Jasmine as a Fantasy

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Abstract:
The paper looks at Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* to assess the rendition of a "liberated woman" and finds it to be vague and insufficient on account of the inability of the heroine to break through, what Adrienne Rich insists are the political institutions of "heterosexuality" and "motherhood". Emotional, economic or sexual alternatives that proffer new and fulfilling roles are conspicuously absent in the novel. The absence of these alternatives in Jasmine is juxtaposed to other powerful narratives by women of color, such as for example Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1983) where such alternatives are explored. Jasmine concludes by invoking a fairy tale economic and emotional rescue of the colored heroine by white male figures, and in doing so the novel enacts, what Adrienne Rich calls the "lie" of "the romantic" in Western tradition. The conclusion appears fantastic because of Jasmine's integration into the white society. Walker's Black women, on the other hand, struggle to reclaim their dignity even within their own communities in a process that takes decades. The heroine's search for an identity appears to be ultimately self-limiting and problematic as resolutions are sought within the conventional structures of gender, race and class.

1 "I wrote poems. I was going to be the next Adrienne Rich," says a pregnant character to the heroine of Jasmine (1990) as the former contemplates the devastating consequences of motherhood on her aspirations (Jasmine 34). This reference to Adrienne Rich inserts Rich's thematic concerns regarding gender, motherhood, mothering, compulsory heterosexuality and the lesbian continuum, amongst others, that occur in her poems and prose, into the novel *Jasmine* by Bharati Mukherjee, an Indian diaspora writer. This paper looks at choices made by the title character of *Jasmine* through the lens of Rich's ideas. In *Jasmine*, the heroine who is brown (or "wheatish") due to her North Indian Asian descent, contends with issues of race, class and gender as she embarks on quest for selfhood on the North American continent (33).

2 The heroine's quest is hampered by her condition of marginality that has been thrust upon her as she is what Mary Ellen Snodgrass describes as an illegal "unassimilated immigrant Asian" women with a "makeshift" life in North America (384). The Buildungsroman of this heroine begins in Hasnapur, India and concludes in America. As the story progresses, the protagonist transforms from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jane. The narrative depicts the heroine as a girl child and as a young wife in Punjab, India. Following her husband's death in a blast caused by terrorists demanding a Sikh state, Jasmine travels to Florida as an illegal immigrant hidden in a trawler. Upon reaching Florida the captain of the ship rapes her and she murders him in turn. She is rescued and provided shelter by a woman called Lillian Gordon. She then moves in to live at Flushing Ghetto with a family of her husband's friend called Proffesorji. Subsequently she leaves Flushing Ghetto to become a

nanny for Taylor's and Wylie's adopted child. After Wylie leaves Taylor, he shares feelings of love with Jasmine in a park in New York. Just then Jasmine sees the man who killed her husband. She is frightened and goes to Iowa where she starts living with Bud as a partner. The novel ends with Jasmine (who is pregnant with Bud's child after being artificially inseminated) deciding to leave him and move to California to live with Taylor.

3 Jasmine's story, according to Anita Myles in her work *Feminism and the Post-Modern Indian Women Novelists in English*, was received with "tremendous response and ebullience from critics and readers alike, being translated into eighteen languages due to its undaunting rendition of a "liberated woman" from a third world nation deeply rooted in traditions and dogmas" (Myles 113). The paper interrogates this rendition of a "liberated woman" and finds insufficient and limited evidence of any such liberation in the denouement. This is because the heroine's choices do not challenge the boundaries of gender, race and class thrust upon her. As her choices are made within the very structures of gender, race and class that produce the conditions of her inferiority, these conditions ultimately are neither challenged nor dismantled in the novel. Emotional, economic or sexual alternatives that might offer respite are thus conspicuously absent in *Jasmine*.

4 The rendition of a "liberated woman" in *Jasmine* is vague and insufficient on account of the inability of the heroine to break through, what Adrienne Rich insists are the political institutions of "heterosexuality" and "motherhood" (*Signs* 637). The novel does not destabilize notions of gender particularly as expressed through sexual practice. Sexuality, Vincent Leitch summarizes in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, is viewed in modern culture as a fundamental constituent of identity. Leitch adduces to Judith Butler's research which following Foucault's work in *The History of Sexuality* (1976), drawing attention to the fact that "one's sex and our sexual desires and activities are profound indices of who we are" (Leitch 2485). Due to the heroine's choices emotional and financial emancipation is available to her only through heterosexual relationships. Her choice to organize her life around the political institutions of "heterosexuality" and "motherhood" is despite the experience of trauma caused by violence unleashed upon her by various versions of masculinities engendered by patriarchy. These versions consider violence as a legitimate tactic to contain, confine, limit women's freedom and assert power over her by keeping her in a state of "fear"(Smith x). Such versions are exemplified in descriptions of men in feudal Hasanpur who bring "rape, ruin, shame" on women; Sukhvinder the terrorist whose separate Sikh nation is envisioned as a space where men continue to wield control over women's bodies through prescription of dress code the transgression of which can incite not only

verbal abuses but also death; and Half-Face (*Jasmine* 55). The rendition of a "liberated woman" is insufficient secondly on account of the novel's preoccupation with what Rich differentiates between the patriarchal institution of motherhood as against the private experience of mothering.

5 Jasmine's choice of heterosexual relationships, despite the attendant trauma of violence, signifies Jasmine's preference for performance of "normative sexuality". "Normative sexuality", Judith Butler asserts in *Gender Trouble* (1990), only "fortifies normative gender" (46). These normative notions of gender are "naturalized and reified" and only "support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power (Butler 46). Butler however admits that "subverting and displacing" normative notions of gender is a difficult task as they keep gender in its place by "posturing as the foundational illusions of identity" (46). These normative notions of gender are, according to Leitch " written into our very psyches as well as into the dominant institutions of political and social life" (2485). Given this hold of normative notions of gender on the psyche, Jasmine does not even attempt to challenge the norms of gender in terms of roles and power relations. Malashri Lal, a leading scholar in women's studies, notes that "Mukherjee's heroine [Jasmine] carries conservative India and female socialization within her wherever she goes and never seems to climb out of the patriarchal structures of her village upbringing" (152). The narrator's trajectory from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jase and finally to Jane recreates, according to Lal, the India of "sharply defined gender roles" through the "continued note of woman's dependency upon man, emotionally and materially, no matter which country—India or America" (152). *Jasmine's* narrator refers to all the men Jasmine enters into relationships with as her "husbands" and furthermore asserts that the protagonist assumes the traditional role of the "caregiver, recipe giver, preserver" (Lal 215).

6 Jasmine also attempts to fulfill the status of a child bearer, which as Rich says has been made into a "major fact" of a woman's life (*Of Woman Born* 11). In order to achieve this socially mandatory status, the heroine of *Jasmine* endures the discomfort of artificial insemination, an assisted reproductive technology. Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART) is intrusive, costly, and painful, and carries the risk of multiple births. Jasmine is exposed to the risks of ART's negative effects like any patient. Her choice to perform this role and subscribe to the idea of normative trajectory of womanhood is particularly problematic as the text alludes to numerous instances of gaps in Bud's and her relationship. Her choice of opting for motherhood is problematic particularly because it appears to be an act of economic desperation. It appears that she values Bud merely for providing basic facilities such as for

example the bathroom. An access to such amenities comprises her notions of victory over the vastly different life she left behind. Companionship with Bud, a rich banker, appears to serve the function of providing her with economic stability. The reader infers emotional reticence on heroine's part as she insists that Bud "chose" her and that she did "nothing to encourage it" (*Jasmine* 204). Rather she describes herself as a "passive person" and hence also a passive partner in the relationship (*Jasmine* 200). The heroine also appears strained due to Bud's increasing emotional demands due to which he requires repeated assertion of her love. At the level of sexual companionship, the novel alludes to Jasmine's unsatisfactory sexual relationship with Bud following his paralysis. Thus even though Jasmine becomes pregnant with Bud's child, she does not want to ultimately marry him. She uses the lens of normative gender in her description of Bud as being no longer a "whole man" following his disability as he can no longer impregnate her (*Jasmine* 36). Interestingly she is timely rescued from an official marriage to Bud by Taylor's appearance at the door in a fairytale ending. The text falls silent about her private experience of impending motherhood that Rich, in *Of Woman Born* (1976), explains can be a source of power. It can be argued that the version of motherhood one encounters in *Jasmine* is deeply oppressive as the heroine does not acknowledge at any point the value of such role for her. The conditions of the heroine's pregnancy reveal the duality in the meaning of motherhood

> one superimposed on the other; the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women –shall remain under male control… motherhood as institution has ghettoized and degraded female potentialities. (Of Woman Born 2)

7 Both the traditional roles of a "caregiver, recipe giver, preserver" or motherhood, that Jasmine relies on and upholds, have been fundamentally formulated by patriarchy's control over a woman's labour. Emotional, economic or sexual alternatives that proffer new and fulfilling roles are therefore conspicuously absent in the novel.

8 The absence of these alternatives in Jasmine can be juxtaposed to other powerful narratives by women of color, such as for example Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1983). Like Mukherjee's novel, *The Color Purple* also contends with issues of race, class and gender in the North American continent. In Walker's novel, a range of relationships between women are depicted that can be explicated through Adrianne Rich's idea of the "lesbian continuum". This term "encompasses a wide variety of relationships between and among women, ranging from

> the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, [to]the giving and receiving of practical and political support! By desexualizing the term *lesbian*, Rich

> calls … attention to the variety of bonds formed between women and to the various functions those bonds play in women's lives. (Leitch 1761)

9 The critic Charles Proudfit explains that in *The Color Purple*, these relationships over an extended period of time, enable Celie who is "a depressed survivor-victim of parent loss, emotional and physical neglect, rape, incest trauma and spousal abuse–to resume her arrested development and continue developmental processes that were thwarted in infancy and early adolescence" (19). These relationships are evoked in "ministrations of Celie's younger sister Nettie, to Kate and Sophia and to Shug's facilitating Celie's sensual awakening to adult female sexuality and a healthy emotional life" (13). These bonds do not merely nurture her at a psychological level but also allow Celie to become economically self-reliant when she becomes an owner of a store. Thus from being a property of her father and husband, she herself ultimately becomes an owner of property. Thus these bonds between women emerge as a counter-discourse against the "institution" of "compulsory heterosexuality" that has traditionally been used by men, including of their own color in *The Color Purple*, to exploit women to the extent of dehumanizing them (Signs 637). Unlike Walker, *Jasmine* does not challenge uneven gender relationships and continues to operate within the paradigm of patriarchy without even for once questioning the prescribed script of compulsory heterosexuality.

10 It is also argued that *Jasmine's* choice of performing the prescribed script of compulsory heterosexuality should not be linked to the rhetoric that same sex love is purely a Western concept. On the contrary, according the Indian mythologist Ruth Vanita's essay, "Same-Sex Love in India: A Brief Overview"

> [t]here is a wealth of material relating to same-sex love in Indian languages, literatures, visual arts, and modern mass media […] However, modern South Asian scholarship, both in India and West, has tended to ignore this material […] This attitude has fostered the popular belief that homosexuality is an aberration imported from Europe or West Asia, and was nonexistent in ancient India. (166)

Vanita, through the examples from Indian mythology, makes a case for the "non-reality of gender and the non-absoluteness of heterosexuality […] Ancient Indian philosophy provides us with tools to undo the categories of gender and of sexuality" (171). Vanita's study is important in comparing *Jasmine* to another text like *The Color Purple* because it justifies comparing Jasmine's choice to operate within the paradigm of heterosexual patriarchy with Walker's ideas of sisterhood and lesbian relations. Vanita shows that lesbian relations are not an alien concept in India; as the pre-colonial narratives in Vanita's essay suggest that same-sex love occupies a unique space in the Indian consciousness. To view same-sex love as an

alien concept strengthens the argument that heterosexuality is natural and that lesbian relations are deviant and that the West is the site of this deviant behavior.

11 If Mukherjee is heterosexual and/or she is not discussing lesbian themes, she may view heterosexual relations as a natural choice. Homosexuality does not seem to be an option for Jasmine. Rather in *Jasmine*, relationships between the heroine and other women are palpably absent. This is despite the fact that in her moments of acute crises, particularly when even her very survival is at stake, it is only women figures such as Lilian Gordon and Mother Ripplemeyer who come to her rescue. The emancipatory potential of these scenes is not developed in the novel. On the contrary, the novel eschews this potential by invoking a fairy tale rescue of the heroine by white male figures such as a rich banker like Bud or the highly educated Taylor. In doing so the novel enacts the "lie" of "the romantic" in Western tradition according to which "women are inevitably, even if rashly and tragically, drawn to men… that primary love between the sexes is 'normal'; that women need men as social and economic protectors, for adult sexuality, and for psychological completion" (*Signs* 657).

12 The novel's insistence on operating within the paradigm of patriarchy however co-exists with undercurrents of an acknowledgement of threat from patriarchy. This threat is symbolized in the recurrent image of a dog. In the novel, the image of the dog undergoes a gradual metamorphosis from a carcass to a rabid dog and finally to a puppy. The novel begins with Jasmine's childhood memory of a rotting dog carcass floating in the water. The carcass disintegrates into two parts the moment Jasmine accidentally touches it. In this scene, a sense of death and disintegration is conveyed. The carcass is an objective correlative of constant threat of death and disintegration to the being and body of a young girl growing up in a village in Punjab where they were considered unwanted by their families to the extent that for them "daughters were curses" (*Jasmine* 39). In order to eliminate this "curse," her society commits many acts of violence against girls that attempted to erase their very being. For example, the novel includes a reference to the "ruby red choker of bruise around" the throat of the infant narrator that suggest attempted infanticide through strangulation (*Jasmine* 40). The novel also mentions the screams of a baby girl thrown down a well in Hasnapur so that the family could rid itself of the liability of having to raise a girl child (*Jasmine* 233). Another act of violence is the immolation of Jasmine's friend, Vimla. Vimla is a widow and even at the age of twenty-two, her and Jasmine's patriarchal society sees Vimla as an entity to erase

(Jasmine 15)[1]. *Jasmine* does not give a reason for Vimla's immolation following her widowhood because the reason is assumed to be obvious to the reader. However, Jasmine's, Vimla's and their society's attitude toward Vimla's widowhood can be understood by reading social researcher Alka Ranjan's paper titled, "Determinants of Well-Being Among Widows—An Exploratory Study in Varanasi." Ranjan writes that "the historical perspective considers widowhood as a form of 'social death'" (4089). The reason is also explained in scholar Swati Gosh's essay "Lives of Seclusion." Gosh highlights

> the anxiety involved in controlling the sexuality of young, 'non-remarried' widow […] The fertility of the widow in her reproductive years, a potential threat to the honour and purity of her husband's lineage, was a constant reminder to the patriarchal society at large in asserting control over widows. (848)

Ghosh also discusses "torture, suicide or murder mostly of the childless, land-owning widows" for appropriation of a widow's property (850). These murders or attempted murders of women in *Jasmine*—by infanticide or suicide—portray the threat of death and erasure that Jasmine perceives from her immediate environment. This sense of death, erasure and disintegration is projected upon the a rotting carcass of a dog floating in the water which disintegrated into two parts by the heroine's accidental touch. That it disintegrated upon her touch points to the relation between the meaning of the image of the dog and her.

13 The narrative continues to evoke yet another image of a dog when it refers to a growling mad dog which attempts to attack the women during the "latrine hour" which was the time when the village women defecated in the fields in groups (*Jasmine* 53). A mad dog appeared growling at the scene while the perverted men from the village as usual sat across the stream ogling at them. The male gaze is an assertion of power and is intended to dehumanize the women by denying them even fundamental access to performance of their

[1] These practices have at various stages been commented upon by researchers. To begin with the census reflect the skewed sex ratio in 0-6 age group suggesting the prevalence of the practice of infanticide. Mahendra K Premi in his research article "The Missing Girl Child" published in Economic and Political Weekly (Vol 36.21 (2001): 1875 – 1880) points out that the census of 2001 (conducted nearly ten years after the publication of Jasmine) has highlighted specifically the "adverse sex ratio at birth" in Punjab and Haryana (EPW 1875). The researcher using the statistics points out that "the decline in sex ratio of population in 0-6 age group …from 945 in 1991 to 927 in 2001" is "a matter of deep concern" (Premi 1875). The practice of female infanticide in various regions of India is an age old practice and has even been mentioned in archival records of British colonial officials. L. S. Vishwanath in his essay "Female Infanticide—The Colonial Experience" in Economic and Political Weekly 36. 35 (2001): 3411–3412 refers to a British resident called Jonathan Duncan who as far back as December 1789 came across this practice (2313). The researcher notes that the justification for the practice was provided on the grounds that castes which practiced it (usually those higher in the hierarchy) "could not afford the huge dowries or the incalculable marriage expenses having a daughter entailed" (Vishwanath 2313). Besides dowry the family is also burdened with vulnerability to family honor arising due to possible defilement of the female's body or even moral reputation. Vishwanath notes that "though caste is pervasive in Indian society and politics, the government of post-independence India decided to discontinue caste enumeration in the census. Therefore it is difficult to say if the castes which previously resorted to female infanticide still maintain that tradition" (3411).

basic bodily functions due to the fear of impending rape. In order to deal with the intimidation by these men, the women stick together. As the heroine contemplates “rape, ruin, shame”, she confuses this growling to be the sounds indicating the approach of these men. The “enemy” however turns out to be a mad dog and not the perverted men which Jasmine is able to stave off with a staff (*Jasmine* 56). The scene relates these perverted men to the mad dog. The dog’s eyes that “glowed red” and the foaming slack jaws also appear to be describing the lecherous eyes from which the male gaze is being directed towards the women. Jasmine “hated” and “distrusts” all dogs implicitly conveys emotional reaction to patriarchy (*Jasmine* 56).

14 Significantly, as the novel concludes in America, the novel presents an image of a harmless puppy that Jasmine pities (*Jasmine* 201). The reference to a puppy is also invoked in a quiet family scene on one Sunday when Jasmine, Taylor and Taylor’s child, Duff, take the supper in a basket to a park. By this time, Taylor’s wife has left him, and Jasmine acknowledges to herself her love for Taylor. In this familial scene, both Taylor and Jasmine tickle Duff who “rolled on the grass” and declared herself to be like a puppy (*Jasmine* 186). Soon Taylor too “rolled over on the grass” (*Jasmine* 186). In this scene Taylor’s companionable conduct does not reflect the traditional deportment of a man asserting his authority over women and children. The reference to a dog as a puppy at this juncture can be viewed as representing a version of patriarchal social and family structure which is far more egalitarian than that in India. It is thus not surprising that the image of a puppy figures when she meets lovers such as disabled Bud and Taylor. This representation is subversive as it dehumanizes men by equating them to a dog. However Jasmine does appear to believe that a heterosexual marriage can be reformulated to function without threatening a woman’s body and existence.

15 Since Jasmine does not enter into emotional or sexual bonds with women, we do not know whether or not Jasmine is conscious or aware of the very idea of lesbian relationships—yet it cannot be denied as a possibility available to Jasmine simply because it is not alluded to or directly referred to in the novel. Jasmine’s decision to operate within the norms of patriarchy, despite the associated threats to her body and subjectivity, implies a refusal to identify and challenge the structures that promote oppressive gender relations. In contrast, Walker in *The Color Purple* proposes the idea of sisterhood and lesbian relations as a sexual, political and emotional position that enables the Black woman to counter the oppressive forces of race, gender and class. Racial identity is crucial for Celie but Jasmine distances herself from her own Indian identity as she transforms herself to fit the locations

she relocates at in USA. The novel devalues the role race and class play in the life of a woman of color in America and therefore, the denouement in the novel is a fantastic one (meaning not realistic). It is fantastic because the author does not condemn the protagonist to versions of oppressive heterosexual relationships in America such as the one that led to her rape when she illegally arrived in the country. Rather the protagonist, at the conclusion, pursues a relationship with Taylor who is sexually and intellectually far more equipped than the paralyzed Bud. This relationship is fantastic as Taylor is a white professor in the area of "subnuclear particle physics" at Columbia University, while Jasmine, on the other hand, is a far less educated woman of color and located in the margins of America because she is an illegal immigrant. Due to her status of an illegal immigrant she cannot extricate her own self from poverty and desperation and join the mainstream through education and gainful employment. Through Taylor the heroine can achieve class elevation since he belongs to the creme de la creme of the intellectual elite and relocates with her at the end to California—a site of perceived considerable economic affluence. Taylor thus becomes a route through which the "promise of America" if fulfilled (*Jasmine* 240). Thus the conclusion of Jasmine is largely fantastic and uncritical of attempts by the dominant discourse of race, class and gender to subjugate women of color. Unlike Jasmine's fantastical integration into the white society, Walker's Black women struggle to reclaim their dignity within their own communities in a process that takes decades. The white society in *The Color Purple*, Molly Hite notes "figures as profoundly unnecessary" (Hite 261).

16 The fantastic conclusion in *Jasmine* is foregrounded by the author's position on identity construction. In the interview "Bharti Mukherjee: An Interview With Runar Vignisson," Mukherjee claims that she is "[…] very aware of the dark side of America as well as the romanticism that America offers" to people like her, and she believes "that both the dark side and the hope comes through." This assertion of "hope" is rhetorical, as it not accompanied by any concrete counter-measure to the realities of the dark side. Rather Mukherjee appears to advocate the idea of assimilation as a strategy for identity formation. Anne Brewster summarizes Mukherjee's position in stating that:

> in her non-fictional writing (specifically, in interviews and articles) Mukherjee explicitly endorses the notion of 'assimilation'—a concept that generally carries negative connotations in the Australian context, especially in terms of Aboriginal history and the notorious assimilation policies of the 1940s onwards—and contrasts the American policy with what she sees as the less successful Canadian 'mosaic' policy of multiculturalism.

17 In *Jasmine*, the narrator's attempts to assimilate are revealed as she mutates along the trajectory from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jase to Jane. According to the narrator "Jyoti of Hasnapur was not Jasmine, Duff's day mummy […] that Jasmine isn't this Jane Ripplemeyer" (Jasmine 127). Jasmine describes herself as being "reborn" and in doing so emphasizes a break from the past through a cycle of birth and death over across various identities (*Jasmine* 126). The narrator's description implicitly denies a continuum between not only each identity but also between cross-border identities where a rejection of hyphenation is implied. Critic Anita Myles responds to Jasmine's trajectory through the comment that "the narrative entails epical universality by its quick movement between America and India and between the past and the present without any traces of ennui" (113). While Myles notes merely an absence of nostalgia, Jasmine not only tries to overcome memories of her past but also attempts to reject her ethnic background and history. Jasmine's desire to assimilate is hinted at early in the novel. At Flushing Ghetto, Jasmine "wanted to distance" herself "from everything Indian" (145). On the other hand Nirmala, the wife of Proffessorji (the man in whose house Jasmine stays briefly), is described as watching Indian movies until she "had exhausted the available stock of Hindi films" in store (*Jasmine* 145). Nirmala's "regressive behavior" is juxtaposed with Jasmine's distancing herself from "everything Indian." Both women represent attempts to establish a specific version of immigrant woman identity. This immigrant and cultural identity negotiated by the narrator in *Jasmine* suggests attempts to completely assimilate in the West and implies a complete break from the past—namely the Indian experience. The attempt is not easily accomplished. The subtext reveals reception of the experience in the West through the lens of Indian roots. Thus Jasmine describes Jamaica as shedding "monsoonful of tears" and Mary Webb's socks as being dyed "the orange of Indian swami's robes" (*Jasmine* 179, 123). Imagery used in these descriptions is drawn from her life in India.

18 However Jasmine's attempt to reject hyphenation by increasingly distancing herself from her Indian roots entails a denial of ethnic identity as a means of political and institutional space-claiming. The assertion of ethnic identity has political implication. This assertion becomes, according to literary scholar Susan Koshy, a means of claiming political and institutional space.[2] This space is claimed by the Black community in *The Color Purple*.

[2] Susan Koshy, "The Fiction of Asian American Literature" The Yale Journal of Criticism 9 (1996) 315-346. Project Muse. 1 March 2007 < http://muse.jhu.edu >. Koshy discusses that question of "affirmation of ethnic identity as a means of political and institutional space-claiming." Discussing the "category "Asian American," Koshy points out that it has undergone reconfiguration more rapidly and to an extent that none of the other ethnic categories have". Koshy's essay presents a brief summary to elucidate this without "delineating exhaustively the many shifts, nuances and disjunctures in the historical constitution of Asian Americans." Koshy writes that "the latest historical pattern of ethnic identity formation has emerged in the last decade or so,

The desire to claim such a space is made irrelevant, as Jasmine appears to simplistically view the West as a land of freedom and "dreams." Jasmine's views appear to have been influenced by her husband Prakash who claimed that only America could make possible a "real life" since "here" (referring to India) this was made impossible by the "backward, corrupt, mediocre fools" (*Jasmine* 81). This view is rendered problematic when seen in light of Koshy's claim. Jasmine continues to envision a "happiness" that would "appear out of the blue" because of "green card, a job, a goal" (Jasmine 149). This hope is despite of the description of difficulty for many Asian Indian immigrants living in ghettos to gain these items. Jasmine notes that "New York was an archipelago of ghettoes seething with aliens" (*Jasmine* 140). The implication of her observation is that minority groups such as the Punjabis described living in the Flushing ghetto in New York are unable to integrate into the mainstream. The inability to integrate in the mainstream occurs at an economic level. Proffesorji, an Indian who lives in one such ghetto called the Flushing ghetto, is described as a "ghost, hanging on" (*Jasmine* 153). He performs such menial jobs as sifting through human hair so as to sell it to wigmakers and scientists. His condition points to the workforce in America discussed in Avtar Brah's essay "Diaspora, Border and Transnational Identities." Brah discusses the condition of low paid "peripheral workers" performing low-end jobs whose "labour is central to the functioning of global economies" (626). Unlike the relentless discrimination of Black women in *The Color Purple*, Jasmine overcomes all hurdles by simply marrying Taylor. This therefore implies that Mukherjee refuses to incisively critique America as a site of relocation in terms of gender, race and class. Through Professorji, Nirmala and descriptions of other Punjabi families, *Jasmine* presents images where men and women living in ghettoes lead lives in deep anguish due to the conditions of marginality thrust upon them. The novel however in its fantastic end refuses to propose a coherent political alternative that will challenge the conditions of marginality experienced by people of color and various ethnic groups.

19 The critic Anne Brewster seeks to explain the note of optimism in Mukherjee's writings on America in her essay "A Critique of Bharati Mukherjee's Neo-Nationalism." According to Brewster, Mukherjee's early work, written in Canada, registers pessimism and

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and the scripts it has produced have further transformed the constituency we refer to as Asian America. This shift has been initiated by the reconfiguration of aspects of ethnicity within a transnational context. During this period, relations between the U.S. and Asia have undergone dramatic change and we have entered a transnational era that is remaking economic, political, and cultural relations in the Pacific. As a result, ethnicity can no longer be solely contextualized within the problematic of whether and how Asian Americans will be incorporated into the American body politic, but must also be read through the deterritorialization of ethnic identity" (322-23)

thematically focuses on racism and homelessness. Brewster locates this preoccupation in the fact that Mukherjee had to deal with both "relative literary anonymity" and "racism" in Canada. A change in tone and thematic content occurred subsequent to her relocation in the United States where she gained literary recognition with "award-winning success and canonization." Mukherjee felt less marginalized so her writing became more positive and hopeful.

20 As discussed earlier, the protagonist of *Jasmine* is dependent on men for both class and economic support. At the end of the novel, Jasmine's search for an identity appears ultimately to be self-limiting, problematic and difficult as it continues to maneuver in various degrees within the dominant discourses of gender, race and class relations. *Jasmine*, in conclusion, enacts a limited and a problematic resolution with regards to the theme of gender equation. The reason is not difficult to find. Jasmine as a women of color continues to operate within the paradigm of patriarchy and lacks a support group due to which no radical counter-discourse seems to emerge. In contrast, Walker's formulation of bonds between women—both sexual and emotional—provides an alternate script of selfhood that erases and demolishes constrictive ideas of womanhood. In the treatment of the theme of racial oppression, Walker visualizes the role of economic empowerment gained by the Black women. *Jasmine* does not acknowledge the existence of racial conflict—despite the protagonist's experience of it. Rather, the text proposes assimilation into the dominant white culture as a method for identity construction and class elevation. From the perspective of class, Celie is able to transform from being a muted slave of her "father" and "husband" by wresting her freedom by becoming an entrepreneur. Unlike *The Color Purple*, *Jasmine* concludes without proposing any substantial economic resolution that might empower women in material terms. Rather economic stability in Mukherjee's novel is derived from heterosexual relationships.

21 *Jasmine* depicts the heroine's search for an identity which appears to be ultimately self-limiting and problematic. This is due to the novel's unique treatment of issues of gender, race and class. *Jasmine* does not represent race relations as significantly hampering the trajectory of the heroine's story and thereby eschews acknowledging the experience of marginality experienced by women of color. In addition, *Jasmine* accepts patriarchy as normative even though the heroine is acutely aware of its ability to unleash violence towards women. Rather the (white) heterosexual relationship is a source of class elevation. Unlike Jasmine, Celie's emotional and erotic bonds with the other Black women facilitate social and individual transformations that also seek financial independence and the dignity from being

financially independent. In Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, the heroine does not destabilize dominant ideas of either gender or race despite her recognizing their tendency to oppress women of color and rather seeks to carve her identity within the dominant discourse.

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