I. Introduction: Bharati Mukharjee's Strange Pilgrims

One of the best known contemporary novels in English, Bharati Mukharjee's *Jasmine*, the story of a widowed Punjabi peasant reinventing herself in America, enters the literary landscape in 1989. This research explores the enmeshing of both European-American and Indian modernities in *Jasmine* and analyzes the ruptures brought about by the demise of European imperialism. The novel challenges both the modernity of the West and the postcolonialism of India by deconstructing the familiar binaries of west/rest, modern/traditional, and innovative/ imitative. Instead, Mukharjee shows each location of her characters as the imitative of the other; each, in other words, is engaged in mimetic encounters that intermixes the modern and traditional as constitutive of modernity itself in its different locations. Women--specially, attraction to them, violence against them, and women's own engagement with modernity--figure centrally in Mukharjee's complex staging of intercultural encounters in *Jasmine*.The protagonist's exploration of herself resonates with the discourse of alternative modernity as she goes on moderating herself so as to create 'new' identities in various places from India to America. Jasmine's tour jeopardizes the very notion of universality of western modernity and its emancipatory claims. This chapter assembles some of the critical voices in Mukharjee's works and the theoretical insights in alternative modernity to frame the novelty of this research.

Mukherjee's works correspond with biographer Fakrul Alam's catagorization of Mukherjee's life into three phases. Mukherjee's works focus on the "phenomenon of migration, the status of new immigrants, and the feeling of alienation often experienced by expatriates as well as on Indian women and their struggle" (7). Her own struggle with identity first as an exile from India, then an Indian expatriate in Canada, and finally as a immigrant in the United States seems to have led to her

current contentment of being an immigrant in a country of immigrants.

The first phase, as Alam categorizes, begins with her earlier works, such as the *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Days and Nights in Calcutta*, which are “her attempts to find her identity in her Indian heritage” (10). Alam further writes:

> "The Tiger's Daughter" is a story about a young girl named Tara who ventures back to India after many years of being away only to return to poverty and turmoil. This story parallels Mukherjee's own venture back to India with Clark Blaise in 1973 when she was deeply affected by the chaos and poverty of Indian and mistreatment of women in the name of tradition. Her husband, however, became very intrigued by the magic of the myth and culture that surrounded every part of Bengal. These differences of opinion, her shock and his awe, are seen in one of their joint publications, *Days and Nights in Calcutta*.

The second phase of her writing, according to Alam, encompasses works such as *Wife*, the short stories in *Darkness*, an essay entitled "An Invisible Woman," and *The Sorrow and the Terror*, again a joint effort with her husband. “These works originate in Mukherjee's own experience of racism in Canada,” Alam contends, “where despite being a tenured professor, she felt humiliated and on the edge of being a housebound, fearful, obsessive, and unforgiving queen of bitterness” (10).

After moving back to the United States, she writes about her personal experiences. One of her short stories entitled "Isolated Incidents" explores the “biased Canadian view towards immigrants that she encountered, as well as how government agencies handled assaults on particular races” (11). Another short story titled "The Tenant" continues to reflect on her “focus on immigrant Indian women and their

mistreatment" (11):"the story is about a divorced Indian woman studying in the States and her experiences with interracial relationships" (11). Alam further writes:

> In *Wife*, Mukherjee writes about a woman named Dimple who has been suppressed by such men and attempts to be the ideal Bengali wife, but out of fear and personal instability, she murders her husband and eventually commits suicide. The stories in *Darkness* further endeavor to tell similar stories of immigrants and women. (11)

In her third phase, Mukherjee is described as having accepted being "an immigrant, living in a continent of immigrants" (9). She describes herself as American and not the hyphenated Indian-American title in yet another context:

> I maintain that I am an American writer of Indian origin, not because I'm ashamed of my past, not because I'm betraying or distorting my past, but because my whole adult life has been lived here, and I write about the people who are immigrants going through the process of making a home here . . . I write in the tradition of immigrant experience rather than nostalgia and expatriation. That is very important. I am saying that the luxury of being a U.S. citizen for me is that can define myself in terms of things like my politics, my sexual orientation or my education. My affiliation with readers should be on the basis of what they want to read, not in terms of my ethnicity or my race. (Mukherjee qtd. in Basbanes, 29)

Mukherjee continues writing about the immigrant experience in most of the stories in *The Middle Man and Other Stories*, a collection of short stories which won her the National Book Critics Circle Award for Best Fiction, *Jasmine*, and essays. These stories explore the meeting of East and West through immigrant experiences in the

U.S. and Canada along with further describing the idea of the great melting pot of culture in the United States. Alam contends on the pretext of Mukharjee's writing of *Jasmine*:

> *Jasmine* develops this idea of the mixing of the East and West with a story telling of a young Hindu woman who leaves India for the U.S. after her husband's murder, only to be raped and eventually returned to the position of a caregiver through a series of jobs. The unity between the First and Third worlds is shown to be in the treatment of women as subordinate in both countries. (100)

Her latest works include *The Holder of the World*, published in 1993, and *Leave It to Me*, published in 1997. "*The Holder of the World* is a beautifully written story about Hannah Easton, a woman born in Massachusetts who travels to India," Alam writes, "She becomes involved with a few Indian lovers and eventually a king who gives her a diamond know as the Emperor's Tear" (120).

Mukherjee's focus continues to be on immigrant women and their freedom from relationships to become individuals. She also uses the female characters to explore the spatio-temporal connection between different cultures. As is the case in *Leave It to Me*:"here, Mukherjee tells the story of a young woman sociopath named Debby DiMartino, who seeks revenge on parents who abandoned her to reveal her ungrateful interaction with kind adoptive parents and a vengeful search for her real parents" (120). The novel also looks at the conflict between Eastern and Western worlds and at mother-daughter relationships through the political and emotional topics by the main character in her quest for revenge. In the similar context Candia McWilliam of *The London Review of Books* describes Mukherjee appropriately as "a writer both tough and voluptuous" (37) in her works.

Kristin Carter-Sanborn observes after the context under which Jasmine is continually exposed to violence of identity in "We Murder Who We Were: *Jasmine* and the Violence of Identity."

> When Jasmine is suddenly widowed at seventeen, she seems fated to a life of quiet isolation in the small Indian village where she was born. But the force of Jasmine's desires propels her explosively into a larger, more dangerous, and ultimately more life-giving world. In just a few years, Jasmine becomes Jane Ripplemeyer, happily pregnant by a middle-aged Iowa banker and the adoptive mother of a Vietnamese refugee. Jasmine's metamorphosis, with its shocking upheavals and its slow evolutionary steps, illuminates the violence of identity. (573)

For Carter-Sanborn, Mukharjee's novel depicts the shifting contours of an Indian peasant being transformed by continual violence. She observes how Bharati Mukherjee has created a heroine as exotic and unexpected as the many worlds in which she lives.

Known for her playful and developed language, Mukherjee rejects the concept of minimalism, which, she says, is "designed to keep anyone out with too much story to tell" (Dhaliwal15).Amarpal K Dhaliwal further writes in "Other Subjects: Identity, Immigration, and Representations of Difference in *Jasmine*": "she [Mukharjee] considers her work as a celebration of her emotions, and herself a writer of the Indian Diaspora who cherishes the 'melting pot' of America" (16). Mukharjee's main theme, according to Dhaliwal, discusses the condition of Asian immigrants in North America, with particular attention to the changes taking place in South Asian women in a new world. He writes: "while the characters in all her works are aware of the

brutalities and violence that surround them and are often victimized by various forms of social oppression, she generally draws them as survivors" (15).

Mukherjee has often been praised for her understated prose style and her ironic plot developments and witty observations. "As a writer, she has a sly eye with which to view the world, and her characters share that quality," Anupama Jain contends:

> Although she is often racially categorized by her thematic focus and cultural origin, she has often said that she strongly opposes the use of hyphenation when discussing her origin, in order to 'avoid otherization' and the 'self-imposed' marginalization that comes with hyphenation. Rather, she prefers to refer to herself as an American of Bengali-Indian origin. (117)

According to Jain, Mukharjee's writings often correspond to her difficult life in Canada, a country that she sees as hostile to its immigrants and one that opposes the concept of cultural assimilation. Although those experiences are challenging, she come over the trauma of cultural separation through her works. Jain says that she eventually cast her life in her writings which in many ways reflect her mood of cultural separation while living in Canada.

Bharati Mukherjee is not only the most commercially successful of the women writers of the Indian Diaspora, but she is also the most controversial narrator of Indian cultural identity in a multicultural context. Some critics seek to find Mukherjee's semblance with other writers of Indian origin. Sunanda Mongia, for example, finds Mukherjee's writings modeled after V.S. Naipaul's. Mongia writes:

> It is no coincidence that her literary model was originally V. S. Naipaul. Like the Caribbean author, she has an Indian Brahmanic

> background and a way of tackling issues concerning native values and Western ideology that has been said to be provocative by many postcolonial critics. However, Mukherjee's and Naipaul's most important common trait concerns the investigation of the migrant identity. Naipaul belongs to the old form of Indian Diaspora, that of indentured labor and his Caribbean origin is as important as his Indian ancestry. (244)

Mongia however traces some of the demarcating lines that distinguish her from Naipaul: "Mukherjee is a free diasporic" (245). According to Mongia, Mukherjee belongs to that group of intellectual migrants who "expatriated for a better education and who were backed by solid financial sources" (245).Mukherjee's shifting to West is somehow voluntary, most unlike her characters in her works, who are forced because of social and economic stigma. Educated at the best school in Calcutta, the Loreto Convent school for girls, Mukherjee "picked up that distinguished English accent that has survived even her long North American residence," as Mongia puts it.

Mukherjee openly declares her affiliation to V. S. Naipaul in her introduction to *Darkness: Days and Nights in Calcutta* (1977), a collection of short stories based on her experiences in Canada, coauthored with her husband Clark Blaise:

> Like V. S. Naipaul, in whom I imagined a model, I tried to explore state-of-the-art expatriation. Like Naipaul, I used a mordant and self-protective irony in describing my characters' pain. Irony promised both detachment from and superiority over, those well bred post-colonials much like me, adrift in the new world, wondering if they would ever belong. (2)

Despite her declaration that her poetics are similar to those of Naipaul, she later began to disagree with him about his negative vision of the Third World. She rejects his view of the colonized people as helpless and doomed to failure because of their peripheral location. Mukherjee attempts a narrative and ideological response to Naipaul's view of the postcolonial world by writing a short story entitled "Jasmine," published in her collection *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988), which sets her female character in the Caribbean:

> I very deliberately set the story in V. S. Naipaul's birthplace because it was my 'in' joke, challenging, if you like, Naipaul's thesis of tragedy being geographical. Naipaul's fiction seems to suggest that if you are born far from the center of the universe you are doomed to an incomplete and worthless little life. You are bound to be, if you are born like a Jasmine, an Indian in the Caribbean, a comic character, you come to nothing. So I wanted to say, 'Hey, look at Jasmine. She is smart, and desirous, and ambitious enough to make something of her life.' (1)

Mukherjee's inspiration is drawn from a friend's housekeeper, a Caribbean woman of Indian origin whose energy stemmed from her desire to remake herself and the need to improvise morality. Thus Mukherjee creates her model of fighters, women who have to adapt and struggle for their own survival. In this way the writer highlights that the Third World subject in its imbrications of gender, ethnicity, and migration cannot indulge in Naipaul's assumed paralysis, but on the contrary goes through an intense phase of transformation: "however, as the author likes to underline, assimilation is not a one sided process. I say we haven't come to accommodate or to mimic: we have changed ourselves, but we have also come to change you" (2).

In Mukherjee's works of the making and imagining of immigrant identities in America, female subjectivity forms the primary site of dislocation. The critics assume the standpoint from where there is always a celebration of assimilation and little nostalgia for roots and authentic belonging. On this aspect they find Mukherjee profoundly differing from Naipaul. The critics here aim to analyze whether or not Mukherjee, has convincingly articulated the exuberance of immigration.

II. Alternative Modernities: A Theoretical Modality

To think in terms of "alternative modernities" is to admit that modernity is inevitable and to desist from speculations about modernity's end. Modernity today is global and multiple and no longer has a Western governing center to accompany it. In his most recent book, *Habitations of Modernity*, Dipesh Chakrabarty remarks: "Achieving a critical perspective on European forms of knowledge . . . is part of the interrogation of their colonial inheritance that postcolonial intellectuals must carry out" (18). Mr. Chakrabarty not only questions on the modernity but also focuses on how the knowledge had been Eurocentric for a long time. As a consequence, single form of knowledge has been fed to the globe especially to non-western world.

Before discussing alternative modernities we must reconceptualize the nature of the modernity conceived to originate from Europe which, as a consequence of the real economic, political, and cultural challenges to Euro-centrism issuing from non-Western areas of the world, has been challenged. Mr. Chakrabarty further claims

> I argue that we can no longer produce knowledge about Europe that does not situate Europe within its global context. As a consequence of the real economic, political, and cultural challenges to Euro-centrism issuing from non-Western areas of the world, we also must reconceptualize the nature of the modernity conceived to emanate from Europe and entertain the possibility that European-derived categories of modernity decreed to be universal may be merely expressions of a specific European particularism. (21)

What afore cited thinker insists that we must further interrogate notions taken to be universally applicable, like those of the individual, the division between public and private, gender and sexuality, development and the formation of the nation-state and

its citizen-subjects, and a linear conception of history culminating in the production of a modernity that takes the same forms everywhere. Therefore, critics who study Europe will want to look for traces of the global in the European cultural products they investigate, show how cultural production has contributed to the production of modernity, draw attention to heterogeneous voices of dissent and protest that have been occluded in dominant cultural narratives. Further these recent critics have read cultural texts as a place where suppressed elements have nonetheless been preserved, and also insist that our own interpretations are always culturally and historically-specific.

Within the frameworks elaborated by classical Western social theorists like Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, modernity itself has been taken to be a condition that characterizes contemporary Western societies, though to which non-Western societies may aspire and will eventually willingly or unwillingly succumb. However, scholars critical of Euro-centrism have shown that that the diffusion of capitalism throughout the globe i.e. the phenomenon now known as globalization has produced heterogeneous, not homogeneous, political, social, and cultural effects, bringing other parts of the world into being that are just as modern as the West, but differently so.

Another notable critic, Arjun Appadurai has called the forms of social organization he had observed in contemporary Latin American, India, and East Asia "alternative modernities." Regarding this Arif Dirlik argues: "[M]odernity may no longer be approached as a dialogue internal to Europe or Euro-America but as a global discourse in which many participate, producing different formulations of the modern as lived and envisaged within their local social environments" (17).

It is important to emphasize that thinkers like Chakrabarty, Appardurai, and Dirlik are putting into question not only our description of observed phenomena like

say, major global cities, but, more importantly for an examination of Europe and the West, also for the frameworks within which they are understood. The chapter in this dissertation, therefore, approaches the dilemmas of modernity from transnational and trans-cultural perspectives.

Charles Pierre Baudelaire is credited with coining the term ‘modernity’ (modernité) to designate the fleeting, ephemeral experience of life in an urban metropolis, and the responsibility art has to capture that experience. Conceptually, modernity relates to the modern era and to modernism, but forms a distinct concept. Similarly, the idea of alternative modernities holds that modernity always unfolds within specific cultures or civilizations and that different starting points of the transition to modernity lead to different outcomes. Without abandoning the Western discourse on the subject, the paper presenter writes from the standpoint that modernity is in truth a richly mulitiplicitous concept. Believing that the language and lessons of Western modernity must be submitted to comparative study of its global receptions, the researcher focuses on such sites as China, Russia, India, Trinidad, and Mexico along with more theoretical aspects of modernity, such as its self-understanding and the potential reconcilability of cosmopolitanism and diversity.

The records of European social thought are replete with accounts of modernity and its defining characteristics. For some, modernity begins with the rise of the capitalist world-system and its colonial forays into Africa, Asia, and the Americas. For others, it originates in the rise of bio-politics or the construction of the secular state. But whatever its key features, it's clear that the modernity to which Europe gave rise has now gone global no longer the sole domain of the relatively few societies in the far western reaches of Eurasia, "modernity" defines the life of the world at large.

To say that modernity has been globalized, however, is not to say that modernity has in each instance been globalized in the same way. Across the globe, what passes for tradition often seems to live alongside the modern, and forms of religiosity and other cultural practices deemed primitive by the champions of modernity exist along with the forms of production and exchange said to leave all that behind. Many are quick to suggest that this is, in one way or another, a failure of modernity as it appears in these sites, but an important vein of contemporary social theory often suggests otherwise. Rather than failures of the modernizing impulse, these diverse practices are best understood as signs of something else, namely alternative modernities and the complex dynamics of cultural and social modernization implied therein.

In course of defining alternative modernities, Dipesh Chakrabarty's book, *Alternative Modernities,* almost all the essays take their readers to many places around the globe: settler-dominated Australia, nineteenth-century Russia, Shanghai in the 1930s, Calcutta, Zanzibar, Trinidad, Mexico, and so on. But for all the talk about cultural difference, we always seem to find the same unsettling fallout everywhere. Modernity, that is the experience of modern times, is inevitably swathed in paradox, ambivalence, anxiety, shifting perspectives, and nostalgia. Meanwhile we all seem to get run over anyway. Despite this dismaying perception, the essays are very good, with plenty of new information and penetrating analysis. Dipesh Chakrabarty on the tradition of *adda* in Calcutta, a kind of pre-industrial chat room, is richly detailed and cogently presented. Leo Ou-fan Lee's study of Shanghai which he terms the "Paris of Asia" in the 1930s makes excellent use of Benjamin's work on Baudelaire and the Arcades project. Claudio Lomntiz on the social construction of "citizenship" in Mexico is also worthy of note. In fact, it is unfair to single out three essays without

saying that all of them are worth reading. Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar has rendered valuable service in bringing these scholars together in a single volume. As most of them are based in Chicago, either at the University of Chicago or Northwestern, one might even speak of the book as defining a Chicago School of "alternative modernities" studies.

Bill Ashcroft, in his essay, “Alternative Modernities: Globalization and the Post-Colonial” pens:

> Modernities are everywhere, at precisely the time modernity as the epochal discourse of the West appears to be on its last legs. This is one of the more paradoxical features of the global. One might declare the end of modernity in a narrow sense as Jean-François Lyotard (and postmodernism in general) does, but to declare its end even as an epoch is either to fall into the fallacy that modernity has remained a Western phenomenon, or to colonize the world with the Western paradigm of the postmodern. The sense that modernity is at a turning point comes not, I would suggest, from its imminent demise either through the “end of history” (Fukuyama) or the “clash of civilizations” (Huntington), but from its global, transcultural, and variegated character. Globalization may now be characterized by the *multiplicity* of its modernities. (81)

Ashcroft, here, regarding alternative modernities, claims that there is not a single modernity as claimed by the western philosophers. Neither there is the end of the modernity as post-modernists claim. However, there lie multiple forms of modernity according to societal, economical, theological and cultural phenomena around the globe. Further, the critic clarifies that:

> A substantial literature has developed on the related concepts of "multiple modernities," "alternative modernities," of modernity "at large," "multiple globalizations" and the principles of fluidity, localization and hybridization that they imply.1 Eisenstadt, for one, claims that the concept of multiple modernities is a refutation of the triumphalist theories of modernization of the 1950s, which assumed that all industrial societies would one day converge. The so-called classical theories of modernization (Marx, Durkheim, Weber) all posited a cultural program of modernity, which had its origins in Europe but was expected to become universal in time. (82)

In the afore cited extract, Ashcroft claims that since the modernity is different as per the space there is no single theory of modernity as claimed by the prominent western thinkers like Marx, Durkheim, Weber, etc. However, the place of modernity has been taken by the alternative modernities.

This chapter tries to examine the full terrain of alternative modernities, exploring, across the humanities and social sciences, the ways in which European modernity has given rise to its others and the promises and pitfalls of the perspective this concept tries to bring into being. It asks first about the origins of the idea and the uses to which it has been put: How can we trace a critical genealogy of the notion of "alternative modernities"? In what sites does it originate? And in relation to what problems does it develop? Second, the paper considers the ways it has shed light or, in some instances, failed to shed light on the study of capitalism in India and China, on the historiography of Afro-Caribbean cultures, and on the problem of modernity and modernization in Africa. What does "modernity" mean in contemporary developing powers such as China and India? What defines the modernity of the Afro-Caribbean

world? What can the problem of technology transfer and diffusion tell us about the dynamics of modernity and modernization in West Africa? And third, it tries to examine how and why literature has served as an important venue for the elaboration of alternative modernities around the world. What has literature meant to the understanding of modernity in China, India and Latin America? In what way do literary accounts of modernity in these sites alter or inflect what we understand the modernity of social theory to be?

In recent years, the idea of alternative modernities has become universal in the humanities and social sciences, and for good reason. Conceptually, it tries to come to terms with a whole series of phenomena dealt with through the lens of unreconstructed social theory that are easily distorted. And ethically, it insists on the coevalness of European modernity with those new versions of modernity too often dismissed as backward, primitive or irrational. The very popularity of the concept, however, has too often led to uncritical or simply distorted applications of it. Present paper hopes to re-examine the concept in order to bring its pitfalls and promises into view and thus to make better use of it in scholarship and teaching alike.

In *Alternative Modernities*, Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar's introduction is especially good in sketching some of the theories and debates about modernism and modernity that have animated the topic for more than a century. Discussing the notion of "alternative modernities" both within and against the dominant Western "tradition of reflection" that runs from Marx and Weber, Baudelaire and Benjamin, to Habermas and Foucault he identifies Arjun Appadurai and Paul Gilroy as key contemporary scholars who have contributed significantly to the development of an "alternative modernities" perspective along with a dozen or so scholars. In his book, most of the essays examine modernity from specific national and cultural sites and most work

from the same premise. We learn, once again, that modernity always eludes universalist definition. It is, instead, composed by the endless pluralism of differing cultural experiences. These differences form a kind of invisible planet that exerts gravitational influence, but the planet itself cannot be spotted. All the instruments agree it is there, but no one has ever seen it whole. The modernization process, on the other hand, is overtly visible. The techno-economic juggernaut may affect different societies and cultures in different ways and the alert scholar must think his or her way through to those differences, but, like the eighteen-wheeler hurtling down the highway, modernization pursues a logic all its own.

Taken together with his use of the spinning wheel as a practical sustainable development for India, Gandhi's dress was directed against the ideologies of masculinity and modernity. However, this reading of modernity has been reread by Dipesh Chakrabarty who focuses on the practices of modernity, in his book *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies*. Gandhi's unswerving promotion of *khadi as* it has been associated with purity, simplicity, and self-reliance is altered as Chakrabarty argues, today everyone is aware of khadi as nearly synonymous with "corruption" and "thievery" (53). So why do politicians persist with this "transparently hypocritical gesture"? (53) Chakrabarty argues that khadi can be read as the site of an "alternative modernity" (64); its disappearance, were that to happen, would signal India's complete absorption into the global market. *Khadi* is the remainder, so to speak, but not merely something left behind; it operates on a semiotic register that is not entirely assimilable to modern knowledge systems.

In the tanner lectures on human values delivered at Stanford University, Charles Taylor concludes his paper with:

> [The] explanations of Western modernity which see it not as one culture among others, but rather as what emerges when any "traditional" culture is put through certain (rational or social) changes. On this view, modernity is not specifically Western, even though it may have started in the West. It is rather that form of life toward which all cultures converge, as they go through, one after another, substantially the same changes. These may be seen primarily in "intellectual" terms, as the growth of rationality and science; or primarily in "social" terms, as the development of certain institutions and practices: a market economy, or rationalized forms of administration. (253)

In this way, although a singular concept, modernity has changed its own definition as it must be defined according to its placement. Although modernism has started from the west, it has travelled throughout the universe as the globalization hit the world. Therefore, modernity is, as Taylor claims, to be understood in the form of multiple meanings.

Supporting the same theme in his essay Two Theories of Modernity, Taylor further claims that "instead of speaking of modernity in the singular, we should better speak of 'alternative modernities' (182).

James Ferguson in "Decomposing Modernity" writes:

> The anthropologists lately have tended to focus on the first axis of the development diagram, the first product of modernity's decomposition – a happy story about plurality and non-ranked cultural difference – to the neglect of the second, which yields relatively fixed global statuses and a detemporalized world socioeconomic hierarchy. In this way, the

> application of a language of alternative modernities to the most impoverished regions of the globe risks becoming a way of avoiding talking about the non-serialized, de-temporalized political economic statuses of our time, and thus, evading the question of a rapidly worsening global inequality and its consequences. Forcing the question of Africa's political-economic crisis to the center of the contemporary discussion of modernity is a way of insisting on shifting the topic toward the second product of modernity's decomposition: the enduring axis of hierarchy, exclusion, and abjection, and the pressing political struggle for recognition and membership in the emerging social reality we call 'the global'. (192-93)

Ferguson in his essay clearly focuses upon the alternative modernities while discussing about African context. Similar to other critics and thinkers, he also avoids singularized concept of western modernity which valorizes the westernization.

Many thinkers like Charles Taylor claim that modernity is the change that has replaced the tradition. And these changes vary according the time, place and society bringing positive and superior socio-cultural, religious, and political transformation. In his essay, The Political Pop Art of Wang Guangyi: Metonymic for an Alternative Modernity, James D. Poborsa claims that

> The concept of postmodernism within a Chinese context is a rather difficult one to classify, as many scholars have argued that China does not possess the requisite socioeconomic and cultural conditions necessary for 'inhabiting' a post-modern period (Cf. Gao, "*linglei fangfa*" 1-3). Within the purview of post-colonial thought, there is also concern that theoretical modes of analysis 'imported' from the West

> necessarily carry with them a certain cultural hegemony which limits their import. (86)

What Poborsa claims in his essay that alternative modernity has emerged from the scenario of postmodern era or let me say postmodernism in particular. However, it is quite difficult to pin point the exact boundary line from where it has separated. To make his stand point clear, Mr. Poborsa further says

> As I have argued above, while such structures of thought may have arisen within different (meta)-geographical locations (or locations of cultural production), they are by no means limited to those contexts, as the relevance of theory across boundaries of difference must not be delimited within mutually exclusive spheres of intellectual and cultural production. The question of post modernity within China in the reform period is further compounded by the fact that China is still in the process of hashing out its own form of modernity, or as Wang Ning has argued, its incomplete modernity. Although this may be the case, Wang Ning has argued that "postmodernism has had no difficulty in coming onto the scene of such an incomplete modernity" (Wang Ning 35). With all the discussion of postmodernism, it might seem evident to the reader that I would wish to classify the works of Wang Guangyi as 'inhabiting the postmodern' … Chinese modernity is a consciousness of both transcendent time and reconstructed space with a clear national cultural and political territorial boundary. (87)

The critics' argument regarding modernity in China is quite different in comparison to its western counterpart where post modernism has greater influence. In the time of post modernity in the western culture, China is facing an 'incomplete modernity' in

the view of another thinker, Wang Ning. Mr. Poborsa, therefore, has concluded his paper saying that

> This tension, evocatively expressed on the canvas in the Great Criticism Series, signifies a society consuming the ideological spectacle of an alternative modernity which needs to be thought through, deconstructed, and thoroughly critiqued, if it is ever to move to a more equitable space. (90)

James D. Poborsa, therefore, has firmly asserts that such tension of western post modernity and Chinese modernity should be worked out. As Chinese modernity vastly differs from western modernity, it should be revisited and be termed as an 'alternative modernity'.

Recent literature on "alternative modernities" and the provincializing of Europe questions the notion of a singular modernity. This raises the strong possibility that more fine-grained historical, cultural, and philosophical analyses will show how distinctly modern values such as individuality and radical egalitarianism were articulated in contexts other than the capitalist West. Modernity does not have to involve a retreat into cultural relativism. What it suggests, instead, is an empirical and theoretical hypothesis that so-called pre-modern societies have been looked at through speculative and ideologically distorted lenses and that a more rigorous empirically based analysis can drastically revise our understanding of them: "Literary and cultural texts, both high canonical and popular or "folk," can play a major role in this revisionary analysis, revealing the alter-can play a major role in this revisionary analysis, revealing the alternative and non dominant layers of modernity to which scholars have remained blind" (4).

Looking carefully at this analysis in a comparative context, drawing on similar texts produced around the same time elsewhere in India, some of the essays in this study NarayanaRao; Dash and Pattanaik; Misra, etc. for instance show that the colonialist ideological opposition between native tradition and western modernity was challenged forcefully by several nineteenth-century writers in their literary creations – prose sketches, novels, and plays, for instance.

While many writers of the period implicitly accepted the ideology of "colonial modernity," others provided a more complex defense of what we may call the "rationality" of some traditional Indian social institutions. Modernity is thus a layered and complex phenomenon, and analysis of traditional culture needs to be nuanced and contextually sensitive. These writers in effect prize apart the many layers of modernity in order to analyze them critically. Instead of identifying modernity with what colonial rule brought with it – and choosing to either accept it in its entirety or reject it outright – many in the colonized world defined modernity for their times through their complexly mediated critiques of their own social traditions, both the old and the newly invented ones.

The basic assumption shared by all versions of this thesis, however, is that what the modernity that was imposed by colonialism replaced or destroyed belongs to the irretrievable past and is irrelevant for our purposes.

As presented by various critics above so-called modernity propelled by the western thinkers no longer exists. In place of this singular modernity, there has come to exist 'alternative modernities' as per the socio-cultural, geographical and eco-political context. Thus, in order to interpret the novel, *Jasmine*, alternative modernities provides strong foundation for the analysis of the chosen text.

III. Questioning of Euro-Centric Modernity in *Jasmine*

Jasmine, the protagonist cum and narrator of Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine*, 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, the protagonist 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, to Manhattan, to Baden, Iowa, and finally is off to California as the novel ends.

The novel is based on a migrant Indian female character. In order to understand *Jasmine*'s contribution to the postcolonial debate, it is relevant here to briefly discuss V. S. Naipaul's famous essay "Jasmine," a milestone in the development of postcolonial consciousness. "Jasmine" appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement* on 4 June 1964, and was republished in Naipaul's essay collection *The Overcrowded Barracoon* in the year 1972. In this essay the jasmine flower is used as a leading metaphor for the disconnection between the colonial natural world and the possibility of its representation through the English language imposed by the colonizers. Naipaul recalls that when he was young in Trinidad, he was familiar with the scent of the flower without knowing its name. Later in his life while visiting an old lady in British Guyana, he smells the scent of a flower:

> I knew the flower from my childhood; yet I never found out its name. I asked now. “We call it jasmine.” Jasmine! So I had known all those years! To me it had been a word in a book, a word to play with, something removed from the dull vegetation I knew. The old lady cut a sprig for me. I stuck it in the top buttonhole of my open shirt. I smelled it as I walked back to the hotel. Jasmine, Jasmine. But the word and the flower had been separate in my mind for too long. They did not come together. (3)

Like other postcolonial writers Naipaul attempts a critique of the imposed colonial language. This critique entails the disconnecting of the signifier from the signified, of the wording of a world and the reality of it, which is culturally and geographically different. This creates anxiety and fear in adopting the language used in such influential literatures as English since, for example, English cannot express the Caribbean atmosphere but conveys, instead, an alien mythology:

> There was, for instance, Wordsworth’s notorious poem about the daffodil. A pretty little flower, no doubt; but we had never seen it. Could the poem have any meaning for us? . . . To us, without a mythology, all literatures were foreign. Trinidad was small, remote and unimportant, and we knew we could not hope to read in books of the life we saw about us. Books came from afar; they could offer only fantasy. (4)

Naipaul’s often quoted statement is not only based on the postcolonial dissymmetry between language and representation, but also on the strong assumption that a writer’s vision could never be individual, nor could he be separated from his own society. Mukherjee distances herself from this assumption. By modifying Naipaul’s botanical

image, Mukherjee contests the paradigm of origins in the Third World as being a hindrance for success, and instead she uses the word "jasmine" to evoke the flowering of possibilities. First, she disengages the development of Jasmine's identity from any idea of collectivism and traces a clear path of rampant American individualization for her. Second, she disengages herself from any other postcolonial model. She never thinks of herself as being part of a larger school, even though she has claimed affiliation with Naipaul:

> I'm uncomfortable being bracketed with other expatriate Indian writers, like Salman Rushdie and Anita Desai. I'm simply writing about characters whom I know and who interest me. At the same time I think I am a new kind of American writer for whom novels have a big social, historical moral component. (5)

Mukherjee distances herself from her Indian origin because she wants to be defined as an American writer who expands the border of the American canon. This shift of positionality within the literary world was made by Mukherjee when she decided to move from Canada, where she was racially assaulted for being "dark-skinned," to the United States. Here she came to terms with her uprootedness and underwent the transition from the "aloofness of expatriation" to the "exuberance of migration" (3).

In a famous article that appeared in *The New York Times Book Review*, "Immigrant Writing: Give us our Maximalists!" (28 August 1988), Mukherjee accuses American writers of not including in their narration the faces and voices of the immigrants, who color and dominate all American cities, from buses to universities. "I don't think we are on Ellis Island anymore," she states, presenting a view of American society that can no longer afford to exclude new narrative models. If minimalist writings predominate, and this is supposed to be "American" fiction,

then we need to revise the literary canon, she argues, because there is a blind spot in American writing. She lists the reasons for the success of minimalism: “clever, mannered, brittle . . . Minimalist techniques seem a healthy response to too much communication, too much manipulation, and too much of everything in a society that promotes its sports, its causes and its candidates in slick sound-bites.” Mukherjee reacts against the minimalist shorthand agenda since she sees in it a dangerous white strategy to eschew the exotic, exuberant embrace of the 1960s culture, and with it the multicultural panorama of the 1980s. She invokes the Maximalists, the Expansionists, under which immigrants, expatriates, exiled people can enumerate themselves as part of the new American canon, and a more real one. Maximalism is an attempt to oppose the imposed mainstream, an illusory “majority,” and turn the gaze to the “minority” voices, the immigrant voices, the second generation Jews and Italians and Irish and French-Canadians. Immigrants may look a little different, and carry different-sounding names, but “we mustn’t be seduced by what others term exotic. Don’t choose to be an exile out of fear, or out of distaste.”

With these concluding lines Mukherjee professes her new philosophy on migration. Fight against the “static ghetto of little India,” don’t choose the rear position, don’t play the victim, you are part of America and America is made out of you. With this revisionary slogan, which the Indian critic Malashri Lal has defined as “the Maximalist Credo,” (6) Mukherjee not only intends to expand America but to change it, adding a minority point of view that is not clear-cut assimilation, but transformation. The transformation affects both sides and it is in this binary but fluid interaction between origin and modernity, traditional values and emancipation, collectivism and individualism, that Mukherjee’s female characters develop.

By letting go of her Indianness and her roots, Mukherjee positions herself as a controversial author. She claims, in fact, to have overcome her "indianness": I have joined imaginative forces with an anonymous, driven underclass of semi-assimilated Indians with sentimental attachments to a distant homeland but no real desire for permanent return:

> I see my "immigrant" story replicated in a dozen American cities, and instead of seeing my Indianness as a fragile identity to be preserved against obliteration (or worse, a "visible" disfigurement to be hidden), I see it now as a set of fluid identities to be celebrated . . . Indianness is now a metaphor, a particular way of partially comprehending the world. (7)

Mukherjee departs from it with great casualness. She makes of her mother country an India of the mind, as in Salman Rushdie's tradition, and it is exactly this aspect that bothers Indian writers and critics who see their cultural heritage used by Mukherjee as a magician's hut from which icons and myths can be picked up and blended in a literary style apt for the Western audiences.

Mukherjee is often accused by her Indian critics of creating fables, tall tales rather than realistic depictions, and of using orientalizing icons to market her books in the West. However, some critics, in particular female Indian academics whose readings of Mukherjee's texts are psychoanalytic have rightly observed that these recurring images can be read as the unconscious level of Mukherjee's narrative, which shows that her Indianness has not been overcome but returns constantly as a perturbation. This will become clearer in the analysis of *Jasmine*, the novel that launched Mukherjee as an American writer and which contains the embryo of

Mukherjee's recurrent themes about gender, migration, and identity. These issues are better controlled and developed in the freshness of *Jasmine*'s recklessness.

Jasmine is a novel written around the postcolonial, postmodern, and feminist agenda. The novel focuses on Jasmine, an underage village girl from the Punjab, who ventures as an undocumented widow to the United States, where her fate will be "rewritten."

The fabula level of the novel, which is represented by the series of events narrated, does not coincide with the *story*, which is how the events are organized and conveyed. Therefore, the novel unfolds in non-chronological order, creating a rather cinematic effect that makes it hard to follow the shifts in location, focalization and time. The narration is in the first person and is set in Baden, Elsa County, Iowa, when Jasmine is age twenty-four. The fabula, instead, begins in Hasnapur, a village in Punjab when Jasmine is age seven. The bold events that have allowed her transformation from the ill-fated village girl, Jyoti, to the self-assured emancipated American woman, Jane, are told in a narrative reversion. The narration goes in the following ways: "I'm twenty-four now, I live in Baden, Elsa County, Iowa, but every time. I lift a glass of water to my lips, fleetingly I smell it. I know what I don't want to become" (5).

The dialectic interplay between the diegesis (past) and the narration (present), separated in time but ideologically intersecting with each other, makes the evaluation of this novel more complicated than it would at first seem. The distance between past and present time also represents the distance between two cultures. But the translation of the past life privileges the language of the present life and therefore becomes an example of what Spivak calls "translation-as violation" (234).

The past is therefore constructed through constant flashbacks from the Baden location of narration, which function also as flash forwards if we consider the time and setting of Hasnapur in Punjab where the fabula begins. Jasmine is not Jasmine yet; she is called Jyoti (which means “light”) and is a seven-year-old girl, the fifth of a long line of daughters: “God’s cruel, my mother complained, to waste brain on a girl. And God’s still crueler, she said, to make a fifth daughter beautiful instead of the first. By the time my turn to marry came around, there would be no dowry money left to gift me the groom I deserved” (40).

Jyoti is presented as an unlucky child: female, intelligent, and born too late down the line of daughters to use her beauty to her advantage. She was good in Punjabi and Urdu, good at counting and at reading and was the first likely candidate for English instruction. An unhappy fate seems to await her. First, Masterji, the English teacher who supports her education, is killed in a Sikh terrorist attack. Then, as described in the opening page of the novel, a scene under a banyan tree, the astrologer predicts a life of widowhood and exile. Jyoti protests against the old man’s craziness determining her future: “Fate is Fate” (4), he tells her. Jyoti reacts to the astrologer’s attempt to reduce her to nothingness by falling down and making a star-shaped mark on her forehead, which she interprets as “my third eye.” The third eye becomes the figuration for

Bhabha’s in-between-ness, for that location of hybridization and ambivalence that allows subjugated subjects, in this case a female subaltern, to operate in the vacuum of hegemonic authority and create their own empowerment. Jyoti starts the war “between my fate and my will” (12) by creating her own inter-space for individual growth.

If, according to Hindu wisdom, bad luck seems to persecute Jyoti (she loses her father before he can marry her off), a strange logic seems to be at work for her. She will be free, in fact, to marry at the age of fourteen her brother's friend, Prakash, a twenty-four-year-old electronics student whose voice she falls in love with. Jyoti states at this point, "I was a sister without dowry, but I didn't have to be a sister without prospects" (70). Prakash plays the modern enlightened man. The wedding is, in fact, not a religious one, and no dowry is exchanged. He refuses to live with his extended family and moves with Jyoti to Amritsar, the biggest city in Punjab. He renames her "Jasmine," the name that gives title to the book, to remove from her any trace of traditional dutifulness since as he says to her "only in feudal societies is the woman still a vassal" (77). She is not Jyoti, the village girl, anymore but Jasmine, a modern city woman. Prakash wants to be called by his first name, whereas in traditional India women address their husbands formally. He also prohibits her from having children for the time being, and he encourages her to read his manuals to improve herself and to cherish a better future for them both in America, the land of possibility, in order to break away for good from Indian atavism and immutability: "Pygmalion wasn't a play I'd seen or read then, but I realize now how much of Professor Higgins there was in my husband. He wanted to break down the Jyoti I'd been in Hasnapur and made me a new kind of city woman. (77)

The voice narrating the events is that of Jasmine in Iowa at the age of twenty-four.

However, the comments and political insights offered come from backstage and betray the narrator's ideological point of view. For example, when we read, "he was basically an old-fashioned Indian patriot, with a lot of Gandhi and a lot of Nehru in

him" (88), we are aware that this cannot be Jasmine's standpoint since her role in the novel is of the naive, but resourceful migrant woman, who tries to survive in America.

She is portrayed in the active role, as the woman making sure she has no time for reflection or nostalgia. These cultural and political afterthoughts, therefore, come from an external omniscient voice that sets the whole novel into an ideological and culturally located frame.

There is, in fact, a distance between Jasmine and the authorial center. Jasmine has a limited awareness. The author has the bigger picture that contextualizes *Jasmine* historically and geographically. She was born eighteen years after partition. Her family was from Lahore and had aristocratic connections.

However, with the division of the Punjab and their forced migration from Lahore to Hasnapur, they become simple peasants. Jasmine has already inherited a tradition of exile and migration from her family. At the age of sixteen, she is planning to move with her husband, who dreams of his own Vijh and Wife shop, to the United States. It is the period of the Sikh separatist movement, when Sikh terrorists kill Hindu men and women, accusing them of being rapists and whores. The Sikhs want a state of Punjab that is independent from India and protected by Pakistan, and India fears a total disintegration of the nation state that has been based on secular principles. In this novel readers have to keep counting to establish the dates and historical situations of events. For a careful reader these are crucial data, the added layers to the unfolding life story of Jasmine.

We are now at the beginning of the 1990s, a period when several separatist movements take hold in India. Communalism, which had been condemned by Gandhi and Nehru, had retaken possession of the nation after Indira Gandhi's declaration of

the Emergency State in 1977, which greatly restricted rights of speech and freedom in order to protect the supreme unity of the Indian nation.

> Indira Gandhi's paranoia led to imprisonments and repression of public functions and created political unrest and a growing distrust in Indian democracy. Things came to a head with Operation Blue Star in 1984 when Indira Gandhi sent Indian troops into the Golden temple in Amritsar, which resulted in a bloodbath and the murder of the Sikh leader. Retaliations occurred throughout the country, the most notorious of which was the murder of Indira Gandhi herself four months later at the hands of one of her own Sikh bodyguards. (9)

The novel is set in the years of tension (the early 1980s), preceding the moment of writing, when Sikh terrorists roam the Punjab on scooters, planting bombs. Prakash is murdered for his secularist vision after he tells his Sikh friend Sukhwinder that "There's no Hindu state! There's no Sikh State! India is for everyone" (66). Jasmine is seventeen and widowed as the astrologer had foretold. In her confusion she can only find direction in her old Indian dutifulness.

She decides to go to America to commit *sati*, burning herself along with her husband's suit at the site where he would have gone to the university. But fate has a few surprises in store for Jasmine. She travels by plane to Amsterdam and starts acknowledging her uprooted identity and her minority status in the big airport lounges. Transmigration begins:

> We are the outcasts and deportees, strange pilgrims visiting outlandish shrines, landing at the end of tarmacs, ferried in old army trucks where we are roughly handled and taken to roped-off corners of waiting rooms where surly, barely wakened customs guards await their bribe.

> We are dressed in shreds of national costumes, out of season, the wilted plum age of intercontinental vagabondage. We ask only one thing: to be allowed to land; to pass through; to continue. (101)

In order to illustrate how Jasmine manages to escape her Indian fate and the deadlock that many immigrants have to face in the States, Mukherjee highlights a series of strategies that makes successful Americanization possible. Her model is based on adaptation to American otherness through a concatenation of permutations while at the same time keeping Indian diversity and mythological tales for strategic purposes. This is rather an "opportunistic" credo that works wonders in the United States of America, the land of opportunity.

This strategy has been criticized in particular by Indian critics as Mukherjee seems to use easy icons of the Hindu mythology only to market them to the West and to illustrate very unlikely passages in her novel. The writer's plan is to develop a female ethnic identity into an assimilated American at all costs.

Mukherjee's creation of fables rather than realistic descriptions does not hinder her in her investigation of diasporic imagination. Juggling a bit with Hindu mythology, a bit with the American dream, Mukherjee creates the illusion of a continuum between the oppressive Indian female identity and the new invigorating, multiplying American subject hood. Jasmine survives innumerable beginnings and ends; she has "hurtled through time tunnels" (240) and cries "through all the lives (she has) given birth to, (cries) for all (her) dead" (241).She steps from the old world ethics of submission, helplessness, and doom to the exciting new ethics of adventure, risk, and transformation.

Mukherjee interrogates the narrative of assimilation and feminism by taking into consideration the struggle that subaltern women have to undergo in the First

World. However, her claims can be bigger than her results. Mukherjee isolates, in fact, a particular figure from the Indian reality and forges her into the subject she needs to in order to validate her transformative American model. The author does not take into account the communal aspect of Indian identity but selects subjects who are characterized by inherent distinctiveness.

In so doing, the quick passage towards individualization is made possible for Jasmine. Born with aristocratic traits, Jasmine is particularly beautiful, intelligent, and capable of learning the tricks of survival. In America she is recognized and marked as special, distinctive. Lillian Gordon, her first rescuer in the U.S., strikes the chord of her difference: “You’re a very special case, my dear. I’ve written that to my daughter, so don’t hesitate to call her” (134–35).The authorial voice shifts in position between Jasmine’s inherent nobility, which distinguishes her from other immigrants and allows her to escape a future as a cleaner or paid nanny, and her naiveté as a Third World immigrant.

These passages make *Jasmine* a rather American novel, and Mukherjee tries very hard to exploit the resources of Asian exoticness to succeed and to verify the American dream. American prescriptive feminists have labeled *Jasmine* as not emancipator enough because the character is too effeminate and passive. Mukherjee has called them “imperialists.” According to her, Western feminists do not understand the implications for the gendered Indian struggle and instead impose their vision of how an emancipated female subject should act irrespective of her background and ethnicity. Mukherjee’s idea of a militant Third World position is more radical than “middle class Ms Gloria Steinem,” as she states in an interview with Maya Jaggi in *Harper Bazar*, 1990. Her idea of integration, mongrelization, and fusion conveys the transformation of Jasmine’s different identities, none of which can be wiped out, but

all of which are contained and metamorphosed in the new other. Therefore, in the constant politics of renaming, which is Mukherjee's leading device for showing the multiplying of identities, an element will remain unchanged and fixed. From Jyoti the village girl in Hasnapur, to Jasmine the city woman, to Jazzy the undocumented immigrant who Lillian Gordon teaches to learn and walk American, to Jase the sophisticated Manhattan nanny who falls in love with Taylor, to Jane the Iowan woman who marries the banker Bud Ripplemayer and centers the story, the "J" represents the element of continuity within transformation. As Elizabeth Bronfen writes,

> This "J" serves as a signifier for the dialectic of a progressive engendering of identities as these bar any already existing identities, putting them under erasure without consuming them. In so doing, Mukherjee's novel traces the parameters of the narrative discourse available to the muted subaltern woman. Jasmine's dislocated other speaks out of a self-conscious and self-induced effacement in the voice of a resilient, and incessantly self-refashioning hybridity. (10)

This is the "J," the aspect which will affect American society, all the men and people around her, that will cause their irreversible transformation. America has transformed Jasmine, but she has transformed America too: "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 of the door and in the pothole and rutted driveway, scrambling ahead of Taylor, greedy with wants and reckless from hope" (241).

These closing lines release the tension, which runs like a red thread throughout the novel, between Jasmine's predicted fate and her desire to escape and transform it. Juggling with both her destiny and her attempt at self-determination, she challenges

the astrologer's premonition that reappears frequently as a leitmotiv in the novel. On the first page her future will be read as a widow and exile, but on the last page Jasmine says, "Watch me reposition the stars, I whisper to the astrologer who floats cross-legged above my kitchen stove" (240).

Jasmine's fate does not differ from that predicted by her astrologer—she will indeed be widowed and exiled—but in America these cultural referents assume a completely new function of empowerment and multiplication. The "*porousness* of my days" (211) helps Jasmine towards self-fashioning in an upward movement within American society. However, some critics have been highly unsatisfied with Mukherjee's use and abuse of the rhetoric of migrant to support Jasmine's class mobility. Her fairy tales are far from being representative. Susan Koshy argues, for example, that "Mukherjee's celebration of assimilation is an insufficient confrontation to the historical circumstances of ethnicity and race in the United States and of the complexities of diasporic subject-formation" (70).

Mukherjee's protean feminist text overlooks the important categories of class and caste and how these categories interrelate to gender, ethnicity, and age both in India and on the new American frontier. Mukherjee's main characters are middle-class Indian women, but ignoring their class status creates the assumption that every woman is granted the same possibility of upward mobility.

Mukherjee distances herself from mainstream Western liberal feminists since their "tools and rhetoric" cannot be applied "wholesale and intact" to the situation of "some non-white, Asian women" (12). However, while Mukherjee sketches her character as self-fashioning, autonomous and self-determining, "she is deeply complicit with some of the underlying assumptions" (70) of mainstream feminism.

Though Mukherjee's feminist strategies are not totally convincing, there are some imprecision in Koshy's statement. As Mukherjee has tried to demonstrate, more or less successfully, the relation between Third World strategies of survival and First World emancipatory declarations is neither separate nor exclusionary. It is in their interpenetration, which can result in paradoxical and conflictual outcomes, that Mukherjee's revisionist discourse should be placed. Asian women use all the tools they have to succeed, and this can be detected from the boldness characteristic of Punjabi communities of emigrants, to feminine devices such as beauty and passive attitudes, to the embrace of Western feminist self-assertion strategies.

However, it is in her indication of positioning within the structure of dominance that Mukherjee's characters are flawed. They remain flat, without introspection or real believable fusion between origin and point of arrival. As such Mukherjee leaves the frontier of arrival open. Often the success and mobility of Jasmine mislead the readers with her agency and assertiveness, whereas the novel often highlights how much she is still a prey of her fate. Taylor decides to move West to California, and Jasmine joins in, but does not plan it herself. As Koshy observes, "Mukherjee's writing celebrates assimilation or whether this celebration reveals a positive attitude toward immigration. The question is, how is assimilation constructed in her texts" (13).

Chandra Mohanty has criticized Western feminism for constructing a monolithic image of Third World women as "ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family oriented, victimized etc." (51) while implying a self-representation of white women as more modern and sexually emancipated. What is created is the Western standard as the norm and referent versus a Third World standard as 'Other.'

In this regard Mukherjee's position is highly questionable. Because of her narrative reversions she presents the backwardness of the status of women in Punjab through an identification with Westernized ideas. These stem from her locating the narration, and therefore the language of emancipation, in Iowa, across-location which functions as a trope for the transformations that have already taken place.

Mukherjee unconsciously recreates a split between an idea of feminism as applied to Third World conditions and an idea of feminism applied to Third World migrant subjects in a Western society. She therefore reproduces the objectification mentioned by Mohanty by portraying Jasmine's singularity (with the inborn requisites to become a successfully developed emancipated subject in the West) as compared with other anonymous village women, backward and doomed to oblivion. As Koshy writes, "The celebration of Jasmine's singularity is dependent on flattening out the subjectivities of other nonwhite women whom she encounters and identifies with, but from whom she is carefully distinguished" (14).

Jasmine's exceptionality is developed at the expense of other nonwhite characters: "who are homogenized as "Other" and objectified as victims: all over our district, bad luck dogged dowry less wives, rebellious wives, barren wives. They fell into wells, they got run over by trains, they burned to death heating milk on kerosene stoves" (41).

This discourse constructs the Third World as a monolithically oppressive society where resistance and rebellion is impossible. Mukherjee becomes trapped by the formulation of her own discourse. If there is no escape for Hasnapuri women,

Jyoti escapes through extraordinary means, that is, her mission to commit *sati* in front of Prakash's aspired university in Florida. This narrative trick is insufficient to justify Mukherjee's claim of forwarding a situated and historically bound notion of

feminism as applied to Asian women. Her fictional imagination takes over and in constructing her mythography of making it in the *tabula rasa* that is America, Mukherjee emphasizes the fabulistic pattern of the romantic heroine rather than carefully identifying the shifts in the development of identity as centered on a well-articulated notion of race, caste, and class.

Jasmine becomes "special" and "exotic" only for Americans who see her as different from other radicalized women. As Lillian Gordon tells her "Jazzy, you don't strike me as a picker or a domestic. . . . You're different from these others" (134). Once Jasmine is set apart from a monolithic alterative, she is distinguished from and destined to a success denied other migrant workers.

Mukherjee operates the transformation of Jasmine's identity according to two main master discourses, the first relative to colonial oppression (against which technology, the mastering of English, and migration are used), and the second relative to patriarchal oppression (which is answered by becoming multiple selves, seductive and transformative). Jasmine uses the various tools provided by her male partners, adapts her identity to the role she is expected to fulfill, then destroys the master's house, moves on, and proceeds with herself realization by acquiring new master's tools: "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).

Jasmine's power is apparent in her restlessness to keep changing shapes and houses. The master discourse cannot trap her in any definite and finite location or self. In this trans-migratory mythology, the self that is fluid and accumulative can be killed and endlessly reincarnated, and this strategy defies both the patriarchal and the colonial logic.

However, Mukherjee is not transformative in her gendered and ethnicized representation because she uses clichés and stereotypes to create a post modern text for the West and an improbable mythological tale of an escaping princess from India: she presents rampant individualism with an exotic tinge. What Mukherjee lacks is thinking through difference according to which "neither the totalitarian effacement of difference nor the delirious celebration of a limitless and ever-proliferating 'in-difference'" take place (225). With its celebration of postmodern geography and free-floating identity, the novel *Jasmine* plays with the subject who is in a non position, everywhere and nowhere at the same time, consuming differences and creating mobile identities.

The most important particularity of Mukherjee's strategies is her use of language. The characters speak in a fancy, hip American slang, fuse registers and styles, and convey the unique voice of American's multiple idioms. However, Mukherjee flattens the category of difference by making most of her characters—with ostensibly different backgrounds, itineraries, and histories—speak all the same "hip, jumped-up, word jazz" (201). Nonetheless, as Pfeil adds, "the tonal and stylistic equivalence of these voices is, paradoxically, their most salient feature" (201).

Despite the declaration of discontent, Mukherjee's postcolonial assimilatory manifesto is a text where the emphasis on pleasure and agency challenges the images of fragmentation and victimization that are usually projected on those who are perceived as the other by the hegemonic subject. It is for this that Mukherjee's book must be praised. Despite its pitfalls and limits of essentialism, the novel shows that the road to America is open. This exuberance of immigration makes the text worthwhile despite its controversial aspects.

Multicultural Identity in order to position Mukherjee's discourse of assimilation within American multiculturalism, it is useful to briefly discuss Peter McLaren's article, "White

Terror and Oppositional Agency: Towards a Critical Multiculturalism." In this article McLaren distinguishes three forms of multiculturalism. These refer to the way in which race and ethnicity are mapped out in the cultural construction of difference or sameness. The first form is defined by McLaren as "Conservative Multiculturalism."It indicates the white groups who do not question their whiteness as an ethnic category but position other ethnicities and minority groups on a lower ladder of civilization. For the purpose of multiculturalism this implies that the integration of different groups by the dominant hegemonic group takes place at the expense of their specificity. The hegemonic group forwards, in fact, a common culture where the colonialist and imperialist ideology still dominates. The various ethnic groups are added on to the dominant white culture. For example, in the United States the denial of an education in Spanish is detrimental to the Hispanic community, but favors an English and Anglo-Saxon form of integration.

The second form of multiculturalism indicated by McLaren is termed "Liberal Multiculturalism." This vision defends the natural equality existing among white and other communities. However, as McLaren explains, the social and educational opportunities necessary for competing in the capitalist marketplace are not the same. Liberal multiculturalism erodes, therefore, into an ethnocentric and universalizing humanism. The legitimizing norms that govern the substance of citizenship are, in fact, identified most strongly with Anglo-American political communities.

The third form considered is "Left-Liberal Multiculturalism," which emphasizes cultural differences and suggests that the stress on the equality of races

only erases the cultural differences between races that are responsible for different behavior and social practices. The backdrop to this approach is the exoticization of "Otherness" and a nativist trend to locate differences in a primeval past of cultural authenticity. This tendency to essentialize difference by ignoring the historical and cultural situated-ness of difference runs the risk of requiring a definite identity as a starting point before a dialogue can be undertaken.

Therefore, people can be trapped in a constructed identity on the basis of their ethnicity, gender, or class without taking into account how personal experience has developed within the ideological and discursive complexities of its formation. Identity is constantly being produced through a play of differences which are linked to shifting and conflicting discursive and ideological relations. As Joan Scott writes, "experience is a subject's history. Language is the site of history's enactment" (34). Therefore, identity politics must be qualified by a more complex tracing of relations and influences that are based on hegemonic relations and on non-locatable yet fixed assumptions of knowledge.

Hegemonic Western cultures are usually not perceived as specific to any particular ethnicity, and they are hegemonic precisely because they are able to represent themselves effectively as neutral and universal. Following this position McLaren moves towards a fourth position, which entails a radical understanding of the concept of difference. With "Critical Multiculturalism" he wants to stress the central task of transforming the social, cultural, and institutional relations in which meanings are produced. If conservative and liberal multiculturalism stress "sameness," and the left-liberals stress difference, they create a false opposition because both perspectives are based on an essentialist logic. In both cases identity is presumed to be autonomous and self-contained. Critical multiculturalism starts from

the notion of differences as constructed between and among groups. Critical multiculturalism interrogates the construction of difference and identity in which the operations of power and privilege are analyzed, examining how structures of exclusion are still at work despite the declaration of equality among differences.

If we follow this classification to analyze how Mukherjee represents assimilation in *Jasmine*, then we have to admit that she skips among the different forms of multiculturalism, holding to only one constant pattern, individualization. Mukherjee puts forward a conservative multiculturalism when she depicts Jasmine as a special case, as an elected immigrant who fulfils the right requirements to be assimilated within the dominant white model of American society.

Jasmine shows the capacity to transform and to adapt in order to survive and to acquiesce to the "special" role already written for her: "I wanted to become the person they thought they saw: humorous, intelligent, refined, affectionate. Not illegal, not murderer, not widowed, raped, destitute, fearful" (171).

However, at the Hayes' Jasmine has to adapt to that democratic idea that she is as worthy as they are, as cultivated and articulate. This idea of liberal multiculturalism sees no differences among human beings: "Taylor didn't want to change me. He didn't want to scour and sanitize the foreignness. My being different from Wylie and Kate didn't scare him. I changed because I wanted to" (185).

Jasmine's efforts to improve herself open the question of which standard will prevail and for whom must this improvement be performed. Jasmine says "for herself," expressing that leading concept of Mukherjee: individualism. Only if you detach yourself from your traditional heritage and fixed familiar bonding can you have a chance at success. Individualism, hence, is an illusion that is upheld by projecting cultural specificity exclusively on others. And therefore

Jasmine becomes unique, different, and special in order to fulfill her path towards individualization.

She plays her exotic card to conquer the various men, and she uses modestyand naiveté in order not to infuriate the women whose men she steals, but to win them over as well: “Karin, Bud’s ex called me a gold digger” (195). Or, “‘Taylor loves you,’ Wylie said, ‘but you must know that’” (182). WithBud Ripplemeyer there is an evident case of left-liberal multiculturalism since he falls for Jasmine because of her otherness: “Bud courts me because I am alien. I am darkness, mystery, inscrutability. The East plugs me into instant vitality and wisdom. I rejuvenate him simply by being who I am” (200). Differences are necessary for the construction of identity and within the notion of left-liberal multiculturalism, differences are emphasized and fixed into a static notion of alterity. No one investigates what constitutes Jasmine’s Indianness. In America, Lillian Gordon tells her, people know only walking and speaking American: if you divert from this assumed majority, then you have to qualify as other-than-American. Lillian Gordon carries out her humanitarian mission under the flag of conservative multiculturalism, inciting Jasmine-Jazzy’s rapid integration.

However, Jasmine survives in America and guarantees her own upward mobility not through purely playing by the rules but also by making strategic use of her difference as an Asian in order to acquire maximum visibility and privileges. Mukherjee has been criticized for accepting Left-liberal Multiculturalism, for essentializing both the notion of Indianness and of Americanness into coded and prescriptive categories. India is fate, immobility, oppression; America is a rewriting of destiny, change, and empowerment. Mukherjee assumes in her novel that there is only

one way to be American: by asserting one's own individuality and centering others around the self.

IV. Redefining Modernity

We can also identify forms of what McLaren defines as Critical Multiculturalism, since the historical and situated difference of Jasmine's Indianness moves from proceeding unencumbered on her path towards self-emancipation. When she sees Sukhwinder, the Sikh terrorist in Central Park, she knows her past has come to reclaim her and that she cannot shake off her previous role despite the promise of Americanness. Therefore, her identity is relational in the sense that only by maintaining her American environment can she asserts a certain kind of identity, whereas in other situations her construction will be immediately demolished. Mukherjee does not ignore the exclusionary structures of power that are still at work within swinging discourses of equality. At a certain point Jasmine remarks, "I wish I had known America before it got perverted" (201), implying that the American dream of a happy melting pot had lost its magic and the different immigrant communities were competing with one another, often with fatal consequences. Whether that pure America ever existed is not Mukherjee's concern, as it is in perversion that the imbalances of a power structure are revealed.

The democratic people, the Hayeses, who are so fond of her, are really interested in other cultures and have exquisite collections: The apartment was stocked like a museum. Wylie and Taylor weren't

> Simple acquisitors. . . .some of [the art pieces] seemed offensive to blacks or women or red Indians. There were slave auctions posters from New Orleans in 1850 . . . ; old color prints celebrating the massacre of an entire Indian village down to the last baby; a poster of a naked woman with parts of her body labeled choice, prime, or chuck, as in a butcher shop. (174)

The minor cultures are represented not only as other but they are clearly objectified with violence, exploitation, and commodification. This is part of the making of America, part of the American dream and identity. However, by letting Jasmine-Jase be part of the American dream, the Hayes compensate for the exploitation upon which their prosperity is based and make Jasmine-Jase complicit with the hegemonic group. This intersection of historical responsibility is rendered more apparent when Jasmine visits Wylie's new lover's apartment:

> He had been to India several times as a guest lecturer in Delhi, as a WorldBank consultant, as a U.S. government aid officer. He spoke Hindi passably and owned so many Indian paintings and tapestries that his living room looked to me like a shop or an art gallery. His wife was an Africa specialist, so the walls were hung with spears and masks that competed with mirror-work cloths and Moghul miniatures. (184)

There is obviously not only a commodification of the Third World as exotic and interesting, but almost an artificial need to equalize the values of other cultures to those of America, or even to reduce them to a symbolic world, the world of art in which the Third World is reduced to fetishes and token figures. These figures decorate the modern American apartment of "politically correct" people, Americans who do really care for the rest of the world and who do have humanitarian positions within the capitalist structure of exploitation. Stuart works as an aid officer for the US, covers an international function for the World Bank, and knows enough about other cultures not to be an exploiter but a politically correct treasurer.

In his article "The Post-colonial and the Postmodern" Kwame Anthony Appiah offers an analysis of the marketing of African art works in American museums. The selection of pieces for a show at the Center for African Art in New

York clearly demonstrates through a politics of inclusion and exclusion how “Africa” is made for the American postmodern world. David Rockfeller, the art collector “who would never surely criticize sculptures from other ethnic groups in terms of (his) own traditional criteria” (222), tries to assimilate the pieces “between considerations of finance, of aesthetics and decor. In these responses, we have surely a microcosm of the site of the American in the contemporary—which is, then, surely to say, postmodern—America” (223). Appiah’s comments on African art within Western collections unveil the hegemonic colonial structures that are still at work despite the postmodern, postcolonial equalization of all cultures. Appiah’s long quote here is meant to offer a clear picture of the concept of multiculturalism in its historical shifts:

> The incorporation of these works in the West’s world of museum culture and its market has almost nothing, of course, to do with postmodernism. By and large, the ideology through which they are incorporated is modernist: it is the ideology that brought something called “Bali” to Artaud, something called “Africa” to Picasso, and something called “Japan” to Barthes. [This incorporation as an official Other was criticized, of course, from its beginnings: Oscar Wilde once remarked that “the whole Japan is a pure invention. There is no such country, no such people.”] What is postmodernist is Vogel’s muddled conviction that African Art should not be judged “in terms of (someone else’s) traditional criteria.”For modernism, primitive art was to be judged by putatively *universal* aesthetic criteria; and by these standards it was finally found possible to value it. . . . For *post*modernisms, by contrast, these works, however they are to be

> understood, cannot be seen as legitimated by culture—and history—transcending standards. (Appiah239)

If modernism regarded primitive art as part of a universal aesthetic code, postmodernism has erased the hidden relations of power between dominant and dominated cultures through a politics that sees culture disentangled from its historical context, equalizing cultures by abstracting them so as not to deal with notions of difference and otherness but rather by assimilating them into the dominant pattern of commodification.

This is true of Jasmine who functions as an exotic art work to be integrated into an American multicultural pluralism. Like the Hayes' paintings and Stuart's valuable collection, she enters a market place where she can be commodified according to her "financial, aesthetic and decor" applicability in a Western environment. Mukherjee's resistant discourse, however, requires that the Western environment cannot be the same once it has been in touch with Jasmine, that her tornado, rubble-maker nature affects identity construction both ways. It is through this quality to confront and subvert the concept of Americanness that Jasmine has an agency and is empowered. Bud's innate racism leads him to acquire an Asian wife and to adopt a Vietnamese refugee as a son, to be deserted by them both; the undermining of his American dominance and values are symbolized by his becoming crippled and having to live in a wheelchair. Jasmine has moved progressively away from the conservative multiculturalism of Lillian Gordon ("walk American") to the Liberal multiculturalism of the Hayes ("you don't have to change") to a left-liberal multiculturalism in which her difference is enhanced in Iowa. The conclusion is an attempt to represent critical multiculturalism with her decision to move on and to leave everything behind, everything that was destroyed by her tornado.

However, the dissymmetrical power structures are really explored by Mukherjee in *Jasmine*, which assists us from seeing the novel as an act of alternative modernity. She has sketched more general traits, thus opening up the discussion on multiculturalism. With these general traits she has stumbled on essentialisms, really thinking through difference and identity, and criticized existing categories that are appealing and comprehensible to the West. She has created an alternative representation of agency and pleasure, but sometimes the subject consents to hegemonic representations of transnational and multicultural reality. Mukherjee has explored this consent as a two-sided alteration/infection. Furthermore, by following the path of consent to hegemonic structure, she has made her minority text extremely successful, thus opening the discussion on subaltern migrant identity to a wider audience and stimulating further representations.

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