

Legitimizing an Illegitimate History : Some Questions on the Americanization of Jasmine in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

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Introduction

"Go West, young man, and grow up with the country."

(qtd. in Cincotta 124)

John Soule wrote this introductory quote in 1851 when America still had a geographical frontier. It suggests geographical movement toward the "West" is usually accompanied by positive images in the discourse of American westward expansion: on one hand, America's national expansion, and on the other hand, psycho-physical growth and socio-economic upward mobility of the "travelers" who cross the land.¹

Although the geographical frontier inside North America disappeared in 1890, this convention survived and became a part of the American myth.² It produced an American literary tradition of westward road fiction in which characters go west in search of "better" lives. Heralded by the writings of early settlers, for example, William Bradford who sailed from the Old World to the geographically western New World, road fictions such as John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* are rooted in this tradition.

In addition to the road fiction, the westward expansion of America contributed to the development of another current of the American literary tradition: that of immigrants, who were needed to expand and develop the land. Western European Protestant immigrants, who came to the United States relatively early, were welcomed on the agrarian frontier. However, the new immigrants, such as Eastern and Southern Europeans, Irish, and Asians, were forced to stay in the ghettos in the industrialized big cities replacing those who left for the frontier or suburbia, the modern pseudo-agrarian frontier for the middle class.

Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* is constituted at the intersection of these

elements of American myth: westward movement and immigration. In the novel, the personal history of Jasmine, an Americanized Panjub narrator, is paralleled with the growth of the United States as a nation that is developed by immigrants who came from "East" of the continent: for Jasmine this means India, and for the founders of America, it means England. Jasmine, an illegal immigrant from India, legitimizes her history by utilizing American literary traditions to incorporate her story into the grand narrative of the nation.

The archetypal American quality of this novel suits the story of the Americanization and consequential "success" of the narrator, Jasmine, who has been changing her name along with her transformations during her travel to the West: Joyti, Jasmine, Jazzy, Jase, and Jane. To dramatize the victory of herself who is about to create another "self" to complete her westward expansion, and furthermore, that of Americanism, Jasmine metaphorically utilizes many spatial and ideological binary sets that are best understood in the American socio-cultural context: East/West, frontier/city, agrarianism/urbanism, and Jeffersonianism/federalism. Jasmine, a Cinderella of the "American Dream," achieves her American success by assimilating into American society while she moves towards the West. Simultaneously, *Jasmine* contrastingly emphasizes the reality, the "American nightmares" of other refugees and immigrants who are fixed in particular places and status: geographically in the Eastern United States; mentally and culturally in their own homelands, often in another East, the east of the North American continent including Asia and the West Indies.

However, the ambivalence of Jasmine's Americanization is disclosed in a close reading of the novel. The incorporation of the essential American myth into *Jasmine* is a formal representation of the assimilation of Jasmine, who is a victor and a keeper of traditional American ideologies. Conversely, Jasmine is a victim of the same ideologies that force immigrants to be "American" in order to fully enjoy their lives in the "promised land."

I. Precondition of the Exodus: Jasmine's India

In the introduction to *Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspectives*, Emmanuel S. Nelson points out that Mukherjee, who is from Calcutta and immigrated to the United States in 1980 after twenty-one years in Canada,

"redefined herself as an artist in the immigrant tradition of American writers (such as Bernard Malamud)" (xi). Locating herself in this tradition, Mukherjee in *Jasmine* reconstructs the westward frontier myth of America by creating Jasmine, a twenty-four-year-old female illegal immigrant from India, who tells her biographical story in the western town of Baden, Iowa.

In each stage of her life on the way to the West, Jasmine has been forced to change herself. Jasmine's westward expansion that starts from a feudal village in India is represented as a series of her separations, more often escapes; from persons with power who try to change her in their own ways by giving her their favorite names. Although she was named Jyoti by her parents in Hasnapur, she has been renamed during the travel by her male partners and Lillian Gordon, who saves and teaches Jasmine how to pass as an American. Jasmine, in the beginning of the novel, is also entrapped in a form of patriarchy and domesticity; as a pregnant Jane Ripplemeyer, whose name is given by her live-in lover Bud, she tells her history from a kitchen with their baby in her womb and their adapted son in the high school. Her being unmarried to the banker in spite of their children implies her resistance to the settlement with Bud in Iowa and her consequential leaving of the household in the end of the novel.

Her acceptance of those names for a while shows Jasmine's survival method: adjusting herself to "power": males and the mainstream of the United States of America. Donna Schlosser positively interprets Jasmine's negotiation with circumstances in which she lives as one of her talents, and believes her success in America is achieved by her agency (Schlosser 75). Her argument, however, ignores the passivity of Jasmine; that almost all of her transformations and her geographical movements toward the West are guided by authorities in advance, apart from her own intention.

Jasmine's geographical westward journey is the metaphor of her psychological movement toward the Western, indeed, American civilization. As early American writers paralleled their escapes with the Exodus, Jasmine begins her own history with her fleeing from India where she experiences persecution from religious fundamentalists. Her psychological Americanization initially occurs in a village, the cultural backwater in Hasnapur, India (Feimonville 53). Under the instruction of Masterji, a Sikh teacher who "love[s] things American" (45), Jyoti learns English language

and its culture by using books and movies of colonizers: the British Council Library and the United States Information Service. Later, a religious fundamentalist youth group, Khalsa Lions, who tries to kill Jasmine as well to keep the purity of Indian Sikh culture, murders Mastaji and Jasmine's Westernized husband.

Jasmine as Jane in Iowa recollects how she learned English with Masterji:

[Masterji] had a pile of English books, some from British Council Library, some with USIS stickers. I remember a thin one, *Shane*, about an American village much like Punjab, and *Alice in Wonderland*, which gave me nightmares. The British books were thick with more long words per page. I remember *Great Expectations* and *Jane Eyre*, both of which I was forced to abandon because they were too difficult. (40-41)

By referring to *Shane*, a representative 1953 Western movie based on Jack Schaefer's novel set in Wyoming (1949), and the idealized farmers' lives in California in the letter from Mastaji's relatives in the States, Jasmine introduces the myth of frontier and the West in this story. Moreover, this passage clearly shows Jasmine's early inclination toward American popular culture set against "difficult" British high culture. Thus, colonized by American culture, Jasmine's search for an Americanophile husband and later America itself is already inevitable.

Likewise, her west-bound geographical movement starts in India. At fourteen, Jasmine as Jyoti marries an Americanized electronic engineer among the candidates selected by her brothers. At the marriage, she moves from the house of her deceased father in a village in Hasnapur to her husband's small apartment in the city of Jullundhar (44). Her urban husband, Prakash Vijn, is structured as a counter character to her farming father and mechanic brothers, the college drop-outs whom Jasmine associates with the feudalism of rural India. In this geographically western city, Prakash renamed Jyoti as Jasmine "to break off the past" and modernize, or more accurately, Westernize her (77). Absorbing Western cultural literacy, Jasmine, later in Iowa, parallels Prakash to Professor Higgins in *Pygmalion*. Jasmine's immigration to the United States is predestined by this West-loving husband who plans to study electronics in

Tampa. Projecting herself into her husband as Vijn & Vijn, Jasmine obediently follows her husband's mission even after his death. Thus Jasmine remains a woman living in a patriarchal society.

II. The Exodus: Jasmine's Immigration to the United States

Uncritically receiving influence from the powers, her teacher and husband, Jasmine follows their will and lands at the Gulf Coast of Florida as an illegal immigrant. The narrator describes the fellow trespassers on her airplane as "strange pilgrims visiting outlandish shrines" (101) and put them on the lineage of classical American tradition: the Pilgrim Fathers. Jasmine's comment evokes those of early puritan writers, including William Bradford and John Winthrop, who often use religious metaphors that compare their immigration to America to the Exodus, the land of America to Israel, and New England to a city upon a hill:

We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies, when He shall make us a praise and glory, that men shall say of succeeding plantations: "The Lord make it like that of New England." For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us. (Winthrop 23).

Just as the Pilgrim Fathers suffered from the severe American winter soon after the immigration, Jasmine is raped by Half-Face, the captain of the illegally operated shuttle to the gulf on her first night in America. The shuttle is the reminiscence of the Mayflower that docked in Plymouth in 1620. Jasmine as Kali, the Hindu goddess of destruction with a red tongue,⁴ continues her travel to the West by killing the rapist as early Americans relocated the natives to explore the frontier. As she travels on the continent, replacing the exile narrative, the popular cultural images of the West derived from the Western movies become pervasive. The murder in this scene also reminds the readers of a familiar scene in a Western movie: the hero shoots the enemy to keep their frontier safe. After the murder, Jasmine burns her old clothes with her husband's—for example, the white sari for widows—but she keeps her "fake American" (127) blue-jean jacket bought in India. A scene of chapter seventeen, in which Jasmine "button [s] up" the blue-jean

jacket and leaves the motel behind and "beg [ins] [her] journey" after the murder (121), also evokes a scene from a Western movie from which she learned English: a cool gunman leaves the scene after a duel. Significantly, after this scene, the "West" in *Jasmine* becomes more "American Western frontier" in American cultural discourse than "Western civilization" as a desirable alternative to "Eastern civilization."

Jasmine's choice of blue-jeans indicates two layers of colonization; Jasmine, who takes the American jacket instead of sari, has grown up in "Coca-Colonized" India in which her brothers easily buy the jacket in Delhi.⁵ Thus, in *Jasmine*, American culture works as a colonizer which colonizes a passive female, Jasmine, significantly through Americanized males and the culture of India, which had already been colonized by Great Britain so that is extraordinary susceptible to another English speaking colonizer, the United States of America. Jasmine's contemplation of the remark of Lillian Gordon, a liberal middle-class Quaker who helps illegal immigrants to assimilate in America by teaching American way of life,⁶ emphasizes Anglicized India's cultural vulnerability to Americanization:

I was lucky, she said, that India had once been a British colony. "Can you imagine being stuck with a language like Dutch or Portuguese?" Look at these poor Kanjobal—they barely speak Spanish! (131-32)

Lillian, who supports the assimilation of the immigrants pragmatically summarizing Americanness in how to "walk" and "talk" (132), recreates Jasmine as "Jazzy" in Florida by dressing the Indian girl in her daughter's clothes and teaching her how to "perform" American. The older American supervisor, who functions as the indigenous people who teach the early settlers how to survive in the North American wilderness in New England for Jasmine, is problematic in her praise of Jasmine's rapid loss of her own Indianness.

III. Urbanization of the East: Jasmine's New York

As the settlers soon develop cities on the East Coast, Jasmine is drawn to an urban location from the edge of American civilization. Passively accepting Lillian's version of America, Jasmine as Jazzy sets out for New

York City to see Professor Devinder Vadhera, who has cultivated her husband's fondness of the States at a college in India. To New York, she takes a Greyhound bus, another popular cultural icon of American mobility often seen in American films. In the transnational city, she is struck by another kind of America: "an archipelago of ghettos seething with aliens" (140) where each diaspora keeps its own way of life. In the city, as Michael Peter Smith argues, various cultural practices which were once "purely local phenomena" go beyond politico-geographical boundaries, and co-exist in the urban space because of the development of transnational networks (117). Professor Vadhera's family who lives in an apartment in Flushing, a microcosmic India within New York, demonstrates a good example of people who appreciate their native culture in a transnational city thousands miles away. Contrary to "Jazzy," the Vadheras maintains an Indian way of life: eating Indian food, reading an Indian paper, watching Indian TV programs and movies, and selling and wearing Indian clothes (145-46). Unlike Jasmine who worships American life style, Devinder comes to believe that "America [is] killing him" (147). However, Devinder, like Jasmine, has to Americanize his life to survive in the American society that hosts the microcosmic India; he changes his name to "Dave" and his job to an Indian hair trader. Ironically, the more he tries to be American, the more his occupation becomes Indian. He has to commodify and exploit his Indianness to survive in America. Thus, Devinder's Americanization reveals another way of life of an immigrant in the United States.

Experiencing seemingly disappointing American immigrants' lifestyles in Flushing, Jazzy cannot stay any longer in the Indian apartment; she wants Lillian's version of America because it is closer to the America that she and her husband have dreamt of together in India: the America in commercial products such as films, books, and student recruitment brochures. To find "*happiness*" (149) with a forged green card, Jazzy runs away to be a nanny of mainstream American baby in Manhattan, notably, instead of attending the old Indian parents of Devinder as Jyoti in the Indian diaspora. This escape confirms what Jasmine is supposed to pursue in America: the life of white middleclass Americans. Significantly, it is Lillian's journalist daughter who introduces Jasmine to Taylor and Wylie Hayes. Jasmine happily surrenders to the WASP authorities who rename her "Jase." Finally,

finding the America that she has sought in India and acquiescing herself to the tradition as an "ancient American custom" (169) of a dark skinned mammy of Duff, the adopted baby of the young, urban, and professional couple of an academic and a journalist, Jasmine declares she "became an American in an apartment on Claremont Avenue across the street from a Barnard College dormitory" (165).

Although she raises her position from a nanny to a lover of Taylor, the master for two years, Jasmine again is forced to leave the urban space to shelter her and the Hayeses from Sukhwinder, the terrorist who killed Jasmine's husband in India. The reemergence of Sukhwinder in New York, who had been relegated to history by Jasmine, emphasizes the image of porous borders and the link between the East and history. To complete this version of American founding history, the Americanization of the Indian girl, Jasmine relocates herself in the West, in Iowa, where Duff is originally from, where the eighteenth century Americans in the crowded, industrialized Eastern cities seek to expand their land toward the West.

Jasmine's life on the East Coast is suggestive. These stages which involve other immigrants imply the realities of the country of immigrants: America's ethnic hybridity and the need to assimilate to the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, or, at least Anglophone Judeo-Christian American society, in order to survive in America as a fully recognized citizen. Positively, it means, as Lillian and Jasmine believe, that everyone can be an American if he accepts American culture; Negatively, immigrants may have to abandon, at least partly, their cultural heritages to be accepted in the new culture. Since J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur defined the national identity in his canonical essay titled "What is an American?" in 1782, immigrants to America seem to have been destined to assimilate to Eurocentric Anglophone culture. In the essay, Crèvecoeur characterizes Americans as "a new race of men" into whom "individuals of all [European] nations are melted," and who are tied by "the knowledge of the language," English (de Crèvecoeur 90). In his understanding, Americanized Jase's success seems to be guaranteed because she is willing to assimilate to the dominant American culture and speaks good English. On the other hand, there are other immigrants such as Kanjobal women in Florida or the Vadheras in New York who do not speak English well and live in their own cultures in

the United States.

Another difference between Jasmine as Jase and other immigrants is their mobility. Jase, who is now an American, is relatively mobile. She can physically move to the wide farming West, where the traditional American Dream of "free" land is promised. Other immigrants, who do not assimilate to American culture, are confined to the physically small industrial East. Here they share squalid land that they do not own with other immigrants while maintaining their own culture; in Florida, the three Kanjobal women share a room in Lillian's house; in New York, five including Jasmine share a small apartment in a small high-rise that accommodates hundreds of Indian families.

As early as 1890, the year of the disappearance of the frontier line, Jacob Riis, an iconic American immigrant journalist and photographer from Denmark, describes that the map of multicultural New York City is "colored to designate nationalities, would show more stripes than on the skin of a zebra, and more colors than any rainbow" in his seminal piece, "How the Other Half Lives" (41). His vision is different from the harmonic concepts of de Crèvecoeur's "melting pot" (assimilationism) and Horace Kallen's "cultural pluralism," which have basic frameworks to contain and limit the diversities of their contents and designate their final destination for assimilation to the mainstream. Each community in Riis's New York is an "independent" stripe of each color which is "querulous[ly]" occupying its own space in the city as if it were rejecting assimilation (Riis 42).⁷ Jase's New York overlaps that of Riis's a century ago.

The spatial contrast of the East and the West does not merely indicate that Jase becomes a "cow girl" or a "gold digger" by leaving the East for the West in the context of American frontier narrative. This also suggests another traditional ideological binary set that is rooted in the American mind: Agrarian Jeffersonianism related to the West that worships nature, farming, and wide land, and Hamiltonian federalism associated with the East that celebrates industrialization and urbanization. Jasmine as Jase chooses the West over the East as those who leave the East in the nineteenth century for the West whose "dullness is a kind of luxury" (6). For Jasmine, who dreams of the America depicted in Western movies, it may be an ideal place.

IV. The Western Expansion of the Manifest Destiny

Escaping the busy, crowded East ridden with history, in Iowa, the mid-western state, Jasmine comes one step closer to being a "perfect American" by physically immersing herself in the very white American heartland. Jasmine's simple American name, Jane of plane Jane, implies the extent to which she has become Americanized by living with Bud in Baden. Besides, Jane, the name of the dark frontier's woman, Calamity Jane, inevitably evokes the image of the Western stories that Jasmine reworks to tell her story. In *Jasmine*, the banker-farmer conflicts substitute for the battles of gunmen in Western stories. As Shane is wounded when he kills gunman Wilson and free rancher Ryker, Bud the banker is maimed by a gunshot from Harlan Kroener, the local bankrupt farmer. However, Bud's "shot" is influential. Not only Kroener who commits suicide after the gunfight, Bud also leads his neighbor Darrel Lutz to death by not favorably financing them to keep the West safe. If it is a typical Western film like *The Virginian* (1923), Jasmine is an "Eastern" girl for Bud the Western hero to marry. However, the hero who is also wounded in the fight cannot marry Jane. Jane, who has been supporting Bud's life and business for a while, herself is a rebel traveler like common Western heroes. She refuses the powerful authority that hopes to put her in "wedlock" and stop her westward journey, significantly as a wealthy old man who has lost mobility in the wheel chair when she leaves him. Jane the cowgirl joins the westbound Toyota of Taylor and Duff, her modern horse, in search of an idealized West that she cannot find in Iowa.

In the beginning of the story, it is Wyoming and California that first colonize her mind when she watches *Shane* and listens to Masterji reading a letter from his nephew in California where people own vast land. Her leaving the German settlement with the Eastern academic in the end may be a gender-inversion of the two typical endings of Western stories as in *The Virginian* and *Shane*: the marriage of the heroes with the intellectual women from the East or leaving the land for nowhere after the fighting. Like the protagonist of her favorite *Shane*, Jane who comes from elsewhere, works and fights for the "right" for one party of a binary value system as a partner of the handicapped banker and a mother of a refugee, and is accepted by the host community, but suddenly leaves for the West.

Even in the end of the story, Jasmine's movement is navigated by external factors. Jasmine's own perception of her westward mobility as something beyond her control is represented in her comment on her leaving Iowa:

It isn't guilty that I feel, it's relief. I realize I have already stopped thinking of myself as Jane. Adventure, risk, transformation: the frontier is pushing in doors through uncaulked windows. (240)

As this passage suggests, it is not Jane who sets out to the adventure in the frontier, but it is the frontier that is pushing toward her. This reveals the fundamental passivity of Jasmine who lacks agency. What she is guided by is Manifest Destiny, an American ideology that is derived from the phrase that John L. O'Sullivan, a democrat-journalist, uttered in 1845. The term is now generally used to describe a belief that the expansion of American democracy and freedom is good and inevitable.

Not only the Western stories, the rhetoric of Jane in the end of story, "scrambling ahead of Taylor, greedy with wants and reckless from hope" (241), is also the reminder of the stories of gold diggers such as those written by Jack London. After digging up all the gold in the East and the mid-northwestern county, Jane has to move further west to find another goldmine in the frontier just as the gold miners in the American history once did. Taylor Hayes, a promising scholar negotiating with "Berkley" in the last letter (236), may be the right goldmine for Jane.

Thus, *Jasmine* is not a story of a nomad who is "never reterritorialized" (Cresswell 364), but a westward American frontier story of Manifest Destiny: a story of a pilgrim immigrant, a cowgirl, and a gold digger with a destined direction. Jasmine, whose story telling is framed by what she has read and watched in India, the commodified American frontier myth, should move to the west coast in the end. By reaching the west coast, her story finally fulfills the formal convention of American westward road fictions as well. Her story finally becomes a legitimate American story by retelling her illegal immigration story in an American grand narrative.

Conclusion

Jasmine exemplifies the traditional model of an American immigrant's

success—assimilation—both in content and form. At the moment of the story telling, Jasmine's mode of reconstructing her history is that of an American. Employing the American myths of the Western frontier and the pilgrim immigrant, Jasmine legitimates her illegal immigration story in American mainstream traditions; her history of Americanization that starts in India and tentatively ends in the West parallels with the American mainstream history that starts with the immigration of the Pilgrim Fathers from East of the continent and continues to the western expansion of their descendents. The employment of American myths also implies that Jasmine's story telling is only directed toward readers who are literate of the American story. Thus, Jasmine ignores those whom she has left behind in her travel of Americanization.

In the beginning, this article suggested that *Jasmine* is a story in which Jasmine separates and escapes from the powers that entrap her in a particular place and position. However, my exploration has revealed that Jasmine, even in the end of the novel, does not realize she has been caught in an Americanism that drives the passive Indian girl toward a Manifest Destiny. Her American mode of story telling typically exemplifies that Jasmine's thought system is controlled by Americanism. The Americanness of the novel and Jasmine's achievement of an American dream through her assimilation to the mainstream America emphasize the victory of Americanism that has been colonizing her from her childhood in the Indian cultural backwater of Hasnapur where even British power and the English language have not reached most of the villagers during their long occupation. Significantly, Americanism travels through the national and cultural borders in the form of popular cultures and the letters from the immigrants. Coombe and Stoller argue that the margin, in fact, actively engages in transnational activities through popular culture and migrations.⁸ Thus, Jasmine seems to think that she has escaped every authorizing figure, but she has not been able to escape Americanism.

Jasmine's American success by assimilation, therefore, conversely highlights the colonial mentality of Jasmine as an Indian woman, who believes that she needs to become a white middle class American, like Taylor and Duff, to survive. Here, in Mukherjee's "Song of America," *Jasmine*, turns out to be on American nightmare of the immigrant from

India, who does not even know that she is colonized and entrapped in the American way of life. Bharati Mukherjee, who is so much in love with America that she declares that "[she is] an American. . . in the American mainstream," may not be concerned the ambivalence of Jasmine's America (Mukherjee, "A Four-Hundred-Year Old" 24).

Notes

- 1 John Soule is an American journalist who was born in 1815 and died in 1891. The quotation originally appeared in the editorial of *Terre Haute Express* (Indiana) in 1851.
- 2 "Frontier" is a term to describe an area, typically on the western edge of the country, in which its population is less than two persons per square mile.
- 3 I referred to Boller and Story's *A More Perfect Union* to understand mainstream American history.
- 4 Kali has a long, red tongue. After Jasmine is raped by Half-Face, she cuts her tongue with her knife initially to kill herself, but she changes her mind, and kills him instead to escape.
- 5 According to Huntington, Coca-colonization is a form of Western cultural imperialism through American culture and its economic power.
- 6 According to Koichi Mori, Professor of Theology at Doshisha University, Quakers, who respect the equality of human beings, include more members from the upper-middle or upper classes than other sects of Protestantism. If we rely on his argument, Jasmine's acceptance of Lillian's advice can be interpreted as her submission to the "power." See Koichi Mori, *Shukyo kara Yomu America*, Tokyo: Kodansha, 1996.
- 7 As for the difference of multiculturalism, pluralism, and assimilationism, see Hollinger's article.
- 8 Their article "X Marks the Spot: Ambiguities of African Trading in the Commerce of the Black Public Sphere" explains how a person who spends a desperate day in search of water in an African desert is closely connected to an immigrant works in a transnational metropolis in the United States.

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