-in-law, Mother Ripplemeyer, and Bud's ex-wife Karin. She hints at sexual tension between her and Du, and her and Darrel. When Jasmine makes love to the wheelchair-bound Bud, it illustrates the reversal of sexual power
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in her new life. Desire and control remain closely related throughout the novel. Du's glimpse of the lovemaking adds another dimension to the sexual politics: there are those in control, those who are helpless, and those bystanders waiting to become part of the action. This resonates with ideas later chronicled about Indian notions of love and marriage.

In the part of the novel, the narrator, Jasmine, alludes to more distant events. These hints at important people and events: her childhood friend Vilma, her Manhattan employers Taylor and Wylie, their child and her charge Duff. These allusions begin to create the more complicated and full circumstances of the story, but remain sketchy until later, when the narrator gives each their own full treatment.

The state of exile, a sense of loss, the pain of separation and disorientation makes Bharati Mukherjee’s novel Jasmine a quest for identity in an alien land. Jasmine, the protagonist of the novel, undergoes several transformations during her journey of life in America, from Jyoti to Jasmine and to Jane, and often experiences a deep sense of estrangement resulting in a fluid state of identity. This journey becomes a tale of moral courage, a search for self-awareness and self-assertion. Uprooted from her native land India, Jyoti does her best to introduce herself into the new and alien society as an immigrant; the culmination finally indicated in Jasmine’s pregnancy with the child of a white man - Bud.

Jasmine changes herself constantly, ferrying between multiple identities in different spaces and at different times. Jasmine shows the most predictable crusade
towards Americanization and its obvious uncertainty and without feeling infuriated she survives to make a new start in the host country.

Geographically, the story begins in India and takes off from Europe to America, where it bounces back and forth from Florida through New York to proceed to Iowa, then finally lands in California. The novelist deliberately transports her in time and space again and again so as to bring in a sense of instability into the novel. Born in Hasnapur in India, Jyoti has the distinction of being the most beautiful and clever in the family. She is seen against the backdrop of the rigid and patriarchal Indian society in which her life is controlled and dominated by her father and brothers who record female as follows, “village girls are cattle; whichever way you lead them, that is the way they will go” (46).

However, Jyoti seeks a modern and educated husband who keeps no faith in dowries and traditions, and thus finds a US based modern-thinking man, Prakash. Prakash encourages Jyoti to study English, and symbolically gives Jyoti a new name Jasmine, and a new life. “He wanted to break down the Jyoti as I’d been in Hasnapur and make me a new kind of city woman. To break off the past, he gave me a new name; Jasmine....Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttled between identities” (77).

Here starts her transformation from a village girl under the shell of her father and brothers to a wife of an American traditional husband who gives her all liberties. Jasmine’s happiness is short-lived. She is widowed and returns to India to her family. She has to now choose between the rigid traditions of her family and perform Sati, or continue to live the life of Jasmine in America.
Jasmine sways between the past and the present attempting to come to terms with the two worlds, one of ‘nativity’ and the other as an ‘immigrant’. Hailing from an oppressive and a rural family in India, Jyoti comes to America in search of a more fruitful life and to realize the dreams of her husband, Prakash. Jasmine sets off on an agonizing trip as an illegal immigrant to Florida, and thus begins her symbolic trip of transformations, displacement, and a search for identity. Jasmine undergoes her next transformation from a dutiful traditional Indian wife Jasmine to Jase when she meets the intellectual Taylor and then moves on to become Bud’s Jane. It seems likely that as Jasmine leaves for California with Taylor and Duff, her identity continues to transform. The author depicts this transformation and transition as a positive and an optimistic journey. Jasmine creates a new world consisting of new ideas and values, constantly unmasking her past to establish a new cultural identity by incorporating new desires, skills, and habits. This transition is defined not only in the changes in her attitude, but more significantly in her relationship with men.

Chitra Benarjee Divakaruni also deals with this sort of transformation in her *The Mistress of Spices* that portraits the character of a woman who is vibrant, eager for life, hungry with desires but masquerading as an old and bent creature. Like Jyoti, Jasmine, and Jane in *Jasmine* (1989), the character changes from Nayan Tara to Bhagyavati to Tilottama and finally to Maya and she does so in order to arrive at a final definition of her selfhood. At every step, Tilo (Tilottama) revolts against her fate and the path drawn for her. Her transformation from Nayan
Tara to Bhagyavati has its own pressures and trauma. She is born in an Indian village only to be rejected as a dowry less, undesirable female child, a curse to the family. She describes her birth in the following manner: “The midwife cried out at the veiny cowl over my face, and the fortune teller in the rainy-filled evening shook his head sorrowfully at my father. They named me NayanTara, Star of the Eye, but my parents faces were heavy with fallen hope at another girl child and this one colored like mud.” (122) Not only the renovation from Jyoti, Jasmine, Jane; Nayan Tara- Bhagyavati- Tilottama- Maya is similar but their intension is also to clear the problem of identity crisis that Indians try to cope with in a foreign land. In New York, Jasmine clearly recognizes her ability to adapt: “I wanted to become a person they thought they saw: humorous, intelligent, refined, and affectionate. Not illegal, not murderer not widowed, raped, destitute, fearful” (171). The abilities to adjust to the requirements of a changing environment and to cut the past loose are Jasmine’s survival skills. They allow her to deal with the ethics and culture of two dissimilar worlds and her occurrence with different identities of Jyoti and Jasmine, where Jasmine feels hanging between the traditional and modern world and controlled and independent love, offered by her Indian husband, Prakash.

Jasmine then meets Lillian Gordon, staying with whom begins her process of assimilation by learning how to become American. Lillian bestows upon her the nickname Jazzy, a symbol of her entrance into and acceptance of American culture which she welcomes gladly. After that she moves in with a traditional Indian
family in Hushing, New York. Jasmine soon finds herself stifled by the inertia of this home for it was completely isolated from everything American. Considering it to be a stasis in her progression towards a new life, she tries to separate herself from all that is Indian and forget her past completely.

She proceeds with her migratory pattern and moves to New York City, to become the au pair for an American family. With Taylor, his wife Wylie and their daughter Duff, she creates yet another identity upon a new perception of herself. But though Jasmine creates a new identity for every new situation, her former identities are never completely erased. They emerge in specific moments in the text and exacerbate the tension, thereby causing Jasmine to create another more dominant identity, different from all those that came before. While living with the Hayes, Jasmine begins to master the English language, empowering herself to further appropriate American culture. Taylor begins to call her ‘Jase’ suggesting that again she does not have an agency in the creation of her new self since Taylor constructs it for her. Also, for the first time in the Hayes household, Jasmine becomes aware of her racial identity because Taylor and his friends understood that she was from South Asia and tried to associate her with that community.

Though Jasmine is attached to Taylor’s family and become his Jase, her foreignness never forgets to peer in her activities. But Taylor doesn’t bother about that and we can know from Jase’s words, Taylor didn’t want to change me. He didn’t want to scour and sanitize the foreignness. My being different from Wylie
or Kate didn’t scare him” (185). Before long Taylor gets romantically involved with Jasmine and embraces her different ethnicity. Jasmine transforms but this time the change is not from a reaction, but rather from her very own yearning for personal change. In becoming Jase, Jasmine gets increasingly comfortable with her sexuality which she always tried to repress earlier, more so, after her traumatic experience. But the relationship between Taylor and Jasmine ends abruptly when the past creeps upon her once again manifested in the form of Sukhwinder, the murderer of her husband in the disguise of a Hot dog vendor.

The inescapability of memory, and the boundless nature of time and space is stressed once again and Jasmine finds her life distorted by the different consciousness through which she now experiences the world. She loses even her sense of self expression. Unable to live with this plethora of conflicting identities she decided to leave New York for the sake of Taylor and Duff and move towards Baden County, Iowa to give her life a new beginning. Taylor, the man of New York commented on Jase’s decision, “Iowa? You can’t go to Iowa- Iowa’s flat” (189).

In Baden she meets Bud Wipplemeyer, an American banker who instantly falls in love with her. They eventually marry and Bud renames Jasmine ‘Jane’ yet another sign of her evolution. Bud encourages Jasmine to freely change roles from caregiver to temptress whenever she feels the desire to and views her sexuality through the lenses of his own oriental fantasy. This instead of demeaning Jasmine serves to instill her with a sexual confidence and she thrives on it. Her racial
identity also morphs in Baden, for here her difference is recognized but not comprehended or openly acknowledged. The community attempts to see her as familiar instead of alien. This new perception of her race is an essential portion of her identity as Jane because now she feels assimilated and in fact becomes the typical American she always wanted to be.

John K Hoppe says: Jasmine’s postcolonial, ethnic characters are post-American, carving out new spaces for themselves from among a constellation of available cultural narratives, never remaining bound by any one, and always fluidly negotiating the boundaries of their past, present, and futures”(56). Jase becomes Jane of Bud Ripplemeyer and they both lived together as husband and wife without an official marriage which is rare in Jyoti’s culture but quite common in Jane’s culture. Jane and Bud adopted Du, a seventeen year old Vietnamese boy, as an orphan when he was fourteen. In this novel he represents his own condition of dislocation and isolation from his motherland, Vietnam to a new where he comes from an entirely different culture than his sons-of-farmers classmates. Du and his friend Scott enjoy watching Monster Truck Rallies on TV, and Jane remembers that his first question to them was whether or not the family had a television.

Escapism from burdens, complications and contradictions of continuity is well depicted by the character of Jane Ripplemeyer who hardly sends out or receives any mail because she wants to disconnect herself from continuity, that is, from her past which implies carrying the burden of history. Jane carries her own
inherent, whereas Du, the Vietnamese American is not as she. He has twice born, as Jane says, “my transformation has been genetic; Du’s was hyphenated” (222).

Mukherjee has explored her theme with its many nuances. The transformation of Jasmine from a semi-educated Punjabi rustic to an American is not psychologically convincing. Perhaps Bharati Mukherjee’s purpose of bringing to the contemporary American fiction the reality of the experiences of the floating elements in American society, the immigrant who are trying to establish themselves, is fulfilled. It is not easy to overcome the “aloofness of expatriation” or disunite oneself from the roots and tradition of the culture that one comes from. No doubt the liberated Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase and Jane, who make a life time for every name, look like a possibility for every enthusiastic immigrant. Thus, caught between the two cultures of the east and west, past and present, old and new, Jasmine constantly "shuttles" in search of a concrete identity. Bharati Mukherjee ends the book on a novel note, and re-emphasizes the complex and alternating nature of identity of a woman in exile, “Then there is nothing I can do. 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” (241).

Jasmine implies these words and moves to California with Taylor, which symbolically represents the uncertain of what the future will bring but nevertheless confident in her decision to leave. This sense of movement further reinforces the notion that her identity is forever evolving, she cannot remain in a stable life
because disruption and change are the means of her survival. The surrounding environments influence her formation of her identities and she navigates between temporal and spatial locations, her perception of herself changes, thereby resulting in a multiplicity of consciousness. These create a tension within her and she feels the need to reconcile these conflicting perceptions so that they do not wage a psychological war inside her. Thereby we see her reinvent her identity completely.

From the beginning, Jyoti rebels against her cultural inscriptions. A seer foretells her future, pronouncing “my widowhood and exile…..I was nothing, a speck in the solar system…I was helpless, doomed” (2-3). In response he whispers, ‘I don’t believe you’. She is only seven years old at that time. She could not comprehend astrologer’s predication, when she boldly challenged the astrologer’s prophesy. His anger soars. In order to escape the anger of the astrologer, she runs and fell. She received a star like wound on her forehead. Her sister was worried because the wound may hinder the prospect of her marriage. But Jasmine is not worried and said it was her ‘third eye’. She proclaimed herself a ‘sage’, rewriting her history from passive object to empowered seer. Jasmine has uprooted herself from her original culture. She absorbs into the new culture.

Jasmine married Prakash after two weeks of their first meeting. Their marriage was love and registered. Guests were uninvited, dowry less marriage. It is the matter of shock to whole town; Vimala criticized such breaking of traditions, ‘once you let one tradition go, all other traditions crumble’. Her husband, Prakash called her by the name Jasmine. Jasmine says, “He gave me a new name: Jasmine.
He said: “You are small and sweet and heady, my Jasmine. You’ll quicken the whole world with your perfume” (77).

Identities of Jyoti and Jasmine are different, though they are one. When she was transformed from Jyoti to Jasmine, her philosophy of life is cheered. Jasmine rebels against the system, whenever she finds herself different from it. Jyoti thought her husband was an engineer not just of electricity but of all machinery in the world. He has a plan to open a big shop one day. His immense enjoyment is indefinable when he secured admission in Florida.

Suddenly Prakash was killed in the Bomb blast. After the demise of her husband, she continues to live in her identity as Jasmine. She was unwilling to assume the role of Jyoti which was restricted life. She determined to fulfill her husband’s mission to visit Florida. Her mother and grandmother dissuaded her. But Jasmine rebelled. Her bother assisted her to go to U.S.A. by arranging the forged documents. Jasmine always lived in past and present worlds.

During her journey, she carried her sandal Ganapathi in her purse. She finds her brother’s fake visa which worked well. She knows little Hindi. She manages the captain who was willing to resort any illegal thing provided he should be paid bribe. Another passenger from Kingsland, from Jamaica appraises Jasmine not to trust the captain who is a man of evil actions.

Jasmines first sight of America is painted. Her heavy suitcase contains all her late husband’s belongings. There was no one to receive her. The captain came forward to assist her and led her to his room. She discussed that she came on her...
own free will. He reminded her that he was a gentle man. But contrary to
gentleness, he kissed her. Jasmine tried to distract him to save herself by
informing him that her husband is an electronic wizard. The captain distrusted her.
But captain is admitting to sexual intercourse with her. He informs her, if she
satisfies his lush he will take care of her. But she pleaded that she had recently
been widowed and unwilling to have sex with him. The captain found this is more
amusing and finally had his way with her, and raped her. After the rape she is
filled with shame “I determined to clean my body as it never been cleaned, with
the small wrapped bar of soap, and to purify my soul with all the prayers I could
remember”. Yet jasmine finds that she cannot escape her bad experience.

Jasmine attempted to kill herself but she decided that her mission was not
fulfilled so she continues her existence. “I had planned it also perfectly. To layout
the suit case to fill it with twigs and paper to light it, then to lie upon it in the white
colored cotton saree”(118). She persistently stabled the captain who raped her
with the small knife of Jasmaican. Finally the evil captain was dead. C.Sengupta
views that “and as she it she becomes kali personified, the deity of avenging fury-
deadth incarnate and the killing becomes so easy” (69). Then she calmly bathed
herself, took up her suitcase and began her new life in America by walking boldly
out of the motel leaving the dead man in the room. She set out to face the world
and country of her dreams. Her nature of courage transforms her into a new age
woman of contemporary society. “My body was merely the shell’ soon to be
discarded. Then I could be reborn debts and sins all paid for” (122). She feels that
her body is a lifeless shell which needs to be washed off her sin. “Abandoning the past like a baggage, she feels light and reborn. With the first steaks of dawn, my first full American day, I walked out the front drive of the motel to the highway and began my journey travelling light” (121). Jasmine’s adventurous journey of life commences to fulfill the dreams of her husband in alien country.

As Bharati Mukherjee says, “We are the out caste and deportees, strange pilgrims visiting outlandish shrines...We ask only one thing: to be allowed to land, to pass through to continue” (101). Jasmine expresses her experiences of America. She escaped with the help of Lillian Gordon. Lillian Gordon, who took her home and gave her a bed room which belonged to her elder daughter, she offered her clothes to Jasmine. She called Jasmine Jazzy. She taught her how to speak like an American and assisted in all aspects of American culture. Jasmine tries to establish identity in an alienated society. This is the first positive adjustment with a new land. It is a good experience of Jasmine in America. “Mrs. Gordon who supports and helps her rehabilitate, transforms her totally. Within a week Jasmine gives up her shy side of personality and dresses up on a jazzy T-shirt, tight cords and running shoes. With the change in clothes comes the change in the culture so much so that the intrinsic qualities of her personality start disappearing. With this change she moves from being a “visible minority’ to being just another immigrant”(99).

Taylor and Wylie are friends of Lillian Gordon’s daughter and they lived in New York. Jasmine searches for Prakash, professor. Jasmine takes a taxi and tried
to find the address. Jasmine becomes real American when she lives with Taylor and Wylie for two years in an apartment Claremont Avenue. She looked after Duff, Taylor’s child. They paid her $95 for a week. Duff was an adopted daughter of Taylor which seemed strange for Jasmine to accept at first. She acquired many things, from them. This is another stage of Jasmine’s education of survival in America. Jasmine says “I became an American. Duff was my child; Taylor and Wylie were my parents, my teachers, my family” (165). Wylie treated Jasmine like a younger sister. Taylor called her Jase. Duff called her as mummy. They spare their money for her expenses she saved everything that she earned. Jasmine leads a new life with Taylor, she states that she is “caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness” (240). Her identity politics can be attributed to her changing adverse situations in an immigrant land. Suddenly things changed. When Wyile opted for other man’s love, she informed Jasmine to take care of Taylor. Taylor was hurt by Wyile and depended on Jasmine for consolation. One day when they are together in the park, Jasmine spots the person who killed her husband and knows that the man has also seen her. She is terribly frightened when Taylor or Duff or both. She resolved to leave them. So she left to Iowa.

In Iowa Jasmine is living with Bud Ripple Meyer and Du, his adopted son she was called as Jane Ripple Meyer. Jasmine is less than of his age. But met with an accident and became crippled. So Jasmine served him and take care of his son Du. Both Du and Jasmine were expatriates Jasmine says “we’ve hurt, led through time tunnels. We’ve seen the worst survived. Like creatures in fairy tales, we’ve
shrunk and we’ve swollen and we’ve swollen the cosmos whole” (240). Jasmine and Du were trying to forget the night mares of their early life. They were in a hurry to become Americans.

Jasmine is marked by determination, sensitivity, concern for others and positive attitude. All these helped her in course of her difficult situations in America. She is successful in spite of crucial complications. Through, she may be poor, but she possesses imagination and eloquence. Her widowhood life at young age does not deter her from full filling a mission which she takes upon herself and no barrier is allowed to stand in her way. She faces many crucial situations like taking care of children, looking after crippled Bud and mothering the Vietnamese Du. Jasmine’s comment on Du: “Vietnamese –American: don’t question either half too hard”(225). Jasmine’s attitude to Du is also very complex. This shows the kind of culture both are willing to adopt as their own they both became Americans with in shortest possible time. Jasmine begins a symbolic trip of transformation. Her displacement is a search for identity. She undergoes her first transformation from a dutiful Hindu wife. But when she meets the intellectual Taylor, she is transformed to her ‘Jase’. Then she move son to become Buds ‘Jane’ the author depicts this transformation and transition as a positive and an optimistic journey. Jasmine created a new world consisting of new ideas and values. She tries to establish a new cultural identity by incorporating new desires, skills and habits. This transition is defined not only in the changes in her attitude, but also her relationship with men. Sengupta opines transformation of ‘Self’ ‘She enacts a kind
of death for her too: the death of her old self and out of the ashes raises phoenix-like a new self”. In America, her awareness is reflected in her relationship with Bud, Taylor and Du. Her first husband Prakash initiates her Transformation from Jyoti to Jasmine. After her husband’s death, Jasmine tries to establish a new cultural identity in exile.

Jasmine is caught in between two cultures. The shifting images explored by the transformation of Jasmine, from a semi-educated Punjabi rustic to an American are not psychologically convincing. The story does not become a pathetic story of an immigrant but explores the ‘state-of-the-art expatriation’ where the woman aggressively waits for the future without regretting the past. The novel seeks to highlight the human needs which are essential for life and which can be realized only by crossing cultural barriers. The compelling urge to lice, breaks Jasmine emotionally, physically and culturally like all earthen pot. The suggestion is that the things we fight to guard body, emotions and cultures are as fragile as the pitcher. In totality, the novel projects the strength of a woman to fight and adapt to brave New World without damaging the effects of immigration.

The novel depicts the American society where people and their relationships are always in motion. Jasmine may be epitomized as a rebel, an adopter, and also a survivor. Her confidence is revealed in this statement, “There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remark one self. We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves-in the image of dreams”(29). Jasmine has the courage to transform her dreams into reality. This not only boosts the immense confidence
of woman but it also serves as energy for women who wish to be liberated from the shackles of age, ‘old dogmas’.

We assume the shifting images of Jasmine as the life of a woman engaged in a quest of values she confides in. Bharati Mukherjee celebrates these values as she drifts from one continent to the other, from one country to another, from one identity to another. In other words she celebrates the image of her multiple identities in this novel Jasmine. Jyoti becomes Jasmine, Jazzy, Jase and Jane. In this way, Bharati Mukherjee recounts the lives of the intellectual aliens, who brave face the worst humiliations and sufferings in a new world. Through her character, the novelist underlines the propensity to spiritual metamorphosis as a precondition to cultural assimilation with each new address. Whenever she acquires a new man she earns name. Jasmine symbolizes love and epitomizes courage and Jane stands for cunning. Mukherjee created an innocent child like character Jyoti who transformed later into Jasmine becomes with an element of love for her husband, Prakash. Jasmine becomes an illegal immigrant and journey to America. It reveals the courage of Jasmine. She marries Du and becomes an American which exhibits her cunning and selfish nature of the character besides craziness for American culture. Thus she transforms from Indian image of women to American new image of woman.

With her move to the United States and her subsequent naturalization, Bharati Mukherjee shifted her focus from an exiled or excluded expatiate protagonist to an immigrant fully integrated into the national culture. Her
characters no longer identified primarily with the culture and community from which they had come but with the nation to which they had moved. This transition from expatriate to immigrant shifts the focus from identification with a group culturally rooted in the past to an individual identity developing in the present. In the transition from *Wife* to *Jasmine*, Mukherjee’s third novel, this shift occurs not only in Mukherjee’s characters but in their relationship to the nation. Through its multicultural lens, the nation (America in both of these fictional cases) sees only group identity, especially when the immigrant community isolates and defines itself in terms of cultural performativity. In *Wife*, the protagonist Dimple struggles with the cultural performativity of the Indian expatriate community in the United States. Suspended in a multicultural society that emphasizes and maintains ethnic difference, this community lives in the cultural past of India, leaving individuals like Dimple has no space to live in the American present or future. Ultimately, the isolated community inhibits Dimple’s ability to meld with American culture and Americanize to achieve true immigration status. The United States (and, largely, the more cultural notion of America) serves as a mere backdrop, a setting in which the story unfolds. In 1980, Bharati Mukherjee gave up her full professorship at Montreal’s McGill University and moved to New York, establishing permanent residency in the United States. Still harboring resentment towards Canada for her experiences of discrimination, Mukherjee came to appreciate America while continuing to live and work in the U.S., eventually becoming a naturalized citizen. America was not idyllic; within a year, Mukherjee had been robbed and attacked
and cheated but in her opinion, American society at least allowed a new immigrant like her to slug it out, while Canadian society degraded South Asians even though it permitted them to be citizens. It is because no fusion between cultures or between individual and nation could ensue, the nation remains unaffected by Dimple’s presence at the novel’s close, despite her significant mental disintegration. Thus, although Mukherjee establishes America as a place wherein individual change can and does occur, the nation remains fixed and troubled, a space where Dimple’s story could be representative instead of exceptional. The dream of American opportunity, for Mukherjee, means not only that a newcomer to U.S. shores can experience change but that the immigrant can enact change, transforming the way the nation is imagined. In a speech that she would later publish as an essay entitled American Dreamer, suggesting both the optimism of America and the revisions needed to make it more inclusive, Mukherjee outlines her authorial project: “As a writer, my literary agenda begins by acknowledging that America has transformed me. It does not end until I show that I (and the hundreds of thousands of recent immigrants like me) are, minute-by-minute, transforming America. The transformation is a two-way process; it affects both the individual and the national-cultural identity. The end result of immigration, then, is the two-way transformation: that’s my heartfelt message”. (Beyond 34). In this formula, the individual and the nation play the significant roles, not the immigrant community that resists integration or a multiculturalist policy that accepts such resistance.
Additionally, Mukherjee’s anger at the cultural roles assigned to Indian women informed much of *Wife*. In her third novel *Jasmine*, published in 1989, Mukherjee moves beyond the Indian community and her resentment for Canada to focus on the individual and America. Mukherjee not only highlights the interaction between the individual immigrant and the national-cultural identity, she emphasizes the complex and pervasive dependency of the national culture on the transnational individual. In executing her agenda in a specifically literary form, Mukherjee proposes literary discourse as both a source of cultural identity and the site for cultural change. In *Jasmine*, Mukherjee evokes America through its popular media and literature and upsets it by rewriting the Indian immigrant into its national mythology.

Change for the national-cultural identity thus begins with a changing individual, particularly one who cultivates her identity by moving across national borders. *Jasmine* chronicles the movement of an Indian woman from India to the United States. With each new location to which the protagonist migrates, she assumes a new identity, one that adopts the apparent clichés of the American immigrant experience in order, ultimately, to subvert them. Jasmine moves from hapless illegal immigrant defined by vulnerability to the modern service of an *au pair* to an immigrant wife presented as orientalized trophy. But while each of these cliché roles seems to confine and define her as subordinate, Jasmine’s mobility and transformation reveals a character who redefines herself by using the common
tropes of American immigration as a platform from which to grow, not as an end result.

Born as Jyoti in the Punjabi village of Hasnapur, Mukherjee’s adventurous and spirited narrator kills a rabid dog, learns English, hand-selects her husband, and seeks to defy the fate portended for her by a village astrologer. Her husband, Prakash Vijh, a progressive man who shuns the strict traditions of India and plans to travel to the United States for university studies, names her Jasmine to distinguish her from such conventional roles as the dutiful Indian wife. Prakash uses his wife to completely reject Indian culture, for which he feels contempt. As Jasmine recalls, He wanted to break down the Jyoti I’d been in Hasnapur and make me a new kind of city woman. To break off the past, he gave me a new name. As a result of the couple’s progressiveness, Prakash becomes the victim of a Sikh attack meant for Jasmine and her whorish ways. Intending to perform sati with her husband’s clothes, Jasmine completes Prakash’s journey to America, relying on a jaded ship captain to smuggle her into Florida. There, Half-Face, the captain, violently rapes her, and she metamorphoses into the Hindu goddess Kali to murder him.

A compassionate woman named Lillian Gordon finds the hapless Jasmine and teaches her how to act like an American, all the while calling her Jazzy. Lillian eventually helps Jasmine move to New York City. After a disillusioning time spent there with the family of Devinder Vadhera, Prakash’s former professor, Jasmine works as an au pair for a New York couple named Taylor and Wylie.
Hayes and their adopted daughter Duff. Taylor dubs her Jase, and even with the upset of Wylie’s adultery and departure, Jasmine finds happiness in New York. The arrival of Prakash’s murderer in New York compels her to flee to Duff’s birthplace in Baden, Iowa, where she becomes Jane, the pregnant companion of crippled farmer Bud Ripplemeyer and mother-figure to Du, an adopted Vietnamese refugee. From Jyoti to Jane, Jasmine transforms as she moves and because she moves. Jasmine defines herself by dynamism, energetic change arising from a transnational identity that allows her to merge with the American culture and revitalize it from its multicultural stagnancy.

Through so many changes in name, role, and geography, Jasmine’s narrative formulates her identity as multiplicity, but in Jasmine’s engagement with cultural literature and mythology, Mukherjee cultivates a whole identity. No longer does the immigrant stand outside the national imagination; she unites with it by reenacting it and joining American mythology with the cultural traditions from her Indian past. In this way, Jasmine asserts herself as a continuous individual who cannot be discarded and replaced as Prakash had intended. As Jane, she describes Jyoti’s childhood encounter with the astrologer in the novel’s opening words Lifetimes ago. She extends the acknowledgement of a plurality of identities to each immigrant individual in general, and specifically to Du, her adopted Vietnamese son, claiming that we’ve been many selves. Multiple lifetimes suggest that she narrates the stories of distinct individuals, not a continual self, since the term implies the standard linearity of birth, marriage, and death. “Each
narrative of self engages with the tropes of birth and death until the very end of the novel when Jasmine cries through all the lives I have given birth to…for all my dead (241). In most if not all cases, she produces and rejects every new self she cries for through violence. Violence plays a chief role in *Jasmine*, as it did in *Wife*, because it provides a vehicle for transformation and individual expression. Characters like Dimple in *Wife* and Prakash in *Jasmine* believe that the immigrant needs to sever ties with her past in order to survive. Mukherjee acknowledges the pain of the immigrant’s necessary break from her origins in a 1998 interview, claiming that if you're going to not remain an expatriate, then there has to be a traumatic, painful kind of break with the past. But she also implies that such a break does not infer a complete rejection and replacement, for after that [break] you might reclaim little bits and pieces of it [the past] and fit them into your new life in a different way, but there is no easy, painless way to make the change; otherwise you’re burrowing in nostalgia (Desai, Barnstone, and Mukherjee 141). Part of the traumatic transformation comes from the abrupt spatial break the immigrant makes when she leaves India and thrusts herself into a foreign culture, but the pain diminishes slowly as the subject mingles with the national culture and, in Mukherjee’s novels, becomes Americanized. Refusing to change and clinging to a culture that one has left behind would leave the immigrant burrowed in nostalgia, but completely rejecting an originary culture can prove just as damaging. Successful immigration melds the original and new cultures, and
successful Americanization recognizes and accepts the intersections of multiple discourses through the forceful and often violent entry of the immigrant.

Because Jasmine reinvents herself multiple times, the initial traumatic break from India recurs in a pattern of waxing and waning pain. In *Jasmine*, violence allows the immigrant to create a new self through ostensibly killing an old identity: “There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself. We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams” (29). The violence of the rabid dog attack on Jyoti scars her, leaving a mark in the middle of her forehead – a third eye resembling the Hindu god Shiva’s that allows her, throughout the novel, to speak prophetically and retrospectively of her multiple selves. Although it originates from an external source, the violence of the Sikh bombing that killed Prakash also compels Jasmine to abandon India and her past selves to join with the collective pool of immigrant’s dressed in shreds of national costumes, out of season, the wilted plumage of intercontinental vagabondage. The most notable and explicit violence, however, occurs upon her arrival to the United States. Though Jasmine continues to alter herself and adopt new personae within the borders of the nation, the transition from India to America resonates most clearly and violently since it represents the shift not only from one identity of Jasmine to another, but from one nation to another.

Once Jasmine reaches America, Half-Face, the captain of the smuggling ship that brought her to the Florida shoreline, takes her to a seedy motel and cruelly rapes her. As Half-Face stand before her, naked and erect, Jasmine
experiences a moment of clarity: for the first time in my life I understood what
evil was about. It was about not being human. Half-Face was from an underworld
of evil. 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. She compares
Half-Face to Yama, the Vedic lord of death. Although fearful for her physical life,
Jasmine speaks also of the death of another self, and this time, a particularly
human one. Breaking the otherwise alliterative strand of names and personalities
beginning with the letter -J, Jasmine transforms and, as Mukherjee later describes,
mythologizes herself into the Hindu goddess Kali, visualized as having a red
tongue, a triangle hanging out, as she’s doing a dance of destruction of evil. After
Half-Face violates her, Jasmine showers and slices her tongue with a knife,
appropriating Kali’s red tongue, and then stabs her rapist to death. Deterred from
her mission to burn herself in the practice of sati, Jasmine instead burns only his
and her clothes and photographs and walks away to experience her first full
American day. Destroying the material remnants of her past allows her to embark
on an American present and future. This episode represents a more brutal break
between selves because it moves from one nation to another, and it thus requires a
more substantial break that transcends even humanity into the larger realm of
cultural mythologies.

More important than the break and Jasmine’s consequent survival and
success in America, are the materials Mukherjee uses to make the break the
cultural discourses of India and Hinduism, in particular which suggest not cultural
replacement but fusion and adaptation. Jasmine survives the fate of a vulnerable illegal immigrant to America by asserting her Indian cultural origins. Jasmine’s multiple identities in America reflect the multiplicity of Hindu deities which have grown as a way of absorbing diverse provincial traditions, rituals, and ideologies. Because of this cultural incorporation, we can view deities as composites in which no one definition or identity exists in practice. Interpretation and adaptation become viable approaches to these deities and, as Mukherjee shows, to Jasmine. Religion, then, serves as an outgrowth and mirror of cultural identity and practice. By referencing Hindu deities and mythologizing her title character, Mukherjee demonstrates how a transnational subject can adapt her past to survive her present despite geographic relocation in America. Jasmine’s childhood scar, her third eye imitates Shiva, who often appears seated in deep meditation or dancing and beating his drum in the cosmic dance of destruction. Although she has the same third eye, Jasmine defies the image of stillness in Shiva’s meditation, for she constantly acts, moves, and reforms. But Shiva, too, represents a very active force as the god of destruction in the relationship with the two other major deities Brahma the creator and Vishnu the sustainer. Shiva’s devotees often see him as all three characters creator, sustainer, and destroyer and thus maintainer of the cosmic cycle. When Jasmine kills Half-Face, Mukherjee invokes Kali as both a destroyer and provider of life. Jasmine, too, creates and destroys selves.
The multiplicity of Hindu deities often results from the worship of *avataras* or incarnations of a great deity like Vishnu or Shiva. As multiple embodiments of one entity in multiple fashions, we can see how multiplicity and the continuity of identity can exist simultaneously, as in Jasmine. As a derivation of Rudra, an outsider deity given to paradoxes like destruction and healing, Shiva also appears as a deity originally excluded from the Vedic pantheon but later accepted through his actions. As an immigrant, Jasmine also faces exclusion, but through engaging with these Hindu myths in American space, she inserts herself and her origins into American culture. She merges Hindu epic tradition with the American cliche of the fresh off the boat immigrant, thus reimagining America as both accepting and amenable.

Inderpal Grewal offers a useful concept to explain the development and impact of this movement of Indian discourses with (in) America. She calls the circulation of international discourses transnational connectivities, which develop within the context of the globalization of the marketplace that increased mobility through technological advances in transportation and communication and allowed cultural ideas to flow across borders. Grewal defines transnational connectivities as intersecting networks of knowledge and power, cosmopolitan and global, that traversed and rearticulated national boundaries and that enable multiple nationalisms and identities to coexist as well as to shift from one to the other, much like Jasmine’s multiple identities.
She specifically engages with the Indian diaspora in America, whose exposure to American technologies and broadcasting exposed them to the American Dream. These multiple subjects emerged because the American Dream, by the end of the twentieth century, linked itself to American discourses of multiculturalism and diversity. This exposure ultimately enabled Indians to survive, and it gives Jasmine a space in which to absorb American culture, even its views of other nations such as India. Despite the mobility of the discourse itself, Mukherjee continues to critique America’s national multiculturalism in *Jasmine* as a fixed cultural identity that forces immigrants like Jasmine to articulate their differences and adopt the stereotypes they have been exposed to in order to survive. Furthermore, transnational connectivities suggest that mobility of persons no longer remains the salient issue but rather that moving discourses recast notions of settled and unsettled subjectivity as well. With subjectivity defined less by national boundaries than by mobility and change, these notions of transnationality render America especially ineffectual, a nonamenable society that keeps Indian and American cultural discourses separate. For an in-depth discussion of the importance of technology in *Jasmine*, see John K. Hoppe The Technological Hybrid as Post-American: Cross-Cultural Genetics in *Jasmine*. While technology has a substantial influence on the individual, it rises in importance on the level of the national to the level of the global, as Inderpal Grewal indicates with transnational connectivities. Because of their greater impact on those levels, technology becomes an even greater force in Mukherjee’s later novels that
broadcasts the nation as a whole on the global stage: *Holder of the World* and *Desirable Daughters*, which I discuss in Part II.

Although Grewal argues that transnational connectivities (spawned by an understanding of globalization that emanates from national superpowers like the United States) enable members of the Indian diaspora to survive when they reach America’s shores, the adaptability appears one-sided. The United States remains trapped in stagnant culture that blindly clings to the rhetoric of the American Dream, an unrealized promise that ignores the internal fragmentation of its own past and its current multicultural policies. If multiculturalism proposed a means of realizing the American Dream of inclusion and opportunity for all, the immigrant reveals the disconnect between the dream and lived reality. Mukherjee’s evocation of Indian cultural discourse within *Jasmine’s* American setting seeks to expose the fragmentation and offer a solution of cultural fusion.

To consider the damages of relying on a flawed cultural mythology, we can look to Lisa Lowe’s assertion that the national institutionalization of unity becomes the measure of the nation’s condition of heterogeneity as a useful link between the immigrant and the national culture. Inspired by Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* and conceptual totality, she writes, If the nation proposes American culture as the key site for the resolution of inequalities and stratifications that cannot be resolved on the political terrain of representative democracy, then that culture performs that reconciliation by naturalizing a universality that exempts the non-American from its history of development or admits the non-American only
through a multiculturalism that aestheticizes ethnic differences as if they could be separated from history. In contrast, the cultural productions emerging out of the contradictions of immigrant marginality displace the fiction of reconciliation, disrupt the myth of national identity by revealing its gaps and fissures, and intervene in the narrative of national development that would illegitimately locate the immigrant ‘before history or exempt the immigrant’ from history.

As an Indian immigrant denied the mythical American opportunity as she enters the country, Jasmine reveals the gaps and fissures of America. She must intervene and create opportunity by inserting both herself and her Indian cultural past into American cultural history. She joins the discourses of Hindu deities with the discourses of American opportunity and freedom, offering hybridity between discourses and between the nation and the individual as a solution. National change requires the interaction of the immigrant with the entire culture. An established relationship leads to recognition of the immigrant as not only a dynamic, revitalizing force in America but an essential part of the nation’s history and development. Hybridity between the immigrant and the nation, then, engages the American past as well as the immigrant’s present. The complex interplay between continuity and transformation, between a single self and multiple selves, deserves attention and clarification, not only because it informs Jasmine as a character but because it provides the means through which the individual can influence and change the nation: hybridity. In her oft-cited essay on *Jasmine*, Many critivs dismisses the transitional properties of Jasmine’s multiple selves in
order to assert Jasmine’s personae as a series of violent substitutions. Because Mukherjee roots Jasmine’s transformation in the Hindu spiritual dimension with the metamorphosis into Kali and the underlying theme of reincarnation, Carter-Sanborn regards Jasmine’s identity substitutions as deferral to either the traditionalist India that Mukherjee seeks to discard or the orientalizing stereotypes of the West, a deferral regarded as regressive and ultimately a denial of personal agency and individual continuity. Instead, Mukherjee presents us with an alternative to this either or formation, a conscious adoption of Western stereotypes particularly American and Indian traditional beliefs in order to highlight their intersections and assert the agency of Jasmine, the immigrant adopting and transforming them. Although stark and traumatic, Jasmine’s transformations do not completely substitute one identity for another, which would assume that each identity is wholly disparate from any other. Jasmine’s first-person narration analogously links the multiple men in her life as husbands, and she refers to and narrates episodes in the lives of Jyoti, Jasmine, Kali, Jazzy, Jase, and Jane as part of her personal past; she relates them all to the central I that continues to move. In New York, when she encounters Sam, a marine iguana from the Galápagos Islands, Jasmine remarks that “Truly, I had been reborn. Indian village girls do not hold large reptiles on their laps” (163). She defines herself in constant reference to past identities and therefore avoids a completely new self. And again, when Sukhminder, the Sikh responsible for Prakash’s death, appears in New York, Jase fears him because of the hurt he caused Jasmine. The encounter compels her to
move to Baden, Iowa, the birthplace of her adopted charge Duff, which implies that even though she leads a radically different life because of her geography and family situation in New York, even Duff’s adoption does not disrupt her individual continuity; the pattern of movement and rebirth is possible even for non-immigrants. In order to maintain a continual self through multiple lifetimes, Mukherjee styles Jasmine’s narrative through the Indian discourse of reincarnation, already inferred by Jasmine’s comparison to Shiva. Mukherjee identifies with the Hindu belief: “I was born into a Hindu Bengali Brahmin family which means that I have a different sense of self, of existence, and of mortality than do writers like [Bernard] Malamud. I believe that our souls can be reborn in another body, so the perspective I have about a single character’s life is different from that of an American writer who believes that he only has one life” (Carb and Mukherjee 651). While Jasmine only occupies one body throughout the novel, reincarnation supposes continuity and an eternal self. The repeated transition from death to (re)birth in *Jasmine* occurs figuratively, through hybridity, which ideally joins two separate entities into one to create a new third. The resultant transformation is genetic as opposed to Du’s hyphenization, which maintains disparate cultural identities in the spirit of multiculturalism. Mukherjee figures survival and adaptation in America in a traditional Hindu belief structure; American opportunity develops through reincarnation.

Though Jasmine experiences multiple rebirths in her narrative, no physical birth takes place in the novel; her pregnancy by Bud Ripplemeyer at the novel’s
close never comes to term in the story. Birth results, instead, from the relationship between two individuals, Jasmine and each of her husbands. While physical intercourse never took place in Jasmine’s marriage to Prakash, later, they had created life. Prakash had taken Jyoti and created Jasmine, and Jasmine would complete the mission of Prakash. In America, Jasmine’s relationships with Half-Face, Taylor, and Bud all result in new identities Kali, Jane, and the unnamed post-Jane at the novel’s close. Despite the shared nationality of these men, the characters they birth are distinct from one another. Using the metaphors of David Cowart, they emerge not as sameness produced from the much-maligned figure of the melting-pot but as perennially new and different alloys of national identity. These new alloys or characters emerge as single, stronger metal through fusion, which Mukherjee describes as seeing that what seems opposite really is simply part of the same whole (Desai, Barnstone, and Mukherjee 143).

Each new self, each new alloyed identity, appears stronger and fixed, but Mukherjee eventually exposes fixity as illusory. Varying approaches to hybridity in postcolonial theory offer differing explanations of hybridity, but variability remains a central feature. Homi Bhabha regards hybridity as an interstitial space restless and in constant internal negotiation. Thus, the temporality of Jasmine’s personae renders them liminal, in between a splintered past but inevitably propelled toward a new future. But Robert J. C. Young, approaching hybridity from its genealogical development in race theory, argues for a type of binary between the fixity and fragmentation of identity: fixity of identity is only sought in
situations of instability and disruption, of conflict and change…The need for organic metaphors of identity or society implies a counter-sense of fragmentation and dispersion. Behind each new, present identity that Jasmine produces through hybridization, then, lies a new, past fragmentation made up of different selves. Jasmine constructs her personal and cultural pasts retrospectively, avoiding linearity in her narrative and thus avoiding a teleological progression in the creation of these alloys.

However, each new hybrid identity allows Jasmine, as Mukherjee says, to reclaim little bits and pieces of the past and fit them into your life in a different way (Desai, Barnstone, and Mukherjee 141). Such reclamation of a heterogeneous past and present is the constant negotiation that sustains Bhabha’s liminal spaces. The continual, diachronic recreation of hybrid identities provides the energy for Jasmine’s migration across America and positions her for interaction with not only its individual citizens but its national culture, changing both.

As a rejuvenating force, hybridity fuses the fixed disparate discourses of multiculturalism that uphold stereotypical identities. F. Timothy Ruppel acknowledges these stereotypical characterizations and asserts that Jasmine does, too. He argues that Mukherjee employs them in order to critique the way the West identifies individuals like Jasmine with these generalized categories and cultural assumptions that ignore and eliminate individual histories. This practice insulates immigrants from the historical trajectories that set this population in motion, the contradictions and ruptures that have propelled them out of their native culture.
This insulation involves a substitution, a metalepsis, where a sociopolitical effect is defined as a cause. As a result, these strange pilgrims’ become the originary cause of scrutiny, interest, or benevolence of a discourse that seeks to situate them in teleological narratives of Western civilization and progress, rather than as the effects of these same narrative gestures. *Jasmine* attempts to disrupt this even flow of narrative historiography with a counter-discourse that thematizes prior narratives of enforced identity narratives that through accumulation and repetition seek to define and circumscribe identity as a fixed and available resource, constituted wholly by another’s desire. By invoking such a damaging metalepsis, a series of metaphors so removed that their original meaning can be lost, Ruppel invokes Gayatri Spivak’s strategic essentialism and builds on her notion of the pragmatic use of stereotype for immigrants’ survival. We see this same dilemma in *Wife* and, in broader terms, multiculturalism as well, when the individual’s personal history is discarded not by the individual but by an outside force as a sacrifice to a group identity. Jasmine does not substitute herself, nor does she discard her personal history, for her first-person narration constantly evokes it. Following Brinda Bose, for example, asserts that for Jasmine (as well as for Dimple in *Wife*), murder evolves into an acceptable signifier for discarding nostalgia and starting over; it is neither the end nor even merely the Ruppel’s reading, by consciously enacting these stereotypical roles, Jasmine asserts her mobility and agency in order to survive the immigrant experience.
Furthermore, these stereotypical roles call attention to the larger cultural discourses that support and propagate them. As Malini Johar Schueller maintains, Jasmine enacts the stereotypes because she recognizes herself as the personification of the oriental other in the popular U.S. cultural imaginary. In this method of survival in America, she fashions herself on this recognition at the same time as she casts off from selfconsciousness (being) whatever is not recognized because we as readers know that the being (who I am’) of Jasmine far exceeds her role as mysterious sex goddess.

Schueller’s reading suggests that Jasmine’s mobility and adaptability depend on an engagement with the national cultural imaginary, and she reaffirms the centrality and transcendence of the central I that resists definition by these external cultural structures. As Jasmine adapts and changes, even through the adoption (and subsequent dismissal) of different stereotypes, she challenges the immobility of an America that would continue to uphold and circulate such traditional ideas without accepting and adapting to others. At the end of the novel, as Jasmine faces the decision of leaving Bud for Taylor and Duff, Taylor asks, “Why not, Jase?...It’s a free country” (239). Although America claims to root itself in freedom, the phrase It’s a free country has become a cliché and, especially with our knowledge of the limitations of immigration and multiculturalism, false. Yet Jasmine acts on the promise, asserting her freedom of transformation and movement by leaving with Taylor. Simultaneously, Mukherjee exposes the
fractures in the American ideal while inserting an Indian immigrant into its cultural foundations to actually realize its promises.

Accordingly, we can understand the rhetoric of freedom, a central feature of America, as one of the cultural discourses that Jasmine engages and revises. Critic Brinda Bose links the pervasive violence of immigration to this freedom and argues that Jasmine’s need for violence arises from the American culture itself, from the freedom of choices thrust upon her once she discards the traditional duties of her Indian wifehood in the fire pit after Half-Face rapes her: “What drives immigrant women to react with violence, then, is their frustration at other people’s inability to understand their changing needs and desires, now that they are no longer confined to the social and cultural patterns of their past” (57-8). Instead of a calming, equalizing force, freedom for the immigrant involves violence and instability. Because other people can neither understand nor accommodate her changing identity, Jasmine must leave them and continue to adapt. Her mobility, both in the geographical sense and the (linked) individual sense, results from the freedom of choices and the myth of infinite opportunity that define the American Dream. Because of her motion throughout the novel, moving from city to city within America, Jasmine enacts this national cultural principle more than the American citizens she leaves behind. Jasmine’s mobility springs from her agency; she moves when she makes choices. When Jyoti kills the rabid dog and scars herself, developing her third-eye, she renders the village astrologer who foretold her fate ineffectual. From the opening scene, then, Mukherjee
presents us with the prominent theme and conflict in *Jasmine* of fate versus agency. Although she did become an exile and a widow, as he foretold, Jasmine refuses or, rather, *chooses not* to define herself by such roles and assumes her own fate of constant transition. Migrancy, then, constitutes the necessary condition for agency, and vice versa. Jasmine moves from exile to expatriate to immigrant within the national boundaries of America, and she adopts new husbands for each of her new selves “I have had a husband for each of the women I have been. Prakash for Jasmine, Taylor for Jase, Bud for Jane. Half-face for Kali” (197). Here, marriage serves as one of the elements of a life cycle, but not in the sense that Jasmine must play the role of docile, obedient wife. Prakash, in his progressiveness, refuses to give her the child that would solidify her identity as a proper Indian wife because he was afraid of youthful pregnancy, of children bearing children. “He talked to me of muscles tearing, of the girl’s body only *looking* mature, no matter what the rituals, the feudalisms, said” (116). Prakash even talks of making her a partner in his business Vijh & Wife or, more appropriately outside of traditional roles, Vijh & Vijh. Although Jasmine intends to perform *sati* after Prakash’s death, she chooses mobility and opts to travel to the United States to do so, thereby removing herself from the geographical location of the culture inspiring her action. Mobility, the ability to uproot, leave, and claim one’s land or identity in the wilderness of the expanding and reforming American landscape also comprises an important part of American culture, in addition to freedom. Of her other husbands besides Prakash, Jasmine chooses to transform
and murder Half-Face. By raping her, Half-Face mars the purity of the perfect widow intending to perform *sati*, and Jasmine feels that death was being denied. She then inverts the passive construction of the situation and *causes* death, thereby assuming Half-Face’s role of Lord Yama. As for Taylor and Bud, she voluntarily leaves both of them, choosing another path. In fact, she never fully occupies the wifely role since she and Prakash never consummated their marriage and she never legally marries any of the other men. This hybridization of the transnational immigrant, herself a hybrid subject, and the stagnant nation creates, in Bhabha’s formation, an uneasy interstitial space that forces the nation to identify, examine, and negotiate its internal contradictions. In *DissemiNation*, Bhabha sees the internal contradictions of the nation as a result of double-writing (*dissemi-nation*) of the culture as imagined and the culture as revealed through history. For Mukherjee, these double-writing results from the imagined American Dream of opportunity juxtaposed with the limitations that multiculturalism places on the individual, particularly the immigrant. Hybridity, in its most radical guise of disarticulating the authority of the nation, interrogates the nation’s cultural practices in order to upset its fixed identity. To challenge American culture and expose the fissures of such a fixed identity and a fragmented past, *Jasmine* more explicitly engages with the nation’s cultural mythology. Upon immigrating to America, Jasmine geographically follows the path of national settlement by Europeans. In so doing, she metonymically enacts national progress, thus reinserting the immigrant into the national historical consciousness.
Remembering Lisa Lowe’s formulation, Jasmine’s path reinscribes the immigrant as the developing force of American history instead of merely its progenitor before history or an inconsequential figure exempt from history. Jasmine’s Indian origin redefines the immigrant in this American consciousness, broadening the definition to include the East in the formation of the country, thereby proposing a more inclusive and transnational origin, a move Mukherjee makes on with a larger scope in *Holder of the World*. Jasmine first lands in Florida, site of St. Augustine, the first continuous European settlement in the present-day United States. Going ashore, she waded through 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. Simultaneously she evokes the pilgrim’s rhetoric of the Promised Land while exposing the decay or, perhaps, false reality of such a notion, thereby undermining the nation’s authority in its own past narrative of progress. From Florida, Jasmine moves northward to New York City, the nation’s prized cultural metropolis. She describes it as an archipelago of ghettos seething with aliens. Here, in the city into which millions of European immigrants poured to live the American Dream, Jasmine sees greed and beggars. Though families like the Vadheras have changed the landscape of not only New York City but American immigration in general, America’s national mythology privileges the European immigrants who arrived by way of Ellis Island; to those privileged immigrants did the American Dream hold merit, and they were the people who could truly test its promises of opportunity
and acceptance in the great melting pot (the same assimilationist symbol that Cowart replaces with the alloys metaphor). Perhaps one of the most idealistic accounts of the American Dream based on the melting-pot mythology arises from this tradition in the work of Israel Zangwill, an English Jew who fictionalizes the hope the United States held for immigrants as a site of ethnic and religious assimilation in his 1908 play *The Melting-Pot*. The protagonist, a Jewish man named David who escaped the brutality of pogroms in Russia, proclaims that America is God’s Crucible, the great Melting-Pot where all races of Europe are melting and reforming...Germans and Frenchmen, Irishmen and Englishmen, Jews and Russians into the Crucible with you all! God is making the American (288). David’s Eurocentric speech hails Ellis Island as the mouth of this great melting-pot, a great promise for all who pass through.

For Mukherjee, as for many other immigrants and citizens of the United States, the problem with the melting-pot rests in the dissolution of individuals and ethnic differences into one homogenous mass. Mukherjee does not want to advocate assimilation to a single identity or universal equivalence for all Americans, nor does she seek to emphasize difference or hyphenated identity as multiculturalism does: “The American mythology about the melting pot certainly helps others to come and say, Yes, I have a place here. The unfortunate part of the practice has been the nineteenth-century notion that you make yourself over following an Anglo or Puritan model. What I’m saying is that it’s not like a salad, in which every bit of lettuce or radish or tomato or cucumber retains its original
shape and taste…but a stew in the sense that the stewing process has changed everything; the broth has become what it is because every bit has given some of its juices, some of its taste. I'm looking for every side to break down in some way and constantly create a new whole” (Desai, Barnstone, and Mukherjee 141-2).

The notion that the melting pot metaphor certainly helps others implies that it helped a nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sensibility that perceived America as the place of acceptance. The prominence of the European immigrant, as in Zangwill’s play, excluded other immigrants from the American imaginary. After the Immigration Act of 1965 and the lifting of the national quotas, American immigrants no longer came primarily from the West. However, by continuing to uphold the Anglo-melting pot model, America ignores and excludes other immigrants like Jasmine. As an Indian, Jasmine disrupts the historical notion of the New York immigrant and exposes the failure of both the assimilationist melting-pot dream and the multicultural salad in the city, leaving room only for a hybrid stew whose constant negotiations of its elements create a new whole.

For five months, Jasmine resides in this city that held such promise for immigrants. She lives with Professorji and his family in Queens, witnessing firsthand the disappointment of reality in America, for the former professor now deals in human hair and hides his professional decline from his family and Indian community. While living with Professorji, Jasmine experiences the same ethnic, communal isolation that Dimple experienced in Wife, stark evidence of the failure of multiculturalism. But life in New York also means life with Taylor, Wylie, and
Duff, and in their apartment on Claremont Avenue across the street from a Barnard College dormitory, she became an American (165). Though initially welcomed into their home as an *au pair*, Jamine eventually finds acceptance in their family as a trusted member, mother, and, upon Wylie’s adultery and departure, wife. The families in New York—both the Indian Vadhera family and the Hayes family, in Jasmine’s experience—indicate a heterogeneous city ethnically unmelted, un-fused, and disunited despite the shared experience of family dissolution. Jasmine’s sudden move to Baden, Iowa, from New York engages with the American mythos on two levels. The movement westward clearly mimics the romanticism of American settlement. Settling west was America’s Manifest Destiny, a geographical realization of the dream of opportunity for all. Mukherjee’s engagement with America’s western romance constantly disrupts cultural history by infusing it with double meaning. She employs the classic American figures of cowboys and Indians, obviously referring not only to rhetoric of the Old West but Jasmine’s and her own origin in India, but she obscures the significance of these characters. While she and Du watch a news report of an INS raid on illegal Mexican immigrants, Jasmine thought “I heard Du mutter, ‘Asshole.’ And I realized I didn’t know who were the assholes, the cowboys or the Indians” (27). Jasmine conflates the meanings of Indian as well as cowboy, hinting that not only Mexicans but Americans work as cowboys, and she further complicates the rhetoric by associating the Mexican immigrant with Vietnamese Du and her Indian self, both immigrants. More than invoking the classic American
Western tale, the movement west toward California, made by Du and eventually Jasmine,

Taylor, and Duff, inverts the traditional America immigration story and highlights not Ellis Island but Angel Island, the site of mass immigration from the East instead of the West. Most significantly, Mukherjee plays with frontier rhetoric. She evokes Frederick Jackson Turner’s influential frontier thesis, which relocates the melting-pot, the site of American fusion, to the moving frontier line of nineteenth century western expansion. For Turner, In the crucible of the frontier the immigrants were Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race, English in neither nationality nor characteristics. Like Zangwill’s play, Turner’s thesis exhibits Eurocentrism. The New York metropolis failed to fuse Indian immigrants into America, and the more rural frontier excludes them as well. By following both United States expansion and the movement of the melting pot, Jasmine continues to insert herself, the Eastern, Indian immigrant into the prominent metaphors of the American mythos, particularly at the sites of supposed change, transforming promise into practice.

As a symbol of the American heartland, Iowa serves as one such site, where Thomas Jefferson’s yeoman farmers and the honest simplicity of American labor supposedly offer opportunity to anyone. Yet this very belief in simplicity and farm independence cripples Bud Ripplemeyer, Jane’s Iowan husband and father of her unborn child. The very definition of the American father from the heartland, Bud, a banker, paralyzes himself with his own American idealism (224). As Harlan
Kroener, an independent farmer dying under the pressure of corporate business farming confronts Bud about his finances, Bud walked in front of Harlan as a sign of goodwill between men that existed only in a cultural imagination, and Harlan took advantage of the situation and shot Bud in the back. Bud was stupid, believing in John Wayne bravery and codes of Hollywood honor, emulating the classic hero of the Hollywood western and putting himself in a wheelchair as a result (198). American mythology has thus seeped into popular media entertainment, which defines America in even more fictionalized terms and makes Bud’s adherence to American ideals or imaginary identities even more unfortunate. The easy and wide circulation of Hollywood images immediately places Jasmine in a broader context, as does Mukherjee’s insertion of her protagonist into not only a strictly American culture, but a more extensive Western literature. More particularly, she writes Jasmine into the role of the very proper woman, an Anglo ideal of femininity. By placing a hybrid character from India in the role of the civilized Western women in these novels, Mukherjee again upsets cultural mythology, this time on a broader scale that just the American mythology. Throughout Jasmine, Mukherjee references the Pygmalion myth, particularly George Bernard Shaw’s 1913 play. Jasmine, thinking about her renaming, retrospectively compares Prakash to Professor Higgins, and for Taylor, “I had been until that time an innocent child he’d picked out of the gutter, discovered, and made whole, then fallen in love with” (189). In the play, Henry Higgins reforms the poor speech and demeanor of Eliza Doolittle to make her socially
acceptable. However, as Mukherjee shows through the novel, Jasmine changes through her own agency, often through disruptive violence. While it possesses hints of Pygmalion revision, the relationship between Jasmine and Bud suggests the famous Tarzan novels of Edgar Rice Burroughs: ‘Bud calls me Jane. Me Bud, you Jane’. Jane, the fair, civilized American girl, wins the heart of the primitive Tarzan. After living in the African wilderness his entire life, Tarzan, who is actually the English aristocrat Lord Greystoke, leaves the jungle and becomes civilized for his love. He says to Jane, “You are free now, Jane…and I have come across the ages out of the dim and distant past from the lair of the primeval man to claim you for your sake I have become a civilized man for your sake I have crossed oceans and continents for your sake I will be whatever you will me to be” (Burroughs 216). Here, the male character transforms himself, yet the Burroughs tale does not parallel but complicates Mukherjee’s. As the masculine character opposite his Jane, Bud does not will himself to change; Jasmine transforms of her own will, eventually rejecting the Jane role. Like Burroughs, Mukherjee questions the level of civilization, refinement, or acceptance in America as opposed to the exoticized origins of the protagonist, either Tarzan or Jasmine.

Perhaps the most important literary reference and subversion in *Jasmine*, however, engages both the American heartland and the classic text of colonialism, Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902). Jasmine’s arrival to the United States aboard Half- Face’s *The Gulf Shuttle* reenacts Marlow’s narrative setting of *The Nellie*, for each ship carries the narrator, the captain, and four other passengers –
immigrants and crewmen, respectively. The geographical setting of *Jasmine* upends the mission in *Heart of Darkness*; instead of the European West penetrating the heart of the African Congo, the orientalized subject penetrates the American West: “Out there…On the edge of the world, in flaming deserts, mangled jungles, squelchy swamps, missionaries save the needy. Out There, the darkness. But for me, for Du, In Here, safety. At least for now. Oh, the wonder! the wonder!” (21). Mukherjee inverts even the setting, darkness and light, in her rewriting of Kurtz’s infamous last words ‘The horror! the horror!’ By broadening the scope, confronting Western literary traditions and cultural imaginaries, and inserting her immigrant self into these narratives to reverse and subvert them, Jasmine exposes the transnational connectivities that deny the fixity and insularity of the American cultural identity, much as Marlow exposes the cruel and disjointed inner workings of the colonial system. Reversing the enactment of multiculturalism provides further exposure. As the only character with mobility in the novel (excepting, perhaps, Du), Jasmine distinguishes her individual self from the collective, stagnant white Americans. Mukherjee contrasts her migrant protagonist with the current multiculturalism of America by placing them all in the same American mythology. She treats the Americans as an ethnic group in a multicultural framework, stereotyping them by their generic pasts, their baseball loyalties…passed from fathers to sons, and their collective ignorance of the failure of multiculturalism (202, 8). These Americans believe in the fulfillment of the American dream and their own cultural tolerance, but their actions expose the
dissonance between this ideal and reality. Though Bud becomes Jasmine “Jane’s lover, she knows that Bud courts me because I am alien. I am darkness, mystery, inscrutability. The East plugs me into instant vitality and wisdom “(200). Bud identifies the immigrant as other instead of American and emphasizes ethnic differences.

Taylor, too, believes he has moved beyond intolerance. He chastises Jasmine for her reincarnation beliefs: “very, very Indian, Jassy….You don’t believe that, do you? You can’t, you’re more modern than that” (59). Taylor would have ethnic distinctions and beliefs disappear altogether in a more modern assimilationist model. Because of these characteristics in the nation’s individuals, Jasmine must insert herself into America’s cultural historiography and rewrite it to reinvigorate it so that the nation can move beyond its static, insular identity. She highlights larger global forces of migration, which, as Arjun Appadurai claims have done much to show Americans that the past is usually another country. If your present is their future…and their future is your past…then your own past can be made to appear as simply a normalized modality of your present (30). Appadurai shows how transnational forces such as the immigration of an Indian girl to America’s heartland challenge the nation’s cultural identity in the past and the present and disrupt the temporal linearity of the identity. By tracing the path of settlement in America and engaging with (and subverting) its cultural mythologies, Jasmine lives the nation’s past in the narrative present. Simultaneously, however, she provides a model for its future, a model of motion
and hybridity that can revise and reinvigorate the nation. At the novel’s end, Taylor and Duff appear in Iowa, and Jasmine leaves the American heartland to journey west with her adopted family and Bud’s unborn child.

They reach no final destination in the narrative, but Jasmine retains her state of perpetual motion, and her namelessness at the end promises a new hybrid identity. Though constantly changing her self, we see that she has changed another as well; Taylor has left New York, mobilizing himself as a result of his association with the immigrant Jasmine. By asserting her transforming individuality and living the nation’s cultural past, Jasmine revitalizes at least one American body. Since *Jasmine* avoids conclusion, Mukherjee does not permit us to see if the national culture as a whole changes under the influence of Jasmine. Whether or not Jasmine transforms the national imaginary is less important than illuminating the possibility that she can change it. While disrupting the past implications of the American Dream and exposing its failures, Mukherjee maintains the spirit of opportunity within the bounds of the nation. She meets her literary goals by writing of this possibility, by exposing the fissures in both the immigrant and the nation to reveal the deep connections between them, thus mapping out a two-way, reciprocal, and potentially successful Americanization.

This chapter argues that in *Jasmine*, Mukherjee explores the sociopolitical issues that determine this position on American identity through the migration narrative of its title character. Several well-known scholars find what they interpret as Mukherjee’s celebration of assimilation and adoption of Western
feminist values problematic, arguing that she idealizes the United States at the expense of her homeland. Moreover, these critics contend that Jasmine’s development relies on American and European models of personal success, thereby reinforcing notions of the ever-victimized “third world” woman rescued by liberal Western values. In her article “Reading and Writing the South Asian Diaspora: Feminism and Nationalism in North America,” Inderpal Grewal argues that “the only ‘freedom’ that Jasmine reveals is that of being part of and valorizing the dominant power structure” (231). Further, she is particularly suspicious of Mukherjee’s rejection of a hyphenated identity: “For Mukherjee, as she has said recently, insisting on being called ‘American’ is political inventory, rather than seeing herself as Asian-American or even Indo-American. Instead of dismantling the hegemony of the term ‘American,’ she wants to be included within it” (231).

Along with Susan Koshy and Anu Aneja, Grewal contributes to a body of scholarship on Jasmine that focuses on its treatment of Asia, Asian women, and America, and that is sometimes accusatory in tone. My argument responds to the claim that Mukherjee is not interested in dismantling the term “American” by engaging specifically with the demands Jasmine makes on mainstream perceptions of immigrant and American identities. While Mukherjee perhaps does not dismantle the term by stripping American identity of its power and privilege, she does challenge its exclusivity and abuses. Rather than reading Jasmine’s character solely as representative of a “third world” woman in the West, I argue that she is a protagonist whose narrative involves translating a postcolonial Indian female
subject-position into the context of immigrant America. As such, she exhibits the potential to change what it means to be “American,” and the identity she negotiates is as much a political stance towards ethnic American identification as it is a commentary on the world both Jasmine and her author left behind. Moreover, I contend that this novel cannot be interpreted without making use of the many examples of personal prose written by Mukherjee in which she explores issues of history, identity, culture, gender, and immigration, particularly in regard to her work as a writer. Mukherjee’s nonfiction reveals many of the attitudes towards Indian and North American cultures that shape Jasmine’s development as a postcolonial, immigrant heroine.

For Jasmine’s family, an acute sense of loss and displacement defines the postpartition, postcolonial condition. They were forced violently from their comfortable, upper-middle class lifestyle in Lahore –“where they had previously owned land and shops, lived in a sprawling home, and were respected for their family name – and 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). The trauma of this departure forces Jasmine’s parents into an exile that makes her mother distrustful and pessimistic, and that her father in
particular never comes to accept. Jasmine describes his perpetual attachment to Lahore in the kurtas he continued to wear, the 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. In the next generation, this trauma replays itself – more and more violently each time – throughout Jasmine’s life in India. In defense of this argument for exile-as-trauma, consider what Mukherjee herself writes regarding exiled writers in an article for the New York Times Book Review: “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). However, she continues, “Lacking a country, avoiding all the messiness of rebirth as an immigrant, eventually harms even the finest sensibility” (29). Although her words – given their context in a review aimed at a new direction for minority American literature – lack the empathy we might expect in a discussion of trauma, they resound in interesting ways with Cathy Caruth’s work in this area. She writes that “the [traumatic] event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (4). Furthermore, she writes that the traumatized “become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess” (5). Haunted by his imagined, suspended in time Lahore, Jasmine’s father clearly exhibits the symptoms of exile-as-trauma. On the other
hand, Mukherjee argues that by embracing “duality” we might “learn how to be two things simultaneously; to be the dispossessed as well as the dispossessor,” thereby working through this exile-as-trauma (29). Jasmine’s words at the end of the description of her father illustrate this attitude towards such dispossession: “He’ll never see Lahore again and I never have. Only a fool would let it rule his life” (43). In her willingness to sever any imaginative attachment to her father’s homeland, Jasmine avoids what Mukherjee describes as the “mordant bite” of exile and instead embraces the messy potential for rebirth as an immigrant when she arrives in the U.S. The novel begins in the village of Jasmine’s birth, Hasnapur, after her parents’ exile and before her own departure. This chapter is only a few pages long, but contains a few very revealing details about the title character and protagonist. When she is only seven years old, Jasmine hears about her future of “widowhood and exile” from a local fortune-teller, but the already subversive little girl screams, “You’re a crazy old man. You don’t know what my future holds!” (3). She refuses to believe the astrologer’s argument that one is helpless against fate. Jasmine, who at that time is still known as Jyoti, trips and falls as she runs away, cuts her forehead when it hits the floor, and her sisters shriek when they see her: “Now your face is scarred for life! How will the family ever find you a husband?” (4-5). To Jasmine, however, this scar is a “third eye”; rather than submit to the will of fate, she prefers to define her own life. She interprets and resists the implications of the astrologer’s pronouncement, refusing to believe that she “was nothing, a speck in the solar system...helpless, doomed”
Instead, this first-person narrator states, “I always felt the she-ghosts were guarding me. I didn’t feel I was nothing” (4). Interestingly, she inserts gender into this discussion of will over fate. For Jasmine, being a woman facilitates the type of resolve it takes to create her own life despite the social (and political) barriers she might face. Her later invocations of Hindu rituals and goddesses reflect her belief that women in particular are blessed with the intuition and fortitude to transcend what is expected of and for them. Although Mukherjee does not return to this narrative thread for another five chapters – she 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 determine how we come to understand “Jane,” Iowa’s version of the girl from Hasnapur. In narrating her birth, Jasmine continues to reveal the burden associated with daughters in her community: If I had been a boy, my birth in a bountiful year would have marked me as lucky, a child with a special destiny to fulfill. But daughters were curses. A daughter had to be married off before she could enter heaven, and dowries beggared families for generations. Gods with infinite memories visited girl children on women who needed to be punished for sins committed in other incarnations.

My mother’s past must have been heavy with wrongs. I was the fifth daughter, the seventh of nine children. When the midwife carried me out, my sisters tell me, I had a ruby-red choker of a bruise around my throat and sapphire fingerprints on my collarbone. (39-40) A daughter’s birth is never celebrated or
related to the luck of bounty; instead, from the moment she enters the world, the question of her dowry preoccupies her parents. Mothers who have daughters are doubly cursed: not only were they once unwelcome daughters themselves, but they are also paying for sins from previous lives with each girl child. Mukherjee’s inclusion of *sati*, the Hindu practice of self-immolation by a widow on her husband’s funeral pyre, however, is more problematic insofar as it represents failure. Although Mukherjee attempts to recuperate it symbolically when Jasmine burns all of her possessions after murdering her rapist when she first arrives in the U.S., *sati* is too loaded for this moment to work. For more on the complications surrounding the interpretation and cultural representation of *sati*, see Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” and “The Rani of Sirmur,” Lata Mani’s “Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India,” and Rahul Gairola’s “Burning with Shame: Desire and South Asian Patriarchy, from Gayatri Spivak’s ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ to Deepa Mehta’s ‘Fire.’” These attitudes characterize the society into which Jasmine is born, and these beliefs determine how she comes to see herself. From the moment she is born, Jasmine is marked by a will to survive that challenges expectations – and possibly fate – and foreshadows the events that drive her narrative. While Mukherjee’s representation of Jasmine’s early life might seem to suggest that Jasmine’s India is stunted by its blind commitment to tradition, which justifiably bothers critics, I propose reading these moments within the critical context of the massive trauma of Partition. Mukherjee is not criticizing her homeland, but exploring the social and cultural impact of this moment on
families like Jasmine’s, particularly as it pertains to attitudes towards women. In Jasmine, Mukherjee authors a character defined by her exceptionality and defiance of expectations. While she performs domestic (female) tasks like boiling milk and haggling prices down at the market with notable skill, she also excels at school. She displays enough promise to be allowed six years of schooling – “three years longer than [her] sisters,” who were married off by a cousin who taught them that men prefer village girls with “no minds of their own” (45-46). Her mother complains that God is “cruel…to waste brains on a girl,” but Jasmine’s intellectual potential earns admiration from the village teacher, who lobbies for her to be allowed to continue her education and pursue a career (40). As her father so eloquently puts it, “That masterji fellow thinks you are a lotus blooming in cow dung” (46). However, Jasmine’s paternal grandmother disagrees, arguing with her son that he won’t find a husband for an educated daughter, stating matter of factly that “Some women think they own the world because their husbands are too lazy to beat them” (47). These exchanges not only demonstrate that Jasmine stands apart from other girls and women in her village, but also that the skills and talents that allow her to do so elicit resentment and the threat of violence. They represent a level of concern with individualistic success that in a woman is unseemly at best and dangerously subversive at worst, especially given the direct correlation between a daughter’s opportunity to marry well and her family’s economic interests. 23 Interestingly, this notion of daughter-as-curse contradicts Partha Chatterjee’s account of middle class Indian women during British rule. These
women are characterized by quite the opposite belief system: a sense of their goddess-like spirituality, which kept them in the home as the protectors of traditional values and away from the corruption of the outside, Westernizing forces. This contrast might be explained by a pre-Independence concern with preserving culture that is replaced by more immediate material concerns in destabilized, post-Independence India in addition to the class difference between Jasmine’s family and the ones Chatterjee describes.

The basis of my argument in this chapter, however, necessitates an alternative reading of Jasmine’s qualities and Mukherjee’s comment about Americans living all over the world. I contend that these things help strip the U.S. of its exceptionalism, its claim to these qualities as uniquely American. As I argue throughout this chapter, Mukherjee is invested in the project of destabilizing American identity in order to make it inclusive of its “third world” immigrants. Despite her family’s attitudes, the adolescent Jasmine continues her education until her grandmother attempts to marry her off to a widower with three children. Jasmine is rescued from this arrangement by Masterji and her mother. The teacher appeals to Jasmine’s father’s sense of modernity, explaining that women are no longer “shackling themselves to wifehood and maternity first chance” (50). In doing so, Masterji reminds Jasmine’s father that their country continues to change, a subject with which Paterji is painfully familiar. This scene contradicts critics who read Mukherjee’s representation of India as backwards in regard to its treatment of women; furthermore, it once again links Jasmine’s situation to the
historical moment so that it is not simply a natural result of unchanging tradition and patriarchy. But although Paterji begins to accept the idea of Jasmine’s becoming a secretary, he becomes outraged when she tells him she wants to be a doctor. Ultimately Jasmine’s mother endures a beating to make the case for her daughter’s education (52). Jasmine recalls how mataji “smiled so wide that the fresh split in her upper lip opened up and started bleeding again” and reflects, “My mother loved me so much she tried to kill me, or she would have killed herself” (52). Mataji’s courage in the face of violence decisively refutes Jasmine’s grandmother’s belief that “individual effort counts for nothing” and contradicts readings that contend that Mukherjee represents Indian women as powerless (57). Jasmine’s willingness and ability to go against her grandmother’s wishes complicate perceptions of culture and gender roles in *Jasmine* as stable or fixed.

In these scenes, Mukherjee deals with what she more explicitly addresses in several of her non-fiction works. Although her upbringing was quite different from her protagonist’s – Mukherjee was born into a wealthy, upper-caste, Hindu family in India’s Bengal province – she consistently grapples with similar issues of flexibility, both cultural and political, in determining her own identity. In “Beyond Multiculturalism: Surviving the Nineties,” Mukherjee writes: When I was growing up in Calcutta in the fifties, I heard no talk of “identity crisis” – communal or individual. The concept itself – of a person not knowing who she or he was – was unimaginable in a hierarchical, classification-obsessed society. One’s identity was absolutely fixed, derived from religion, caste, patrimony, and mother tongue. An
Indian’s last name was designed to announce his or her forefather’s caste and place of origin. (455)

Although Mukherjee’s upbringing and experiences contrast with Jasmine’s in many ways, it is worth noting how her attitude towards Independence makes its way into the novel. Mukherjee, having been born into a comfortably colonized socioeconomic situation, is expected (and ultimately unable) to adapt to a previous, imagined, and idealized pre-colonial India. Jasmine, who is born into a socioeconomic position rendered quite uncomfortable by Independence (and particularly by the consequences of Partition), is raised in the shadow of this undivided and colonial India. Although this is not to say or imply in any way that Mukherjee advocates colonial rule, she clearly takes issue with the socioeconomic effects of Independence and Partition and means to illustrate the often-violent growing pains experienced by the new nation. She admits having witnessed “bloody religious riots between Muslims and Hindus, and violent language riots between Bengalis and Biharis” as a child in an argument she makes against fixed, ostensibly pure cultural identities (“Beyond Multiculturalism” 456).24 Moreover, in the memoir she co-authored with husband Clark Blaise after a yearlong stay in India in 1973 just before the 1975 Indian state of Emergency (and around the time young Jasmine has her future foretold in the novel) Mukherjee reveals the learned ambiguity of her feelings towards Independence. She reflects that “in those days [of Independence] we thought of them as freedom fighters but called them ‘anarchists’ and ‘terrorists,’ for we had accepted the terminology of the British
without ever understanding or sharing their emotions” (174). Later she recalls the “sick headaches” she developed around the time of Independence, which kept her from participating in the festivities on and around August 15, 1947: Were the headaches the earliest sign that I would escape and marry a foreigner? But fate sent confusing signals to some of us who were born in the decade in which Britain relinquished her hold on India. We were born both too late and not late enough to be real Indians. In the colonial ambiguities of the mid-forties we acquired our monstrous habit of loving paradoxes. We loved both the freedom fighters and the red-faced officers who carried bullets and pistols. (223) This ambiguity colors how Mukherjee perceives the “mischievous acts” a euphemism for the erupting unrest between classes – she witnesses in 1973 Calcutta (186). She 24 Born in India and 1940, Mukherjee witnessed the events both leading up to and directly resulting from sympathizes with both the masses rallying for equality and her family’s and former classmates’ desire to maintain the stability that keeps their class comfortable. National instability and communal violence play an important role in Jasmine’s narrative, particularly in her decision to leave India. After her father dies and her brothers come back home to care for Jasmine and her mother, Jasmine begins paying attention to the political turmoil inching closer to her own village, noting, “Even in Hasnapur things started to happen. A transistor radio blew up in the bazaar. A busload of Hindus on their way to a shrine to Lord Ganpati was hijacked and all males shot at point-blank range” (64). Masterji, who had lobbied so vigorously on behalf on Jasmine’s schooling and the modernization
of women, is killed violently (85-86). Soon after, a family friend introduces his radical views into Jasmine’s home, and for the first time she hears political instability linked explicitly to gender. Sukkhi’s support of the Sikh political cause conflates tradition with religion and culture, and Hindu women in particular are perceived to be threats to the purity he espouses. He says, “Renounce all filth and idolatry. Do not eat meat, smoke tobacco, or drink alcohol or cut your hair” and “Keep your whorish women off the street” (65). Incidentally, the list of items that constitute “filth and idolatry” – meat, tobacco, and a short (read: Western) haircut – includes women who are labeled as “whorish” simply for being let out of the house. Jasmine recalls, “he called all Hindu women whores, all Hindu men rapists. ‘The sari is the sign of the prostitute,’ he said” (65-66). Sukkhi dangerously scapegoats women, representing the purity of culture against which Mukherjee has positioned herself in much of her prose. This attitude is consistent with recent scholarship on women and nation that points to the ways women are appropriated for nationalist and communal causes such as Sukkhi’s.26 If before Independence women played an essential role in preserving native culture against the influence of the West, after Independence they become fodder in the violent conflicts between internal groups fighting to claim the new nation as their own. Jasmine’s narrative encourages readers to interpret these conflicts outside the paradigm of East versus West (or the “third world” as victim of Western modernization) and consider them endemic to a nation that was never culturally or religiously pure. Although Jasmine finds herself straddling two worlds even before she leaves
India, in her marriage to Prakash she comes to associate India with a fated existence, with being bound to the way things have to be. Jasmine marries young, but for love, and her husband represents the very attitude that Sukkhi rallies so vociferously against in his anti-Hindu, anti-women political rants. Prakash explains to Jasmine that “only in feudal societies is the woman still a vassal,” pleading with her to further her education rather than get pregnant right away and arguing that “[her] kind of feudal compliance was what still kept India an unhealthy and backward nation” (77-78). She is torn between what she feels are her wifely obligations and Prakash’s desire that she come to understand the value of women differently. Ultimately, Mukherjee ties Prakash’s death specifically to these attitudes about women: Jasmine hears Sukkhi shouting “Prostitutes! Whores!” after the explosion that kills her husband, and in her narration reflects, “I failed you. I didn’t get there soon enough. The bomb was meant for me, prostitute, whore” (93). Jasmine’s grandmother justifies the tragedy as God’s punishment for her marrying a man she loved rather than one chosen by an astrologer, for calling her husband by his first name, and for the couple’s modern ways (98). Thus, Jasmine is scapegoated by those in her community who believe that rigid gender roles and expectations achieve the preservation of a singular (albeit imaginary) culture.

She argues for Asian-American culture as a site for political agency and forms of expression not dependent on American forms or citizenship parts of her argument intersect with Mukherjee’s prose in important ways. For instance, she
argues against the notion of a pure, fixed culture but instead believes culture is constantly changing in response to the material conditions surrounding it. Further, she contends that Asian Americans (and presumably other minority groups) are not homogenous but defined by heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity. Complicating homogenizing minority discourse allows for a richer discussion of culture in general and also for strategic political alliances with other racialized immigrants in opposition to the dominant, majority culture against nativism and homogeneity. Indeed, at other moments in her nonfiction prose she points out that America was founded by white, slaveholding men, acknowledging that American history is far messier than the “pioneer” version suggests because of racism and the destruction of Native Americans. However, in *Jasmine*, Mukherjee develops this argument that “we must think of American culture and nationhood as a constantly reforming, transmogrifying ‘we’” as the immigration narrative unfolds and Jasmine participates in a transformation of self that demonstrates her potential to “mongrelize” both her native and adopted cultures. In her discussion of *Jasmine*, Aneja asserts the contrary, arguing that the postcolonial immigrant is limited to two choices: she can assimilate and reject her past, therefore recognizing the hierarchy positioning the West as superior; or, she can “make her difference known” and “stand apart, so that she may be recognized as other” (74). In other words, the immigrant is doomed to constantly struggle against what Aneja describes as “a’re-colonization’ of third world people living in the first world” (74). I find this argument troubling for two reasons. First, it assumes that the
immigrant has the privilege of choosing between these two models, although in reality the position of the immigrant is dictated by a need to survive and thrive in her new surroundings rather than by cultural politics. Second, it suggests that immigrants are politically and culturally impotent, unable to change what it means to be American as Mukherjee argues is the true value and responsibility of immigration. Indeed, Jasmine’s transformations drive the narrative and translate the ideals of the American Dream, such as renewal and possibility, into the language of her Hindu beliefs. She observes that “in America, nothing lasts…the monuments are plastic, agreements annulled. Nothing is forever, nothing is so terrible or so wonderful, that it won’t disintegrate” (Mukherjee 181). Although this statement could be read as a somewhat depressing indictment of American culture, it also points to some of the more celebrated perceptions of life in the United States, the more hopeful interpretation that this impermanence allows for continual improvement. While she adopts renewal as a means to becoming an American, Jasmine – sometimes violently – couches her experiences as death and rebirth, or reincarnation: “we murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the image of dreams” (29). Although she does not literally carry out her mission to commit the self-sacrificial act of sati to honor Prakash, Jasmine does symbolically murder who she was after her rape by Half-Face by burning everything she brought with her from India. At this point in the narrative, having suffered this ultimate violation, living with the memory of what happened to her seems like more of a sacrifice than death. To complicate matters, Jasmine refers to herself as Kali, so
that Half-Face’s death also becomes an important turning point in Jasmine’s first transformation, from sacrificed to sacrificer. Because her rapist in essence came to possess her, by murdering him she punishes both him and herself; having lost her purity, Jasmine attempts to subvert the meaning of sati.

Throughout the text, Jasmine refers to the various identities she has possessed and admits, “I do believe that extraordinary events can jar the needle arm, jump tracks, rip across incarnations, and deposit life into a groove that was not prepared to receive it” (127). Although reincarnation belongs to her Indian culture, she integrates each new life into her American identity, effectively transforming both.30 Like the references to sati 30 In “American Dreamer,” Mukherjee comments, “What excites me is that as a nation we have not only the chance to retain those values we treasure from our original cultures but also the chance to acknowledge that and the goddess Kali, Mukherjee uses reincarnation to show that Jasmine does not abandon her culture, but translates particular aspects of it into her new American context.

Here Mukherjee takes on the masculinist and racist “wild west” narrative of American settlement that provides the subtext for Jasmine’s alternative version of this trope. Moreover, as in the following example, she acknowledges how problematic mainstream renderings of American History can be. In “American Dreamer,” Mukherjee notes, I don’t forget that the architects of the Constitution and the American Bill of Rights were white males, and slaveholders. But throughout their declaration, they provided us with the enthusiasm for human
rights, and the initial framework from which other empowerments could be conceived and enfranchised communities expanded…

…the debate about American culture and American identity has to date been monopolized largely by Eurocentrists and Ethnocentrists whose rhetoric has been flamboyantly divisive, pitting a phantom “us” against a demonized “them.” (4-5)

It seems that in order to make a more informed argument about Jasmine, these comments about America are not only useful and relevant but also necessary. Mukherjee clearly understands that liberatory American mythology is ambiguous at best, and she does not deny the history of racism that plagues it. Moreover, she takes issue with the manner in which American culture has been defined as white and European, from a white and European perspective and it is that very argument that she writes against in a narrative like Jasmine, which defines “American” as necessarily diverse. And perhaps most importantly, in what she says about the Bill of Rights Mukherjee implies that it is up to Americans whether new or natural-born to put the framework for empowerment and enfranchisement to work. In the novel, Jasmine’s first glimpse of America also contradicts the suggestion that Mukherjee uncritically represents the new homeland. She observes, The first thing I saw were the two cones of a nuclear plant, and smoke spreading from them in complicated but seemingly purposeful patterns, edges lit by the rising sun, like a gray, intricate map of an unexplored island continent, against the pale unscratched blue of the sky. I waded through Eden’s waste: plastic bottles, oranges, boards,
sodden boxes, white and green plastic sacks tied shut but picked open by birds and pulled apart by crabs. (107)

Jasmine observes the destructive nature of American over-consumption in the energy plant pollution, garbage, and uneaten food floating in the bay where she first arrives. By confronting American readers with their wastefulness, this scene refutes Grewal’s claim that writers like Mukherjee participate in a neoliberal celebration of American consumer culture. Moreover, the invocation of Eden is clearly ironic, meant to show the discontinuity between what immigrants expect America to look like and the reality they face when dropped off at random ports. The text also reveals ambiguity regarding the American Dream itself, casting doubt on whether the possibility of transformation is always positive. After being in the U.S. for a few years, Jasmine reflects, 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 66 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. (138-139)

The fluidity and potential for self-making, which is ostensibly celebrated throughout the text, is presented here as an uncomfortable experience. Although she chooses to remain in the U.S. and become an American, Jasmine does not deny that the new culture in which she finds herself is fraught with its own perils, here depicted as a lack of stability. In fact, the America that Jasmine encounters in the 1980s is undergoing drastic political and socioeconomic changes. Post-
Vietnam disillusionment, an increase in illegal immigration, and an economic recession provide the backdrop for Jasmine’s counter-narrative, the development of a more corporate and diverse United States. We learn early in the novel that Jasmine’s newest hometown, Baden, Iowa, is profoundly affected by these changes, and her husband, a banker who provides loans to farmers, finds himself in the crossfire of a changing agricultural economy. The decline in the American agricultural economy and the difficult economic times literally make their way onto Bud Ripplemeyer’s doorstep: by the time the novel begins he is paralyzed from the waist down as a result of a gunshot wound to the back from a disgruntled farmer whose loan Bud could not approve. Jasmine observes, “In these times a good banker has to be able to walk away from dreamers and pleaders and potential defaulters;” in other words, the American dream of frontier life is clearly coming to an end as more powerful corporate interests gain control of the farming industry. More than one farmer turns to a timeline of American agriculture on the USDA-sponsored website “Agriculture in the Classroom” shows that between 1970 and 1990, the percentage that farmers made up of the labor force shrank from 4.6% to 2.6%, and that although the U.S population grew steadily, the farm population shrank from 9.7 million to 2.9 million. Moreover, agricultural goes from accounting for 19% of total exports to 9.5% of total exports. In the 1980s in particular, economic recession lowered agricultural prices and raised indebtedness among farmers, affecting the Midwest most acutely violence or suicide throughout the text, including Jasmine and Bud’s next door neighbor, a young man who is
tempted by offers from big investors to turn his deiced father’s farm into a golf course and struggles throughout the novel to keep his family land functional in order to avoid having to do so. These details challenge the mythology surrounding frontier life, calling into question the potential for the self-made, self-sufficient American settler. In Jasmine’s recognition of these unstable times, she likens her new home to the one she left behind, a move that contradicts the critics who argue that Mukherjee unproblematically celebrates the West over her homeland: I see a way of life coming to an end. Baseball loyalties, farming, smalltown innocence… In the brave new world of Elsa County, [Bud’s ex-wife] Karin Ripplemeyer runs a suicide hot line. Bud Ripplemeyer has adopted a Vietnamese and is shacked up with a Punjabi girl. There’s a Vietnamese network. There are Hmong, with a church of their own, turning out quilts for Lutheran relief. (229) Just as in the country she left behind, in the United States Jasmine witnesses economic, political, and economic change. Although these changes in the U.S. perhaps allow Jasmine to more easily participate in American culture, to be a part of the wave of transformation rather than just an observer, it is important to note that America is not depicted as being immune from instability through any sort of first-world privilege. On the contrary, anger and tension beget violence even in this all-American farming community.

The novel also explicitly links the changing and troubled times to the growing underground world of illegal immigrants in the U.S., and Mukherjee makes use of what Alejandro Portes and Rubén G. Rumbaut call the “compassion
fatigue” of the 1980s in her portrait of Jasmine’s America (xv).32 By making her protagonist an illegal immigrant, Mukherjee is able to comment on the treatment of such immigrants, their invisibility and dehumanization in the rhetoric of the debate over their status. Jasmine is able to observe a world that her native-born American husband does not see, reflecting, I wonder if Bud even sees the America I do. We pass half-built, half-deserted cinder block structures at the edge of town, with mud-spattered deserted cars parked in an uncleared lot, and I wonder, Who’s inside? What are they doing? Who’s hiding? Empty swimming pools and plywood panels in the window frames grip my guts. And Bud frowns because unproductive projects give him pain. He says, “Wonder who handled their financing?” (109) Bud’s perception is possible thanks to the luxury of his natural-born citizenship. Unlike Jasmine, he cannot imagine living in the shadows of mainstream American society, whereas she sees this invisible population everywhere she looks. In addition to calling attention to the underground world of illegal immigrants, this scene also reflects the unstable economic times, for which the influx of immigrants is blamed. As in the world she left behind, in the U.S. the most defenseless groups are According to Portes and Rumbaut, Public outcry about the growth of the foreign population and the pressure of influential newspapers and public policy centers led the U.S. Congress in the mid-1980s to consider a series of alternatives to bring unauthorized immigration under control. Following recommendations of the congressionally appointed Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy and after lengthy debate, a series of sweeping
measures were passed by both houses. The resulting Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) became law in 1986 and led immediately to a number of important changes in the character and legal treatment of labor immigrants. (361-362) Published in 1989, Jasmine reflects the immigration debates of its day, which were most likely reaching a fever pitch in the mid-1980s, when Mukherjee was working on the novel. Her previous book, Wife, published in 1975, deals primarily with the internal struggles of a newly arrived Indian immigrant and does not reflect a particular political attitude regarding immigration policy in the U.S. In fact, Mukherjee has said in interviews that Wife more directly addresses the isolation and discrimination she experienced as a minority in Canada under its multiculturalist policies. I believe the eruption of anti-immigrant sentiment during the recession of the 1980s played an important role in Mukherjee’s construction of the America

One way Jasmine transforms American culture during her stay in the Midwest is through food. She reflects, People are getting used to some of my concoctions, even if they make a show of fanning their mouths. They get disappointed if there’s not something Indian on the table. Last summer Darrel sent away to California for “Oriental herb garden cuttings and planted some things for me – coriander, mainly, and dill weed, fenugreek, and about five kinds of chili peppers” (9).

Later, she narrates, “I took gobi aloo to the Lutheran Relief fund craft fair last week. I am subverting the taste buds of Elsa County. I put some of last night’s
matar panir in the microwave. It goes well with pork, believe me” (19). Although these two comments may seem insignificant, they indicate the novel’s participation in shifting what the frontier and American Midwest represent in these rapidly changing United States. By itself, food may not serve to defend a claim that Jasmine transforms the very definition of American culture, but in these passages it symbolizes a more profound change than culinary taste.

Furthermore, she writes, “My duty is to give voice to continents, but also to redefine the nature of American and what makes an American. In the process, work like mine and dozens like it will open up the canon of American literature” (36). In other words, Mukherjee’s desire to change American literature is inextricable from her contention that the presence and civic and cultural participation of immigrants expands American identity. These attitudes towards her craft and immigrant American identity support a reading of *Jasmine* and the development of its title character as a metaphor for Mukherjee’s writing career is being shaped by a colonized past and deeply invested in contributing to a more diverse American future.