



# The Hegemony of the Past in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989)

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## Abstract

Experiencing alienation and displacement exiled writers have a specific relationship to the past. "Haunted by a sense of loss, some urge to reclaim to look back" (Rushdie 10), these exiled souls who lead a liminal existence between a lost past and a foreign present cannot but inscribe the past in their fictions. Indeed for them, the inscription of the past is a prerequisite for the restoration of their damaged selves and histories. Perceiving things from their shaky "fractured perceptions" (12), while overwhelmed by nostalgia and homesickness, these "wounded creatures" (Rushdie 12) end up creating idealized versions of homes and pasts or ie: "imaginary homelands" (10) and glorified pasts. Rushdie's theory can be applicable to many exiled writers but certainly not to Bharati Mukherjee. Mukherjee is one of the most prominent Indian American writers who is known by her controversial hypothesis of 'past erosion'. Rejecting hyphenization and heralding assimilation Mukherjee declares herself "an American citizen without hyphens" (33). Such audacious pronouncement that has distinguished her from her peers and incurred her some hostile reactions as well. Nevertheless, Mukherjee's fiction betrays her strong attachment to her past. Hence, this paper seeks to demonstrate that Mukherjee's most praised assimilation novel *Jasmine* (1989) that tells the story of Punjabi Joyti's 'American dream' coming true is one of the most past troubled narratives. It proceeds with dwelling on Mukherjee's theory of "past erosion" then moves to scrutinize the omnipresence of the past in the novel focusing on the protagonist's struggle with past memories.

**Keywords:** Past troubled, erosion, displacement, alienation, memories.

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## 1. Introduction

What distinguishes the main stream Western literature from the narratives of diaspora is "the poetics of exile" (Bhabha 5). Produced by "Partial beings" (Rushdie) who inhabit a marginal space across cultures and times and who lead "unhomely lives" (Bhabha 7), "such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between space' that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present" (7). Hence, time is being desynchronized as the lines between the past

and the present are often blurred. Homi Bhabha asserts that "the past present" modality is "part of the necessity [...] of living" (7) for diasporic postcolonial subjects. Focusing on the trope of the past present, this paper reads *Jasmine* (1989) as a narrative of exile that reflects its own writer's cultural anxieties as an exiled and a wounded soul. Though *Jasmine* (1989) is initially a romance of Joyti's miraculous metamorphose from a feudal Punjabi girl into an integrated Americanized citizen that replicates Mukherjee's American dream, this romance which evolves in between now and then is continuously plagued by the specter of the past.

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Hence, taking Mukherjee's theory of past erasure as its starting point, and focusing on the protagonist's struggle with the burden of the past, this paper seeks to demonstrate that though *Jasmine* (1989) echoes Mukherjee's story of self-re-invention as an American citizen, it fails to inscribe her theory of 'past erosion' since its protagonist never succeeds in exorcising the specter of the past which often casts its spell on the present.

## 2. Baharati Mukherjee's theory of the past

In *Bharati Mukherjee's Fiction: A Perspective* (2004), Sushma Tandon argues that "one needs a theory to analyze and evaluate the corpus of Bharati Mukherjee" (i). Indeed, one cannot read Mukherjee without delving into her theories of expatriation vs. immigration and "past erosion". In her controversial essay "Beyond Multiculturalism Surviving the Nineties" (1996) Mukherjee proclaims herself "a naturalized U. S citizen" (29). She asserts: "I am an American for whom America is the stage of the drama of self-transformation" (29). Such a conviction Mukherjee elucidates is "the outcome of a decade of a powerful introspection" (31) and it reflects her own "transition from expatriate to immigrant" (31). During her fourteen-year stay in Canada and despite the fact that "she spoke the Canadian national languages English and French" (31), Mukherjee could never see herself a Canadian citizen. Indeed, the racial hostility Canada has displayed towards "Canadians of colors" (31) has made her feel an in/visible outsider, a Bengali expatriate for whom the Canadian soil is a temporary residence but not home. As a "voluntary immigrant" (31) who came to America by choice, "not as an economic refugee or a seeker of political asylum" (31) Mukherjee argues that she is "an American by choice and not by the simple accident of birth" (31). She has picked up America as "the stage for the drama of self-transformation" (29). Being "a teeming Nation of Nations" (qtd.in Tandon 5), America has offered Mukherjee what Canada denied to her. Integration into the American society has not been a smooth process for Mukherjee but it has been possible in the land of opportunity. "[P]opulated entirely by people of other lands whose forefathers came from other lands (Tandon4-5), America stands out as "a country with a unique history" (Mukherjee 31). Yet America is not free from racism since "assaults on Asian Americans are quite frequent" (31). However, the xenophobia Mukherjee has already experienced in "a Canada without a constitution" (31) has appeased her shock and "deepened [her] love to the ideal embedded in the American Bill of Right" (31). She elucidates: "the US was violent, mindlessly, macho, conformist, lawless. If I am not exempt from victimization here [...], I am less shocked less outraged" (qtd. in Tandon 21).

Though both expatriation and migration are quintessential forms of exile they are quite different. What makes the difference between both attitudes is the subject's attitudes towards his/her homeland. While "the expatriate will always carry his country with him [or her]" (Tandon i) looking forward to return, the immigrant will not. The expatriate often clings to his cultural identity and texts his/her story with nostalgia but the immigrant "embraces assimilation and subscribes to the melting pot theory of America" (i). S/he pens his/her saga of alienation and integration with a sense of triumph and "invest[s] in the present and in the future rather than in the expatriate's imagined homeland" (Mukherjee 33). Therefore, Mukherjee argues that the loss of past is a fundamental prerequisite for the immigrant integration in the new culture. Indeed, for Mukherjee "erosion [is] a [...] net gain rather than [...] a loss" (33). Past retention cramps the immigrant's process of self-reinvention and reinforces his/her othering.

Mukherjee's rejection of hyphenization has aroused the grudge of many Indian-American citizens who poured their rage on her accusing her of 'race treachery' (33). Nonetheless, Mukherjee concedes that her refutation of hyphenization is a form of resistance to discrimination against non-white Americans on whom "hyphenization is imposed" (33). She argues that her embrace of Americanism is nothing but a challenge to the essentialist concepts of cultural and racial purity that has plagued her home country India and which reflects itself in Canada's conceited "mosaic policy of immigration"(31) and in America's official self-absorbed multiculturalism. Much like "Canada's smug rhetoric of the cultural mosaic" (31), American multiculturalism bases itself on the logic of center and peripheries. "The mosaic implies a contiguity of self-sufficient, utterly distinct cultures" (32). Likewise, multiculturalism grounds itself on setting the white Christian Anglo-Saxon culture as the norm and "the rest as aberrations" (33). Hence, undermining the essentialist discourse of "us versus them" (33) and resisting ghettoization of identity and ethnocentrism Mukherjee's guiltlessly denounces nostalgia, condemns past preservation and commits herself "to celebrate racial and cultural 'mongrelization'"(33). Through this position of the assimilated and integrated subject she can transform America, just the way America has transformed her because "transformation is a two-way process" (34). The country allows the subject to re-invent him/herself and the subject remakes his/her country. Ironically, Mukherjee's theory of vanquishing the past fails to find its smooth way to her fiction in general and to her most praised narrative of self-reinvention *Jasmine* (1989) in particular. Just like her "creator"

the eponymous assimilated protagonist remains haunted by the past carrying India in heart and mind.

### 3. Past haunting in *Jasmine* (1989)

*EJasmine* is a story of a young woman who immigrates illegally to America after her husband's murder by the terrorist Sukkhi Lion to fulfill his unfulfilled mission of migrating to the land of opportunities. She plans to perform her *sati* – to immolate herself with Prakash's brand new suit, which was her 'assignment' as an Indian widow, in the college where he would have gone for higher education, had he not been assassinated by the terrorists Shikh. Once landed in Florida, the protagonist discards her mission. "Suddenly, death was being denied" (*Jasmine* 121) as the life drives triumph over the death drives. Instead of burning herself, she burns Prakash's suitcase and her white *sari*, symbolically burning her past and "beg[ins] [her] journey travelling light"(121). However, despite the protagonist's forceful strive to divorce herself from her past, a conviction that manifests itself in her "unquestioning acceptance of the Americanized versions of her name, Jase and Jane and Jazzy" (Banerjee 171) and in her motto: "experience must be forgotten, or else it will kill" (*Jasmine* 33), the dark shadow of the past continues to haunt her in the form of memories.

*Jasmine* is told by the first-person eponymous protagonist, a twenty- four year old Indian migrant who has lived through "hideous times" (214), undergone recurrent transformations shuttling between identities, Joyti/Jasmine/ Kali/Jazzy/Jase/ Jane and who is now reborn as an Americanized citizen Jane Ripplemeyer. Jane who has "distanced [her]self from everything Indian"(145) insists on her "genetic" (222) transformation into an American Citizen. She lives in Baden, Elsa County, Iowa with her crippled wealthy American lover Bud Ripplemeyer and Du their adopted Vietnamese son. Eager for integration within the American society, "the protagonist feels she can rip herself free of the past" (Banerjee 171). Her desire to cut with her past translates her strive for acculturation which results in her yielding to the colonial discourse. Thus, Jane Ripplemeyer accepts her American name that her male partner assigns to her as well as the identity of the exotic sexually attractive lover.

[s]he acquiesces to her own exoticization as an Indian princess; she is resigned to her lover's uneasy silence about her histories; she does not protest even minimally against the normative core of the patriarchal and ethnocentric society that she has been dangled in front of her as the site of wish- fulfillment. (117)

However, and despite the fact that the protagonist succeeds in recreating herself as an American citizen, she is still prepossessed by the past. The astrologer's predictions and the rotten corpse of the dead dog, that she had encountered while she was swimming seventeen years ago, stay with her reminding her of what she refuses to become: a loser, a victim of the hegemonic discourses of gender and colonialism, a rotten dead corpse. She affirms: "That stench stays with me. [...] [E]verytime I lift a glass of water to my lips, fleetingly I smell it. I know what I don't want to become" (5). Actually, the past memories of the clairvoyant mark their presence at the outset of the novel as well as its end. The novel opens with a flashback as Jane recalls one of the most traumatic childhood experiences she has gone through. She reports:

LIFETIMES ago, under a banyan tree in the village of Hanaspur, an astrologer cupped his ears-his satellite dish to the stars- and foretold my widowhood and exile. I was only seven then, fast venturesome, scabrous -armed from leaves and thorns. (3; emphasis in original)

Enraged by the old clairvoyant's jinxing prophecies, seven-year old Joyti revolts against him "No" I shouted. "You're a crazy old man. You don't know what my future holds!" (3) Her defiance costs her a life a long star-shaped wound scar in the middle of her forehead that would further undermine her already meager chance to find a husband. The astrologer "chucked [her] hard on the head. [She] fell. [Her] teeth cut into [her] tongue" (3), asserting "Fate is Fate" (4; emphasis in original). As the star bled, she bravely whispered: "I don't believe you" (4). Despite her vulnerability in front of the astrologer, Joyti felt empowered by the ghosts of the old persecuted women, "the victims of a social order that had gone untouched for thousands of years"(229). She asserts: "I always felt the *she-ghosts* were guarding me. I didn't feel I was nothing" (4; emphasis added). For her the scar is not a weakening deficiency it is an empowering plus: "It is not a scar' [...] It is a third eye"(5) very reminiscent of the extra eye developed by Hindu holy sages of her mother's stories. Traumatized, little Joyti jumps into the river to soothe her pain. "Suddenly, [her] fingers scraped to soft waterlogged carcass of a small dog the body was rotten, the eyes had been eaten. The moment [she] touched it, the body broke into two [...]. A stench leaked out of the broken body, and then both pieces quickly sank" (5). Little Joyti's encounter with the dead corpse is her first encounter with the abject that remains with her everlastingly terrifying her and empowering her at the same time nurturing her life instincts or her Eros and undermining the death ones.

Nevertheless, despite Jane's obvious victory over her 'Fate' and her conviction to follow Lillian Cordon's advice: "[l]et the past make you wary, by all means. But do not let it deform you" (*Jasmine* 131), the spectral memories of the astrologer and the dead dog keep revisiting her nightly as the past continuously disquiets the present. The paranoid protagonist confesses: "every time the memory of the banyan tree and the old man came over me in the night" (76). Indeed, the spectral memory of the old clairvoyant marks its unexpected return even in the happiest moments of the protagonist's life. Long before she migrates, in Hasnapur, and when she is happily married to Parakash the Gandhi-minded husband who renamed her Jasmine in attempt to convert her from the peasant feudal Joyti into a modern city woman, the protagonist is revisited by the clairvoyant's ghost. She grumbles:

I heard melancholy snores. I thought of the old man under the banyan tree. If we could just get away from India, then all fates would be canceled. We'd start with new fates, new stars. We could say or be anything we wanted. We'd be on the other side of the earth, out of God's sight. (*Jasmine* 85)

After migration, in Iowa, and by the end of the novel when Jane is getting ready to elope with her new lover and former employer Taylor, to move to California and to abandon her crippled aged lover, she is again revisited by the phantom of the astrologer whose memory still holds its grip firmly on her mind. She sees his specter "float[ing] cross-legged above [her]kitchen stove"(240). However, Jane is not that kind of woman he predicted her to be. She is not that submissive passive categorical female he has assertively envisioned. In the United States of America, she is neither a sati victim nor a helpless widow feeding on potatoes like her mom; she is reborn as "a fighter and adapter"(40). She whispers triumphantly to the clairvoyant, who has once confidently preached that "Fate is Fate" (4; emphasis in original): "watch me reposition the stars" (240).

The protagonist's desire to cut with her past translates itself in her erosion of her personal history and her recurrent "psychological suicides" (Kedhe 71). Unlike her adoptive Vietnamese son Du who undergoes one rebirth, and who has secretly "made a life for himself among Vietnamese" (*Jasmine* 222) retaining his ethnic identity and constructing himself as a 'hybrid (222)', Jane has not "spoken to an Indian since [her] months in Flushing" (222) and has willingly gone through multiple reincarnations and exiled herself from the Indian ghettos to avoid any connection with the past. Indeed, Jane's a few months' stay with the Indian Vadheras in Flushing has made her uncomfortable since she has felt "her English was

deserting [her]" (144); she thus felt herself relapsing into the feudal conventional female she had once been. This has led her to deduce that Du's transformation is hyphenated while her "transformation has been genetic" (144). Du abandons his adoptive American middle-class family and opts for return to live with his working-class sister. Jasmine uproots herself from the Bengali migrant community to prevent her past from deforming her present. She quits Professorji's flat because she feels that the past is replicating itself. She is about to return to her old Hanaspuri life. The notion of return is unthinkable for Jasmine as she is "unwilling to abandon the ride [she] is on" (139).

Despite undergoing multiple transformations metamorphosing from feudal Joyti of Hasnapur to Jasmine "the sati Goddess", from Jasmine to Kali the Hindu Goddess of female destruction, from Kali to Jazzy the undocumented new comer, from Jazzy to adventurous Jase then from Jase to Jane Ripplemeyer, the assimilated middle-class migrant, who lives in the land of boundless bounties remains haunted by "the poverty stories" (16) of rural India. The spoiled exotic lover of the southern wealthy American banker Bud who owns three hundred acres is still haunted by the dark memories of the Indian "water famines" (16). She admits: "Even here, I store water in orange-juice jars, plastic milk bottles, tumblers, mixing bowls, any container I can find. I have been through thirsty times and not that long ago" (16). Transforming herself into Jane Ripplemeyer, the protagonist "feel [s] renewed [like] the recipient of an organ transplant" (103). Nonetheless, she is still haunted by the tragic stories of Bengali women who are victims of a feudalistic patriarchal regime that has gone untouched for ages. For instance, the terrible story of her birth that her mother has told her long time before is still disturbing her. Mataji has attempted to murder her at birth. Such a painful story which she has told to her former employer Wylie and which has made her "shriek [...] at [her] 'foremothers' " (40) must be hushed, kept within. Yet, Jane knows that her mother's hideous endeavor is caused by love and not hatred. She wanted to spare her the pain and humiliation of a dowryless marriage. As "the fifth daughter, the seventh of nine children" (140), Joyti had no chance of getting a dowry. Joyti survives to change the world around her, to reposition herself within the discourses of power namely, gender and colonialism, to tell her tale and to negotiate gender orthodoxies of home and cultural, sexual and racial biases of America.

Despite its violence, America has granted Joyti immunity against the idiosyncratic patriarchal regime of Bengali India; It has granted her life. In America, Joyti has been resurrected. Yet, the stories

of Hanaspur persecuted women still hold their firm grip on the protagonist's memory. Americanized Jane is still haunted by the sati story of Vimla. Just twenty two, Vimla sets herself on fire after her husband's death. The first- person narrator compares Vimla's story to Mother Ripplemeyer's who is seventy six and is still taking intense care of her looks and tells us that "[i]n Hanaspur, Vimla isn't a sad story. The sad story would be a woman Mother Ripplemeyer's age still working on her shell, bothering to get her hair and nails done at Madam Cleo's" (15). In India, "a woman may be old at twenty-two" (15). Death is presented as salvation for young women especially unwed women and/or widows. Widows are denied life and if a widow opts to live like Mataji, she has to lead a life like Mataji's "of public humility and secret bitterness" (9). There is no life for female outside husbandry. "Remarriage was out of question within the normal community" (147). As a widow, the protagonist has no chance for life; she is already dead. In Punjab, "[widows] fell into wells; they got run over by trains; they burned to death heating milk on Kerosene stoves" (41). However, America has allowed her to be reborn several times and made her "feel as potent as a goddess" (12). As an illegal and undocumented intruder, the protagonist "who had every reason to fear America" (145) does not only "fail to cry over Hanaspur" (160) but also struggles to cut off with it by repressing its memories and restricting her mails. Ever since her arrival, Jasmine has never written a letter to her family. She also returns each letter to its sender. Quite surprisingly, she has never felt nostalgic to home. The narrative fails to idealize home. Home is often associated with traumatic memories namely the freak callous fortune teller, the terrorist bombing, the holy bull's slaughtering of innocent people, women's rape, forced arranged marriage and the burning of young widows.

Incontrovertibly, Jane is aware that her horrendous past stories of India must be buried. She can share them neither with her partner, Bud who feels "always uneasy with the tales of Hasnaspur", (231) nor with the neighbors nor even with Mother Ripplemeyer with whom Jane shares her tales of depression and anxiety. Her stories would make them uncomfortable. For them she is "inscrutable" (11). Her foreignness seduces them but also frightens them. The impossibility of sharing these memories makes the burden of the past more painful to handle. The female narrator confesses: "I have to be careful about those stories. I have to be careful about nearly everything I say. If I talk about India, I talk about my parents" (16). Thus, the acculturated Jane who struggles with the haunting of the past resists "bunker[ing] [her]self inside nostalgia" (185) by suppressing the past memories and keeping the feudalistic Joyti's stories within the

private sphere while consciously and publically adopting the American lifestyle.

#### 4. Conclusion

Reminiscent of her own creator who vociferously heralds past renouncement and celebrates her metamorphose to an American citizen, Jane insists on her "genetic transformation. Yet neither Mukherjee nor Jasmine succeeds in castrating herself from the Indian culture and past. Both remain past prisoners haunted by the ghost of India. Like the assimilated Mukherjee, the acculturate Jane Repplemeyer has never been able to ward off the specter of the past which haunts her in the form of memories. Trained to walk talk act and react American as if born on the American soil, Jane Repplemeyer feels "renewed" just like "the recipient of an organ transplant" (*Jasmine* 103). Nevertheless she keeps carrying her old murdered Punjabi self and past inside her and as such she could not pass into a 'real' American. Rather she constructs herself as a hybrid subject who breaks "the duality of self and other, inside/outside" (Bhabha 116) and who "inhabits the rim of an 'in-between reality" (13) and thus leads an 'unhomely' existence between temporalities and cultures (Bhabha 13). Fluctuating between now and then, India and America *Jasmine* is not a romance of transformation but rather a "split text of hybridity" (Bhabha 113) that articulates its protagonist cultural alienation, displacement, dislocation and relocation. It is 'a present past' drama of exile that dramatizes its protagonist's struggle to relate to the present which is often cramped by the recurrent uncanny eruption of the traumatic memories.

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