

Metamorphosing Jasmine: Identity Sorting in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

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Abstract—Searching for and defining a new identity is a central question for immigrants living in a foreign land. The confusion this causes them pushes them into an identity crisis. This work by Bharati Mukherjee exposes how Jasmine, the female protagonist, as an outsider strives to shape her identity to fit in mainstream American society. Fortunately, Jasmine encounters confirmations of her shifting identity in different stages of her life. Instead of rejecting these identities and names in various phases, she seeks to create a harmonious relationship with those identities. This paper examines how those identities and changes of name assist her in relocating her self-value as well as in achieving spiritual maturity as an immigrant woman struggling to cope with American culture in terms of Stuart Hall's perspectives on fluidity and non-fixed identity. In such a process, renaming becomes a way for Jasmine to survive and further her development through transformation and the adoption of different selfhoods. Certainly, what makes Mukherjee worth reading is that she draws on the anguish of the uprooted individual and her inevitable frustration with her hostile environment but this experience also generates a sense of rebirth and reincarnation. Thus, I would like to demonstrate how the character of Jasmine undertakes the search for a new self and identity through fortitude and courage until she finds a way of life that satisfies her.

Index Terms—Fluidity, identity, rename, self-value.

I. INTRODUCTION

Indian-born American female writer Bharati Mukherjee has proven to be one of the most fascinating voices among female minority writers. Mukherjee identifies herself as an unhyphenated American rather than calling herself a hyphenated Indian-American writer. In doing so, she depicts herself as an American writer of Indian origin. Her writing describes the old world but also new perspectives, along with the changes upon assimilation into the new society. In other words, Mukherjee is proud of her Indianness while also embracing and “celebrating America” [1] in her works. Moreover, because of her true understanding of and concern about the deep conflicts of the alienation experienced by foreigners, she offers fresh aspects and new vistas in her stories about immigrant lives. Mukherjee breaks free of the enforced silence imposed on women of her background, allowing herself to sound a distinctive voice of her own instead of just dissolving into the mainstream and becoming invisible.

Through their writings, Asian American writers have portrayed their immigrant experiences and featured the

conflicts of the transition from their ancient heritage to America. Many Asian-American writers have depicted the cultural struggles that many of their compatriots have faced moving to a new land. In order to survive, one must cross beyond the traditional boundaries of the past and learn to adjust to American society. The following presents comparable themes and elements that appear in the works of other Asian-American writers as well as Mukherjee's *Jasmine* to help us understand the different faces of Asian-American works. In Amy Tan's second novel, *The Kitchen's God Wife*, Tan depicts the story of a young woman trying to attach more closely to her mother and come to terms with her Chinese heritage. The mother, Winnie was once horribly physically and mentally abused by her first husband, Wen Fu. Experiencing such turmoil and violent attacks, both Jasmine and Winnie learn to fight against the injustices done to them. Hence, both women grow and develop in strength while living in a hostile patriarchal society that undermines their abilities. Nonetheless, both women realize that self-determined actions can change their fate. Second, In Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* the protagonist feels haunted by the ghosts of the past and present just as Jasmine sees ghost in her daily life in America. The ghost figures represent the pain of the historical past, which urge them to decamp and escape. However, it is only by confronting the numerous foreign ghosts that they find a way to communicate with others. The presence of the ghosts serves as a metaphor to imply there is a large gap between their past Asian and present American identities.

Next, Gish Jen's *Typical American* illustrates how the main character Lai Fu, signifying in Chinese Bring Fortune, changes his name to Ralph to express the progress of his Americanization similar to Professor Vadhera, whose false American name is David O'Hara. The purpose of name change is to make it sound less foreign. To some extent one of the first steps to climb the American social ladder is to possess a real American name. On the way to becoming the American self-made man, one must hide one's immigrant identity under the guise of an American name. Later, Eric Liu's *The Accidental Asian* confronts readers with remarkable insights with the puzzles of assimilation in the same way Jasmine reveals the pain of her own ethnic identity sorting. The lacerating challenges both Jasmine and Liu face are the cost of losing one's Asian face. Indeed, Jasmine and Liu epitomize the inevitable estrangement between identities and what it means to become an American. Clearly, Asian-American writers present a diverse and creative in-depth perspective unlike that of American mainstream writers while also bridging over the differences of their diasporic issues. Significantly, these unique experiences form in a sense a mosaic that connects and captures the intricacies

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of how one weaves one's own cultural identities.

Mukherjee is a post-colonial Indian who emigrated to Canada, though later becoming an American of Indian origin. Mukherjee expresses her need for a more fluid space and the feeling of being more at home in America. Mukherjee sees America as the place for her transformation and new cultural possibilities even at the cost of separating from her original identities, almost necessitating an act of felony against her old self. No doubt, Mukherjee is a writer that has lived through the several difficult phases of life as an Asian immigrant similar to her character, Jasmine. Jasmine's life focuses on the search of an immigrant woman for her place of individual identity and sense of homeland. Similarly, Mukherjee speaks of her own quest and awareness of separating from her traditional identity. Mukherjee describes the cultural restraints of women in India as well as her own individual problems. In other words, Jasmine and Mukherjee reject identity as something static fixed by one's own birth, social status and gender. In fact, Mukherjee highlights the craving and longing to establish a new self. In the beginning scene of the novel, the seven-year-old Jyoti disagrees with the village astrologer that speaks of her widowhood and exile. Thus, even as a child, Jasmine has a mind and voice of her own. Jasmine's construction of an identity in a new multicultural land reflects Mukherjee's own experience and struggles when moving to Canada. Moreover, Mukherjee also reveals the problems of the discrimination she suffered and the difficulties of life there. Mukherjee however, just as strongly as her character Jasmine refuses to be merely an expatriate. In the interview, "Holders of the Word" by Tina Chen and S.X. Goude, Mukherjee denotes that the character Jasmine fully lives inside the head of Mukherjee. Notwithstanding, Jasmine's change reflects not merely the changes of just one woman but those of other immigrant lives in dislocation. Hence, Mukherjee's immigrant experiences enable her to understand the alienation, isolation and discrimination encountered by others. One similarity between Jasmine and Mukherjee is the pressure of facing identity crisis after they immigrate to the United States. Thus, both Jasmine and Mukherjee take life's matters into their own hands and become obsessed with making themselves fully American. In all, just as Jasmine undergoes a series of rebirths to become an American, Mukherjee shares with others and embraces the challenges and benefits of her identity as an American.

This paper approaches *Jasmine* as a novel that traces the different name patterns and growth of the female protagonist from her childhood in Hasnapur, India to her trip to Iowa in mid-western America. With the switching of names, Jasmine eventually crosses boundaries, thereby avoiding becoming a fixed subject or identity: "In her struggle to remake herself, Jasmine does not resist several renamings by others, and moves fluidly among new identities thrust upon her." [2] Nonetheless, Jasmine undergoes a series of metamorphoses in her journey in Hasnapur as Jyoti. This is the name given to her by her husband. Later saved by Lillian Gordon, Jasmine becomes Jazzy. Starting her American life, she is Jase to Taylor, the love of her later life. After escaping unpleasant circumstances in New York, Jase becomes Jane Ripplemeyer. Through the changes of her names, Jasmine rejects an "enforced identity and subjugated knowledge." [2] By

undergoing all these constant painful but dramatic unmaskings and transformations, Jasmine is reinvented and reborn each time as she manages to survive in such belligerent settings: "Jasmine exemplifies all immigrant women who have taken their destiny in their hands." [1] That is to say, Jasmine is willing to fight to eke out her happiness without unduly depending on others to carve out her own future. Simply put, Jasmine begins to set out to live the life she wants and hopes for in America. The physical and mental violence encountered mold Jasmine into a different person, giving her a new identity as she integrates these new experiences into herself. Obviously, Jasmine's life is formed by the continuously changing situations and names during her voyage of self-discovery and self-value which eventually initiates her from the traditional Jyoti to American Jasmine.

In "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" Stuart Hall points out two views of identity in terms of sameness and difference. The first view is that cultural identity is shared and we all reflect the same sense of oneness. However, the second issue of cultural identity elaborates on how identities often undergo constant transformation implying fluid change, reflected in the way Jasmine changes her name throughout the novel. Clearly, Jasmine shifts identities due to the struggle between her circumstances and actions, voluntary and involuntary, in her daily life. Seen in this light, identity "is a matter of becoming as well as of being." [3] In this regard, identity isn't fixed and unchangeable but, rather, identity is changing and becoming. Ultimately, identity is complex and does not thrive under any sort of confinement: "Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference." [3] That is to say, one's identity is always in flux and reflects ongoing change. Hall sees "identity as a production, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation." [3] Clearly, Hall wishes to argue that fixed and stable notions of identity should be challenged and are open to interpretation. Subsequently, Hall describes how *différance* "challenges the fixed binaries which stabilize meaning and representation and how meaning is never fixed or completed, but keeps on moving on to encompass other, additional or supplementary meanings." [3] In such a way, this explains how identities lie between definitions, are always fluid and forever unfolding.

Such a theory is similar to the post-modernist point of view that individuals mix and change identities often. Likewise, Judith Butler, a philosopher commonly associated with queer theory also pinpoints how identity isn't fixed and should not determine who we are. Butler regards identity as consisting of many elements and factors, thus it is impossible to predict, nor can we claim it is unitary. Butler implies one's identity is presented in how we interact and in our engagements with others. In addition, Michel Foucault rejects the view of a person as a fixed essence or identity as well. He clearly states how the self must be a continuing discourse in a shifting communication. Thus, things that happen or occur to us change our identities. In a sense, Mukherjee portrays Jasmine as creating her multiple identities based on the different scenarios she encounters in life. In her journey, Jasmine metamorphoses from Jyoti into Jasmine, Kali, Jazzy, Jase and eventually Jane from Iowa. Jasmine must go through several rebirths and namings to assume the American identity that is

right for her. More importantly, Jasmine possesses the characteristics necessary to adapt and reshape herself in order to survive in America.

II. PROPECHY OF DOOMED WIDOWHOOD AND EXILE

Experiencing many obstacles, starting from her birth, Jasmine's journey in life is full of challenges and the struggle to come out ahead. Jasmine being the fifth daughter, the seventh of nine children in her large family, was from conception considered to be a curse. Thus, her mother literally tried to kill her by leaving a mark "ruby-choker bruise" around her throat. [4] Jasmine's mother hopes to spare Jasmine the shame and disgrace of being a dowryless bride in the future. Thus, for Jasmine, survival plays a pivotal role right at the start of her life. As a woman, Jasmine relates to her mother and doesn't blame her. Sadly, however, the fact remains: Jasmine's first battle is against her own mother. Notwithstanding, Jasmine forgives and comprehends the reasons why her mother attempted to strangle her to death. Born to an Indian family with traditional values, Jasmine is forced to comply with the demands of her family and society. Early in the novel, Jasmine rebels against blind belief in traditional values. Consequently, even though little, Jasmine refuses to accept the astrologer's prophecy of her doomed "widowhood and exile." [4] So she shouts at him, "you don't know what my future hold." [4] Jasmine argues with the astrologer and clearly shows her strong desire to change the man's view of her destiny and the prediction of exile. At the age of seven in her native village of Hasnapur, Jyoti, whose name means "light" in Punjabi, then translates the scar on her face as her "third eye." [4] Jasmine chooses to regard her third eye as a force allowing her to see her future. That is to say, Jasmine interprets her gift of a third eye as being a way to control her fate: "Symbolically this may mean that Jasmine is born to reposition her stars by rejecting the traditional fatalism of Indian society." [5] Essentially, Jasmine is defiant in spirit, but with a purpose. Her wrestling with obstacles doesn't just stop at her near death experience at birth for Jasmine's strength is tested many times throughout her series of adventurous journeys as she faces different facets of her identity. At all times Jasmine fights to survive and raise herself above all the old blind traditions. Later, as she is washing clothes with the other women, she encounters her next battle: with a mad dog. The dog's attack is a real threat to the young Jasmine. Nonetheless, she doesn't run away or feel afraid of the dog, even though, as she describes, "It was not just a dog it was more of a wolf." [4] Jasmine likens the animal more to a wolf to imply the tremendous danger she faces here. At the same time, she knows that the mad dog came for her and not for the other women around her. She slowly waits for the dog to attack her while she gets ready to strike back. Eventually, she kills the dog by crushing its head with a tree branch because she wasn't ready to give up so easily and die. Growing up in this bitter milieu, Jasmine grows to be tougher each time she feels closer to death and defeat and yet is able to overcome them. What doesn't kill her, actually makes her stronger.

Though Jasmine was born a cursed daughter to her large family, her life gains true meaning by her ability to learn and discover what she wants. Early in her childhood, Jasmine is

unlike other Indian girls because she excels in school and is a bright student willing to be enlightened. Remarkably, she wants to be educated and empowers herself by learning English: "To want English was to want more than you had been given at birth, it was to want the world." [4] Learning English is Jasmine's way to see beyond her narrow life in India and gives her the ability to seek opportunities for a new life. Moreover, Jasmine knew that she "couldn't marry a man who didn't speak English, or at least who didn't want to speak English." [4] As she has foreseen, Jasmine falls in love with Prakash Vijh who can speak English, being drawn to the fact that speaking English can broaden her horizon. Similarly, she becomes self-motivated to pursue her studies by learning English because she knows she needs English for her future.

Luckily, Jasmine at the age of fourteen meets and marries Prakash, an aspiring engineer, just graduating from a technical college in India. Their marriage not only liberates her but also completely transforms her into a new woman. Jasmine has married a modern city intellectual who doesn't accept the concept that a wife must be submissive, serving as a catalyst for her change from a village girl into a modern Indian wife. Hence, Jasmine is able to live her life without oppression from her family. He deeply implants his big American dream into his young wife. Remarkably, he teaches her "love was letting go." [4] He supports and cares for Jasmine instead of suppressing her. Simultaneously, Prakash wants Jasmine to call him by his first name, which is difficult for Jasmine to do. This stumbling block takes Jasmine several months to overcome and get used to. Prakash wishes to "break down" the old Jyoti and make her into a "new kind of city woman." [4] Therefore, Prakash renames her Jasmine. Prakash clearly loves Jasmine with all his heart, showing his affection in sweet nothings, such as: "You are small and sweet and heady, my Jasmine." [4] Indeed, Prakash encourages her to divest herself of the traditional beliefs of their feudal society, which confines the space of female freedom to that of an indentured servant: "Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttled between identities," she laments. [4] But Jasmine soon learns to reshape herself and shift between different identifiers. In America, Jasmine feels, she can begin a real life and open a new page in her life's journal. Thus, the trip to America symbolizes a morning star on her horizon where her destiny to be a young widow must never come true. The bitter irony is: Jasmine does not know she will become one even before she leaves India.

Moreover, Prakash reminds Jasmine not to turn back or fall back into being the feudal Jyoti again. He says: "You are Jasmine. You can't jump into wells!" [4] Regardless of the challenges they face, he gives her confidence and prompts her to be strong even in times of difficulty. Prakash keeps no faith in traditions and gives her all the freedom she can possibly use, thus "he renames Jyoti as Jasmine, a symbolic break with her feudal past." [6] This symbolizes a promising start because he lets her live the life of a modern spouse. Meanwhile, he promises to take her to America and so gives her a new name to go with her different identity: generally, "By giving her protagonist more than one name, usually through the character of a husband/lover, Mukherjee subverts the notion of a fixed, uniform subject." [7] Tragically, just before Jasmine can embark on her new adventure, Prakash dies in a terrorist bombing, in fact on the very eve of their

departure to America, the land of opportunity and promise for them. After Prakash is killed in the attack, Jasmine decides to immolate herself on the Florida campus where her husband had intended to study in America. Hoppe claims that Jasmine must move away from the past even at “the cost of self-knowledge, and a stable identity.” [8] Eager to escape and transcend her confined existence, Jasmine leaves her native country to begin her new journey. Carrying her fake passport and Prakash’s heavy suitcase, Jasmine smuggles herself into America like a cargo of contraband with her illegal papers.

III. AN AMERICAN ODYSSEY

Nevertheless, Jasmine’s difficult odyssey begins when Half-Face brutally rapes her, which nearly destroys her on her first day in America. Refusing to end her life and wishing to complete her task, especially now that she has finally reached America, Jasmine infuses herself with the destructive energy of the goddess Kali to attack and kill Half-Face. Symbolically, Jasmine transforms herself into the goddess of Kali by slaughtering Half-Face: “Jasmine’s act of violence is an act of de-selfing, much like *sati* itself. Literal violence, in this case, murder, stands in for, even numbs, the pain of individual transformation.” [9] Also, this rape symbolizes the death of Jyoti and the rebirth of Jasmine. It is only through demolition that Jasmine can construct a new self. Clearly put, Jasmine abandons the old self to establish a new American identity. This is why Jasmine burns her husband’s suitcase, i.e., as a way of cutting loose the burdens of her past and leaving everything behind. As she leaves the motel, she begins walking toward the unknown on “the first streaks of dawn” to begin her “first full American day” by “traveling light.” [4] Significantly, she leaves behind her old suitcase and name as she sets out to find new meaning and their connotations in fulfillment of her American dream to find freedom and self-identity. Muted and abused by the savage rape, Jasmine realizes that surviving and living on can be a weapon to resist against male oppression and physical abuse. Becoming the goddess Kali to kill Half-Face demonstrates Jasmine’s power, “She symbolically murders her precious identity again and again to recreate a new one.” [5] Handicapped by cultural barriers and ravishment her only welcome to America, Jasmine nevertheless turns her anger into affirmation to create a better tomorrow. In this sense, Jasmine’s first night in America can be seen as a death and rebirth experience.

After escaping and surviving the inhumane experience of the rape by Half-Face, Jasmine finds comfort with the help of Lillian Gordon. Lillian, a kind Quaker woman, takes the injured Jasmine home to nurse her back to health. Lillian does not ask about Jasmine’s past. Upon meeting Lillian, Jasmine begins her process of assimilation, gradually becoming American. Jasmine visits department stores and for the first time in her life goes through revolving doors. Everything to Jasmine is new and it does not frighten her at all. Instead Jasmine is eager to open her eyes and experience the new excitement. Subsequently, Jasmine dresses up in American “high school clothes.” [4] Wearing this new American style of clothes, Jasmine is shocked to actually see herself in the mirror after such a dramatic change. Her American clothes

give her confidence, and as a result, she feels like a completely new person. In her American clothes, Jasmine features and sees a different image of herself as she sheds the old Jyoti. Lillian teaches and shows Jasmine how to “walk American.” [4] Ultimately, with the support and encouragement of Lillian, Jasmine goes on to accomplish and fulfill her American dreams. Lillian also gives Jasmine an American name, transforming her into “Jazzy.” [4] Henceforth, Jasmine will record all her new experiences and begins by recalling how the Dairy Queen was her first true American healing food.

During her time in Iowa, Jasmine meets Dr. Mary Webb, a professor of sociology. Dr. Webb invites Jasmine to join the University Club. Arriving for a club meeting, Jasmine learns that the purpose of the gathering is to share past-life stories with other group members. In the meeting, Dr. Webb talks about her past lives and remembers being an Aboriginal man in a previous lifetime. Noticeably, this incident also connects to Jasmine’s experience of being reborn and makes her recall past memories as well. In fact, Jasmine implies how now living as Jane has made her life change: “I should have never been Jane Ripplemeyer of Baden, Iowa.” [4] Jasmine states how being Jane Ripplemeyer wasn’t what she wanted to be. Her life in Iowa didn’t bring her true happiness. Jasmine under such conditions is aware of the differences generated with each name: “Jyoti of Hasnapur was not Jasmine, Duff’s day mummy and Taylor and Wylie’s au pair in Manhattan; that Jasmine isn’t Jane Ripplemeyer having lunch with Mary Webb at the University Club today.” [4] This scene reveals the traumatic experiences that shape Jasmine’s life. Through Jasmine’s transformations, she is reborn many times: Jyoti, Jasmine, Kali, Jazzy, Jase and Jane. Strikingly, these different names and identities transform Jasmine in variously critical ways: emotionally, physically and especially psychologically.

Just as Jasmine becomes more of an American she decides to go and stay with Professor Devinder. He lets Jasmine move in with them because she is the widow of his favorite student. While Jasmine is staying with the Vadhera family, however, she once again falls back into the lifestyle of a traditional and submissive woman. The Vadheras live in Brooklyn’s Indian ghetto and refuse to be a part of the American community. Clearly, Jasmine resents the way they cling to the old India because she has largely changed from a traditional Indian girl into a young American woman. That is to say, in the process of remaking oneself, the old must die to let the new be created. Obviously, Jasmine understands the pain of undergoing change to become the person one wants to be.

Not only does Jasmine change her name but also Professor Devinder gets a new name in America and becomes Dave. Jasmine, however, shows her respect by still calling him Professorji. Though Professor Devinder Vadhera was once a distinguished professor in India, he is unable to find a job in a university. Now he supports his family as an importer and sorter of human hair. He lies to his family about being employed at a lab in America, just as he was in India. Mirmala, Professor Devinder’s wife knows nothing about what her husband does while he is at work. In fact, she heeds his admonitions to remain a voiceless housewife: “Submission, beauty, innocence.” [4] Even in America with opportunities for more gender equality, Mirmala remains the

ideal wife for her husband from a traditional perspective. Professorji and Mirmala have everything they need in their neighborhood. They do not go out at night because they have Indian-food stores down the block. In this sense, they have no contact with the outside world and live their lives as in a cocoon, just as they would in India. As a result, Jasmine's experience living with the Vadhera family helps her to see the life that she doesn't want in the role of a hopeless Indian widow.

In fact, Professor Devinder's new American name doesn't change him in any way. Though he answers the phone with a name that sounds like David O'Hara suggesting an American identity and attitude, Vadhera stubbornly keeps to the old values of his past. Unlike Jasmine who changes her name to adopt, Vadhera changes out of superficial conformity—just to blend in with American society but without making any changes on the inside. Vadhera changes his name to Dave just to disappear into his new surroundings. More precisely, Vadhera retains his old ideas and rejects everything about the culture of his new home in America. On Sundays during their free time the whole family gets together and watches videos of Sanjeev Kumar or of Amitabh. That is, they watch the same programs as in India and live in a comfort zone where their lives are essentially the same as in India. Though living in America, they still watch the programs from their homeland that bring them comfort. During her sojourn there, the Vadheras' cultural isolation sparks Jasmine's assimilation. Unlike the Vadhera family, Jasmine opens her heart to learn to live a new life by becoming an unabashed American. In his poker games, Vadhera would get drunk and complain that a part of him was dying because America was killing him. Sadly, Vadhera's transformation never occurs because he chooses to live in the past while Jasmine heads for her future: "He sealed his heart when he'd left home. His real life was in an unlivable land across oceans. He was a ghost, hanging on." [4] Truly, Vadhera lives a miserable life in America, pretending to be someone else. In fact, he feels alive only in his imaginary dreamland back home in India. He is one of the walking dead, finding no hope or meaning in his American life. So as not to upset his family, however, he doesn't tell them the truth because reality, he opines, is just too cruel for them to face.

Without a doubt, Jasmine's few months with the Vadhera family traps her, dragging her back into the miserable past. Jasmine describes this tortuous experience thus, "An imaginary brick wall topped with barbed wire cut me off from the past and kept me from breaking into the future. I was a prisoner doing unreal time." [4] Living with them, Jasmine's once bright future becomes extremely dark. This forces her to face a life full of devastation. The house of the Vadheras symbolizes a form of prison that would lock Jasmine inside, preventing her from escaping to the nourishing and nurturing outside world. In fact, determined to seek a new way of life in America, Jasmine without hesitation or guilt leaves them, knowing that she needs to be on the move: "Nothing was rooted anymore. Everything was in motion." [4] Manifestly, Jasmine's moving out implies she has the courage to face the challenges beyond her control. In this regard, Jasmine is always on the road and ready for her next destination. Gradually, within her there grows a sense of suffocation with everything related to Indian food, music and

culture. Thus, she leaves the Vadhera family to pursue happiness in an unknown and untested future. In contrast to Professor Vadhera's ultra-conservative family, Jasmine finds pleasure in America, confessing that "I could not admit that I had accustomed myself to American clothes. American clothes disguised my widowhood." [4] Thus, not only does Jasmine change her name, she also changes her wardrobe. Her new look and clothes makes her act and behave more like an American. By leaving them, Jasmine refuses the role of the Hindu widow. She rejects assuming the traditional Indian role because "village girls are like cattle; whichever way you lead them, that is the way they will go." [4] No doubt, Jasmine has her own dream and road thus she heads toward the directions of a promising future.

IV. TRANSFORMATION FROM WITHIN

Fortunately, in New York and with the help of Kate Gordon-Feldstein, Jasmine begins to experience a new American way of life: "I became an American in an apartment on Claremont Avenue across the street from a Barnard College dormitory." [4] But just when Jasmine has begun to find happiness, she spots the murderer of her husband, Prakash, and flees to Iowa to protect the people in New York that she loves. In rural Iowa, Jasmine adopts a new name, Jane: "Bud calls me Jane. Me Bud, you Jane. I didn't get it at first. He kids. Calamity Jane. Jane as in Jane Russell, not Jane as in Plain Jane. But Plain Jane is all I want to be." [4] So, in Iowa, Jasmine now has become Jane. Hence, this changing of names is an important point in the novel, reflecting a flexible locus of identity that frees Jasmine to make choices from among the different names she possesses and gives her the ability to see "herself as more than one person." [7] Jasmine's fluidity and courage have carried her further than she had expected or hoped for, from merely surviving to mutely protesting and eventually to gaining a sense of self-awareness. Jasmine also takes Kate's pet iguana, Sam, as a symbol of her own changes. In this regard, Jasmine sees this as reflecting her own transformation, feeling a sense of rebirth while holding Sam. Though Jasmine and Sam are both a long way from their native homes, they find this new home a more pleasant experience. Jasmine acknowledges that there is no going back to India now and the connection she feels with Sam derives from a sense that they intuitively understand each other. Clearly, transformation has never been easy for Jasmine or Sam because they need to adapt to new challenges. Such change, however, is not so terrible either, but actually a necessary step in forming a new self.

In New York, Jasmine becomes a caregiver for an American couple. She lives with the family and takes cares of their daughter Duff. In contrast with other men, Jasmine feels at ease with Taylor because, to a considerable degree, he accepts her for who she is. Jasmine develops a strong sense of self-value when she begins earning her own money and feels she is part of Taylor and Duff's family. Trapped thus far in the clash between the two cultures in which she has lived, Jasmine, moving in as a nanny with the American couple, now becomes completely drawn to America: "I felt lucky. My pillow was dry, a launch pad for lift-off. Taylor, Wylie, and Duff were family. America may be fluid and built on family, invisible lines of weak gravity, but I was a dense

object, I had landed and was getting rooted.” [4] Accordingly, Jasmine feels a sense of belonging as she settles in with Taylor and Duff. After such a long journey, Jasmine gradually starts to feel at home and also that she is a part of something important. Living with the Hayes family, she becomes more American as she begins to master English and grows more aware of American culture. Jasmine gains the ability to adjust to her environment and live out her American Dream, as she becomes Jase: “I liked the name he gave me: Jase. Jase was a woman who bought herself spangled heels and silk chartreuse pants.” [4] Though Taylor is married, Jasmine and Taylor fall in love. Being with Taylor, Jasmine does not feel any pressure. In fact, Taylor embraces Jasmine’s difference. They are like a happily married couple as Taylor calls Jasmine “Jase” so naturally when he stumbles around in the kitchen wearing his wrinkled kimono and looking for food at the counter. Jasmine shares all her thoughts with him, as she effuses, “My life had a new fullness and chargedness to it. Everyday day I made discoveries about the city, and in the evenings, when I listed my discoveries to Taylor he listened carefully, as though I were describing an unmapped, exotic metropolis.” [4] Evidently, Jasmine’s intimate connection with Taylor begins at such moments when Jasmine is sharing trifles of her everyday life with him. These discoveries help Jasmine bond more closely to Taylor.

Jasmine’s life with Taylor is the highlight of her stay in America. They understand each other and have endless conversations on a daily basis. Jasmine finds true comfort in telling Taylor about minutiae of her new life experiences. Jasmine’s transformation through Taylor occurs due to her personal need of change instead of as a result of a negative reaction to her surroundings. In this way, Taylor and Jasmine complete each other. This fluid identity serves as a positive vehicle for Jasmine to continually renew herself while avoiding becoming merely the dutiful Indian helpmate. Thus, the various names and faces Jasmine assumes is a reflection of her ongoing change of identity. Importantly, Jasmine’s departure is a reflection of how she is no longer able to live a sterile life because change is her vehicle for survival as well. In describing her relationship with all men, Jasmine says: “I have had a husband for each of the women I have been. Prakash for Jasmine, Taylor for Jase, and Bud for Jane. Half-Face for Kali.” [4] Jasmine reveals how she has possessed various identities and selves for her congeries of husbands. In each of the experiences with these men populating her life, Jasmine has created many selves and literally died to be reborn again.

In Baden, Jasmine meets Bud and he falls madly in love with her. Though Jasmine is fond of Bud despite his physical handicap, they end up torturing each other because of their incompatibilities and their union estranges them. Actually, Jasmine feels isolated in her life in Iowa. In their relationship, Bud sees Jasmine as a sexual being as well as his lover and she recognizes her sexual power over Bud. Eventually, she chooses Taylor over Bud because he likes the essential Jasmine: “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.” [4] Characteristically, Taylor is ready to accept Jasmine for who she currently is and who she promises to become, while acknowledging the differences between them. In her relationship with Taylor,

Jasmine grows and knows what she cares for. Bud, however, loves Jasmine due to his fixation on her exoticness: “Bud courts me because I am alien. I am darkness, mystery, inscrutability. The East plugs me into instant vitality and wisdom.” [4] Predictably, staying in Iowa, Jasmine begins to suffocate in her life with Bud. Iowa symbolizes a retreat or step back into an unbearable past. Thus, Jasmine needs to take action “rather than passively accepting a name as she had with Prakash.” [6] More broadly, the willingness to arise and sprout wings must come from within her. Therefore, Jasmine breaks away from the code of tradition that oppresses her. Reviewing her life in Iowa, Jasmine recounts a few of the different names she has gone by: “Jane Ripplemeyer has a bank account. So does Jyoti Vijn.” [4] Here, Jasmine implies that Jane Ripplemeyer and Jyoti Vijn are names of her bygone past now. Actually, Jasmine is miserable and suffers from her stay with Bud. She claims to see “ghosts float toward” [4] her. Similarly, Jasmine is a lost ghost wandering in search of her soul. Her past haunts her and won’t leave her alone. In fact, the ghost reminds her of the old Jyoti from India. Clearly, Jasmine refuses to cling to an idealized past because it will lead to her own funeral. In other words, Jasmine feels constrained at the thought of spending her whole life in such a small town and finds it hard to be happy in this uneventful life with Bud.

Jasmine learns from Darrell’s suicide that Karin, Bud’s ex-wife, would make a more suitable caregiver, as she herself indicates, “Most of all, she’d comfort Bud. It’s Bud who needs Karin’s Hot Line now.” [4] Jasmine deeply understands that Karin suits Bud more than she does. She realizes that she must leave Bud and live out her future by taking on some risk: “It isn’t guilt that I feel. I realize I have already stopped thinking of myself as Jane. Adventure, risk, transformation; the frontier is pushing indoors through uncaulked windows.” [4] Nearly at the end of the novel, Jasmine sees herself as Alice in Wonderland: “Like creatures in fairy tales, we’ve shrunk and we’ve swallowed the cosmos whole.” [4] Similar to the seeker of the white rabbit, Jasmine’s search for her identity is seen as an exciting journey. In Jasmine’s childhood reading *Alice in Wonderland* gave her nightmares whereas now as an adult she finds comfort in reading the novel. Indeed, Jasmine is determined to claim a space for herself in American society regardless of the challenges she must undertake and “travel toward a future where identity might be free to grow.” [10] At each stage of her journey, Jasmine has courageously overcome all obstacles, from the beginning from Punjab to Florida, then ending with the journey toward California with Taylor and Duff. Divested of the pressure of feeling guilty about leaving Bud behind, Jasmine runs into the arms of Taylor again. Analyses of the changes in Jasmine indicate the roads she must take in search of roots in this New World soil while, paradoxically, “going all the way to California.” [4] Indeed, Jasmine never gives up hope of Taylor coming to rescue her. In a sense, Jasmine passes beyond the boundaries of a unitary self into a fluid self “that resists the impulse towards certainty and totalization.” [10] If she had married Bud, Jasmine would be looking to a life of conformity and sameness. Thus, the constant changing of names and surroundings implies Jasmine is repeatedly in transition and poised for transformation.

V. LIFE AS A JOURNEY NOT A DESTINATION

Apropos, the narrator's usage of different names implies Jasmine's plural female subjectivity. In her process of untangling her name, the journey in the novel stands for the ever-moving and regenerating flux of life. Thus, by giving Jasmine more than just one name, Mukherjee subverts the notion of a fixed uniform subject: "And it is in this continuous effort of deconstructing and reconstructing selfhood that Jasmine encounters violence in every step of her identity formation." [5] In this regard, Jasmine becomes more westernized, as she changes from Jasmine, to Jazzy, Jase, and Jane. In the process, she, the protagonist, must adapt as "Jasmine goes through several transformations, and I like to think that she is still open to many more self-inventions." [11] Jasmine's decision to leave India coincides with her wish to run away from the confinements of her cultural identity and begin a new life. As Leard states, "The narrative ends on a note of optimism where Jasmine, cocooning a cosmos in her pregnant belly, and about to re-position her stars again, is ready to plunge into another life and another journey of transformation." [7] Geographically and metaphorically she moves and travels from East to West for a greater freedom in which she can control her life. Manifestly, Jasmine is ready for her next departure. Leaving with Taylor and Duff, Jasmine can build a new life with them in California: "I am not choosing between men. I am caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness." [4] Stuck in such a dilemma, Jasmine has to decide what her next move should be. Clearly, she knows that the answer can be found only if her American dream heads west. Moreover, the baby she carries also implies that the birth of Jasmine's new life will come in a home filled with the promise of love with Taylor and Duff: Like Moses who never enters the Promised Land, however, "The reader never witnesses the birth of Jasmine's child just as they never witness her maintaining a stable identity." [12] The fetus in her body grows while Jasmine develops a new sense of self and meaning as she proceeds toward a different life.

Remarkably, the self that Jasmine has built at the end of the novel is not afraid of letting go and facing challenges because losing all can also be a way of winning all on a different plane. Jasmine must be willing to shed her old self to form a new self, thus, "she symbolically murders her precious identity again and again to recreate a new one." [5] No longer isolating herself in her enclaves, Jasmine desires to ford the mainstream on the way to her ultimate goal and live a happy fulfilled life: in one sense, "Jasmine has learnt to live not for her husband or for her children but for herself." [13] To

conclude, Jasmine learns to handle whatever life hurls at her. More importantly, she achieves a sense of self-identity and self-value in the world as she searches for freedom and love in America. In this light, through change and a new fluid identity Jasmine learns to confront pain with courage. At the heart of these conflicts, she sees life as a journey not a destination.

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