

THE FEMINIST DECONSTRUCTIVE ONTOLOGY OF THE HYPHENATED BEING IN EXILE IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S *JASMINE* AND *THE HOLDER OF THE WORLD*

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Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee's novels are exemplary for what one can call the ontology of the hyphenated being in exile, of the postcolonial subject on the margins, the one who belongs to no particular landscape, who has no place to call "home." In *Jasmine*, for instance, this ambivalence is seen as a cause of personal disintegration and existential difficulty. Only through the extremely personal facets of her life is the narrator of *Jasmine* able to make some form of resistance and some subversion of the discourse that surrounds her. *The Holder of the World*, however, is drawn on a much different scale and the ambivalence that is still present – within Hannah who is fragmented between the native Indian and the Puritanism of her homeland, between her assumed English identity and her new place as a lover of an Indian prince – works in a very different way. For on this more epic scale, this ambivalence can be seen as a political weapon of considerable strength. Although Hannah encounters the difficulties of a divided self, the main focus of the ambivalence is how it can alter the discourses within which she is involved. In all her works, including in the two above novels, Bharati Mukherjee deconstructs the colonial discourse yet does not shy away from equally striking against the postcolonial establishment. She does this from the position of the exile, a hyphenated postcolonial being, within neither culture, despite being produced by both of them, a being in constant shuttling, existing in an ambivalent place that he or she tries to deconstruct and reconstruct in what can be called a deconstructive feminist epistemology, a deconstructive feminist postcolonial discourse.

Keywords: *Ambivalence; Being – (in) Exile, Feminism; Genetic, Hyphenated, Postcolonialism; Exile; Home; Multiculturalism.*

Who is the exile? And by what process does the exile – as symbol, as metaphor – come from his or her position on the margins to inhabit, dislocate, and make uncertain a previously sure center (all the while remaining on the periphery)? The exile holds, by the word's very definition, a peripheral place, neither truly at home in his or her homeland, nor truly a native of the newly achieved shore. The exile gains acceptance in the new land while remaining

inescapably "Other." The exile may play many roles, inhabit many parts, and be the sum of many different cultures. In this radical alterity and diffuseness, the exile leads us to question the notion of our own singularity and wholeness. The exile, although a part of his or her new land, remains exterior to it and never fully integrated into it. From this singular position (situated both on the outside and on the inside), the exile casts in question the very notion of the boundary.

Bharati Mukherjee's fiction captures precisely the radical nature of exile, the effects exile has on the individual, and, more importantly, the effects that the notion of exile has on our beliefs about our own lives: the certainty of our identities, the functions of our memories, our convictions about our own and "the Other's," as well as others' cultures. Julia Kristeva views "writing *șasț* impossible without some kind of exile."¹ This is certainly the case with Mukherjee's writing, which is based on the very principle and structure of exile, its alterity, its division.

Jasmine, "Mukherjee's most popularly read novel,"² stemming from an earlier plot from the author's *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988), entered the literary landscape in 1989, the same year as Salmon Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*. *Jasmine* is set mainly in the seventies and eighties (with movements back and forth on the axis of time, for better character enhancement and fluidity of plot) when the violent separatist demands of the militant Sikhs forced many Hindus to migrate from Punjab. The novel is structured around the life of its narrator (who, for reasons that will become apparent later, will for the moment remain nameless), an adolescent Hindu widow who uproots herself from the familiar and

travels from Hasnapur, India, to America, in search of a new life and identity. The novel is not a conventional narration of a life (many literary works have taken autobiography as their formal model), but is told through the prism of the narrator's memory and from her present location in the American Midwest. Furthermore, though it is very much an account of the events that have happened to the main character of the novel, Mukherjee's work is also an account of the myriad cultural influences that have gone to make the heroine who she is, and through the main character, the novel becomes the embodiment of the story of exile itself:

We are the outcasts and deportees, strange pilgrims visiting outlandish shrines, landing at the end of tarmacs. [. . .] We ask only one thing: to be allowed to land; to pass through; to continue [. . .] I phantom my way through three continents. (101)

The narrator "phantoms" her way through the continent; that is, she can never consider herself a full, fleshly presence. The question posed is one of self-formation: What, precisely, makes the narrator who she is, and why can she not achieve wholeness? The narrator's journey takes her from the small Indian village in which she grew up, through the big city of Jullundhar after she marries an engineer called Prakash, across the seas to the United States after his death, into the home of a Punjabi academic, and then into the home of a Western couple, before she runs away to her present home with a banker in Iowa. Each setting, each stage in the narrator's journey, stands as an index to a new cultural setting, a new possible "homeland" for the exile to settle in, to try to identify with. It is against the background of these homes and these landscapes that the central character constructs a series of ambivalent subjectivities by which she can attempt to feel at home.

The novel emphasizes the cultural differences between all these homelands (no matter what country they might be in) and does not homogenize the differences between them. "India" and "the West" are not the sole binary with which the main character deals: her Indian village is very different from Jullundhar; and

Professorji's America is not the same as Bud Ripplemeyer's. Put in Lacanian terms, each "India" and each "America" has its own unique symbolic Order, and each lays its traces within the imaginary unity that the narrator seeks. This is not to say that Mukherjee's novel entirely rejects the Indian/Western dichotomy that characterizes a great deal of post-colonial literature and theory, but rather that it is aware of the complications and contradictions that remain within that dichotomy. Throughout her new life in America, the narrator is constantly perceived as "the Other," as the incarnation of the colonial stereotype of the female native. Because of this exoticism, her American husband is at first attracted to her: "Bud courts me because I am alien. I am darkness, mystery, inscrutability" (200). Similarly, she knows: "I rejuvenate him simply by being who I am" (200), and "I'm less than half his age, and very foreign" (7). It is the fascination with "the Other" that creates the constant interrogation of gender relationships in the novel: "You were glamour, something unattainable" (199). Even when it is not a question of fulfilling the stereotype of her own ethnicity, the narrator is trapped within the darkness of her skin. The farmers of Baden "want to make me familiar" (33) precisely as a reaction to her alienness, as a defense against the danger posed by her foreignness. "Educated people" (with their liberal stake in multiculturalism) "are interested in differences" (33).

In either case, however, the truth of the narrator's being cannot be reached outside of the Indian/Western dichotomy. As Frantz Fanon points out in his ground-breaking study of the psychology of colonialism, "Ontology §. . . § does not permit us to understand the being of the black man. For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man."³ No matter what the differences in the cultural milieus in which the narrator comes to create herself (even while she is in India), it is always within relation to the foreign shore, the West. No matter which cultural surroundings she finds herself in, the narrator attempts to re-inscribe herself in the social order, to become one with the new homeland in which she finds

herself. In the modern parlance of identity politics, she does her best to *assimilate* and, in doing so, dissolve the vestiges of her old self. She learns to walk, move her hips, and mount escalators like a Westerner in order to avoid detection when she is living as an illegal alien with Lilian Gordon. Similarly, when Wylie asks her whether she has a problem with the microwave, she replies, "I don't have a thing about radiation" (169), despite the fact that she does not know what radiation is. These outward shows and mimicking of Western behavior come to have an interior, affective result on who she considers herself to be. "I couldn't tell if with the Hasnapuri sidle, I'd also abandoned my Hasnapuri modesty" (133). This is precisely how those proponents of assimilation expect the neutralization of ethnic identity to proceed in the well behaved immigrant: first the adoption of the ways of Western living, followed by the adoption of their values.

However—and this is the double bind of the exile—as well as mimicking the host culture, the narrator also feels the need to partake in a double mimicry, that is, to mimic herself as the West would have her be seen. This is demonstrated most clearly by the interview Jasmine has with Mary Webb, who believes that in a previous life she was an Australian aboriginal. Although highly ambivalent towards the notion of reincarnation, the narrator feels the need to play the part of the committed Hindu, the mystic from the East: "I tell her that yes, I am sure that I have been reborn several times, and that yes, some lives I can recall vividly" (126). In this particular example of mimicry—in this doubling of the imago, the acting out of a stereotype within a stereotype, which creates a subjectivity for the central character much like that of a Chinese box—we also see the element of subversion that can exist in such mimicry. As can be seen in the mimicry of some of Salman Rushdie's migrant characters and as has been pointed out by Homi Bhabha, such repetition of the dominant stereotypes inscribed in a culture can become a mocking of that culture's discourse, can become a concrete position from which to attack that discourse. This is certainly

the case in the trepidation caused in both Half-face and Bud, both of whom are disconcerted by the central character's ability to perform the part of the Westerner (and both of whom also find such a performance sexually stimulating).

However, Mukherjee pushes this dynamic one step further than Rushdie (and also goes further than Bhabha's theoretical analysis) by illustrating the subversive power of the migrant playing a stereotype of the dominant culture. The scene involving Mary Webb is, more than anything else, a set piece of satirical writing. Mary Webb's pretensions are being laid out for ridicule, her easy acceptance of the mysticism of the Indian and its dismissal of the possibility of secular values having penetrated the religious subcontinent. The thing that crowns the satirical moment, however, is the central character's acceptance of the stereotype. For, by playing the part that Mary Webb has eked out for her, she is exposing it as merely a part, a role, a lifeless stereotype with no depth.

Subversion is not the central character's central reason for utilizing mimicry and playing out the dominant discourse's stereotypes on arriving in the United States. Rather, it is a tool for survival, a means of surviving the reality of her exile. These central tenets—mimicry and acceptance of the stereotype of the "Indian woman"—are the two methods by which the narrator of *Jasmine* attempts to balance the precarious nature of her subjectivity. They are the methods by which each transformation of her identity is accomplished, how each incarnation of her as a woman, as an exile, is born unto the world. I have refrained from giving "the narrator" a more concrete denomination up to this point precisely because of the dynamic of re-birth at work throughout the novel, which gives the narrator a new name each time she is "re-born" into a new cultural incarnation. She is born and lives her early life in the village as "Jyoti," and then, when she is married to Prakash, he calls her "Jasmine" because "he wanted to break down the Jyoti I'd been in Hasnapur and make me a new kind of city woman" (77). These new names are far from arbitrarily imposed. They are names that not

only inscribe the exchange of selfhood that has occurred; they also inscribe the narrator securely into the Symbolic Order of the culture she is entering. She marries Bud, who calls her "Jane," an Anglicization (and neutering) of her original Indian name.

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 Jane is all I want to be. Plain Jane is a role, like any other. My genuine foreignness frightens him. I don't hold that against him. It frightens me, too. (26)

"In Baden, I am Jane. Almost" (26). The referencing of the staples of American popular culture—Tarzan and the movie actress Jane Russell and even the folksy reference to "Plain Jane"—place the narrator's new name in a symbolic chain that links and binds her subjectivity into an American cultural matrix. "Jane"—the very prosaic nature of the name makes it both desirable and detestable to *Jasmine's* central character (who has recently, of course, been the much more exotic Jasme). Its Anglicization is an attempt to make the central character safe, to inscribe her into the dominant culture, to domesticate her and render her foreignness less dangerous. Yet, at the same time, the very English name points out the ambivalence that manifests itself as an unstoppable shuttling. The outward show—*Jasmine's* darkness, her past—is alien and in contradiction to the safety of her name. In this opposition lies the contradiction that severs the links that might have kept her whole. She enters into the "role" and consciously takes on a new identity, but this identity is anything but secure.

Of course, there is something more to this naming compulsion, the insistence of imprisoning the subject in a name that inscribes him or her into the common cultural stock. In every instance the narrator takes on a new name, a man gives it to her—the man both names her and brings her into the world in which he is already a native. Prakash calls her "Jasmine," Bud calls her "Jane," and Taylor calls her "Jase," each one naming the woman he wants her to be. What is more, there is something particularly

gender biased toward a number of the constructions that these various names create. "Jase," for example, the exotic and carefree woman that Taylor falls in love with, "was a woman who bought herself spangled heels and silk chartreuse pants" (176). It is no surprise that "Jane," after a disgruntled farmer shoots her husband, is the kind of woman who will submerge her own desires so as to look after her injured spouse. Even the one name that is not chosen by her man (her first name, "Jyoti," which is given to her by her grandmother) is bestowed on her by a representative of the old patriarchal Punjabi tradition, her grandmother, who tries to prevent her from continuing her schooling and is shocked by the fact that "Jyoti/Jasmine" wishes to move away to the city.

What seems to overarch the cultural differences that separate the different names the narrator uses, and the different cultural selves that those names differentiate, is a patriarchal system of control—one that is current in all cultures, a masculine colonialism that stands over and above all the other hegemonic discourses of race or color. Can we say, then, that Mukherjee's text falls into the trap that, according to post-colonial theory, many recent feminists texts have done, of producing "the 'Third World Woman' as a singular monolithic subject?"⁴ That is, has Mukherjee used the female's subjection by masculinity as a transcendental signified and by doing so homogenized the cultural differences that separate "Western" and "Indian" women?

I think not and for two reasons. The first is that to see patriarchy as a single and homogeneous entity in the novel would, in itself, be a reduction of the varied ways in which masculinity exerts its influence over the narrator. We cannot consider the rapist Half-face, using all the violence and might available to a man in relation to a woman, the same as Prakesh, who produces an identity for the narrator with all the force that Half-face does, but with none of the attendant violence. If anything, the similarity in the *position* of the man—as the namer and inductor of the narrator into new worlds—only underlines the difference of *function* that the man

performs, how culturally different each individual man is from his counterpart in other worlds. Second, we cannot consider a patriarchal system the central means of operation in the narrator's various identity formations because of the role played by the narrator herself. Thus far we have considered the narrator's creation of new identities—her assimilation and objectification and the new names that induct her into the social order of whichever culture—as being a question of outside agency, of an aggressive force perpetrated by a cultural imperialism on the body and soul of the exile. However, the orientation of *Jasmine's* narrator is such that she is an active force in re-forming herself in the shape of the culture into which she enters (and also in interrupting and deforming that culture's discourse). She says of her relationship with Taylor that he "did want to change me. He didn't want to scour and sanitize the foreignness. My being different from Wylie or Kate didn't scare him. I changed because I wanted to" (185). Here the exile's assimilation and difference is wielded by the exile herself. Her new identity is self-born and self-created, actually in opposition to the culture she has entered into (in this case, an Academic, Western liberal culture, which purposefully *imposes* on the exile a difference and desires the exotic, "the Other").

In terms of post-colonial theory, this is an interesting move in a different direction for the notion of identity formation of "the Other" of Western discourse. In most post-colonial theorizing of the last thirty years or so, what has been stressed is the construction of "the Other" by the colonizing discourse. From Said in his groundbreaking *Orientalism*⁵ to the more recent writings by Homi Bhabha,⁶ the question concerns how the West constructs the Oriental or the colonized African. There is not much question of agency, of an ethics, that attends the theory or what the Marxists might call a *praxis*. There has been consideration of ethnicity and race, mainly by those working within ex-colonies. For example, Senghor spoke of the notion of "Negritude": "Negritude is nothing more or less than what some English speaking

Africans have called *the African personality*."⁷ This "African personality" was a humanism that may be placed in opposition to the colonizing discourse of the West.

Fanon, on the other hand, in a piece more practical than his theoretical work, states that "the historical necessity in which the men of African culture find themselves to racialize their claims and to speak more of African culture than of national culture will tend to lead them up a blind alley."⁸ Both suggest, like Cabral,⁹ that the colonized is a fighter who must use culture as a weapon. The suggestion is that the identity, whether racial or national, most suited to interrupting the dominance of Western discourse over a colonized "Other" would be a static, singular, and at home. Whereas assimilation, the negating of this "at home" identity, to a myriad of identities drawn from the discourse of the Western "Other" would most probably be considered a betrayal, a collaboration. However, it is precisely this course that Mukherjee seems to be positing as a positive means of acting in the world. She puts forth assimilation, mimicry, and even collaboration as the components of an ethics of exile.

Bharati Mukherjee is a naturalized American citizen and has been in the country since 1961. She neither rejects the term "Asian-American" to describe herself, nor is she happy being called an Indian writer. She sees herself as an American writer, albeit of Bengali origin. However, despite these declarations, it would not be either correct to consider her merely someone who has assimilated uncritically a Western position (for she has been accused of "race treachery") or, which has also been claimed, to see her as mainly pitting a nationalism of her new country, America, against the nationalism of the post-colonial world. America is not an identity so much as a place to re-enact transfigurations of her identity. The reason she came to the United States was that she "desired 'America,' which to *şherţ* is the stage for the drama of self-transformation."¹⁰

This is something different, a third term that falls between the binaries constituting cultural identity with the West and cultural identity with

the Asiatic "Other." Rather, she chooses "America" as a staging post in a series of transformations that are not static (as those binary opposites are), but enacted as a drama, in continual motion. As Brennan says of Salman Rushdie, Mukherjee too presents a "defiant challenge to traditional ways of conceiving the 'national.'"¹¹ The inverted commas enclosing "America" point in this direction America is not merely a single, static edifice, but a shifting, incomplete staging post as much to be altered by the process of self-transformation as effecting it.

The emphasis on the agency of the individual in the ethics of the exile, which develops out of Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, should, at this point, be further examined. In the above quotation, the emphasis is placed firmly on the I—"I desired 'America,'"—suggesting that Mukherjee, her narrator, and any subject are separate from and above the identity that they create for themselves out of the detritus of culture. This was the way that Said thought of the subject in *Orientalism*. Although he followed Foucault in many of his observations on the nature of the discourse that constructed the Orient and the Oriental, he could not follow Foucault to the radical limit of the French theorist's conception of discourse and the subject. Foucault saw the subject as the product of discourses, merely another apparatus of power, discourse coming before and creating the notion of subjectivity. Said was too much of a humanist to take his theory of Orientalism to this extent: "Yet unlike Michel Foucault, to whose work I am greatly indebted, I do believe in the determining imprint of individual writers upon the otherwise anonymous collective body of texts constituting a discursive formation like Orientalism."¹²

The individual writer *can* influence discourse, can choose to intervene. There is the suspicion in Said's work (a suspicion which also can be leveled at Foucault in some of his most political works and interviews¹³) that there is a subject beneath the discursive formation of Orientalism to be saved, to be unearthed, an individual outside and above the discourse who creates his or her identity. Although this sometimes seems the model of subjectivity that *Jasmine* sets out, I

would argue that Mukherjee is not actually proposing a subject capable of agency outside the discourse that forms her and that "self-transformation" is a more complex a term than might be first thought.

Mukherjee's narrator puts forth two notions of subjectivity in the exile—demonstrated in the novel by the narrator and Du. "My transformation," the narrator says, "was genetic, Du's was hyphenated" (222). Both are particular strategies of identity that arise in response to the condition of exile. Du is a refugee, a Vietnamese boy whom the narrator and Bud adopted and, throughout the novel, the narrator sees as having an experience similar to her own: he is a foreigner in a strange land; he has felt the need to fit in. However, unlike the narrator, he has been able to balance the two sides of his identification, Vietnamese-American, and has been able to hold on to two different identities, two different roles. In many ways, Du seems to be the perfect American: good at school, with perfect English, and an engineer. But he can easily leave behind his

American self (deciding to return to his Vietnamese sister in Los Angeles) with the same ease as an actor might have coming out of character. In this conception of identity (one similar to Said's), there seems to be a Du beneath the formation of an American identity—an original, primary Du—still existing beneath the American identity he has put on like the duffel coat the narrator buys him when he first comes to America. But this is not the case with the narrator, whose various cultural identities cannot be suspended, as Du's are, but are contributive to her very being. "Plain Jane" may be a role, but it is a role without an actor; it is as much a part of her as Jyoti was and remains to be. There is no solid identity or subject outside of the roles the narrator plays.

These two different kinds of existences, the hyphenated and the genetic, have—each in its own way—a considerable effect on the ethics of exile and on the nature of the individual's subjectivity. They both have very different conditions, and both present a different possibility for subversion of the dominant

discourse. In the case of Du, the ability to resist the dominant discourse is based simply on his ability to adapt and, in the end, to move on. And this is precisely what he does in the novel when he finds himself unhappy with his life with the Ripplemayers. This is also the political stance that many nationalists from ex-colonial countries take: to thy own self be true; return to your natural home. However, in the final analysis, hyphenation might be able to rid a country of its colonial masters, but it will not be able to make a meaningful intervention in the underlying authoritarian discourse that makes colonialism possible. Hyphenation, in the political sphere, will lead only to one master being replaced by another.

The central character's genetic transformation presents an entirely different possibility for resistance and subversion—despite the fact that it immediately presents itself as assimilation or collaboration. The changes within her are “genetic,” meaning they are ingrained into her being. The character, thus, cannot shrug off the roles she plays because those roles constitute who she is. By playing out the stereotypes of the dominant culture, by inhabiting the matrices of their discourse, the central character of *Jasmine* is able to question them from the inside. Through her many character roles, what is put in doubt is not simply one particular cultural milieu (in the way that Du's return to his Vietnamese roots questions the American dream), but the notion of a singular identity and a singular discourse generally. Du's transformation only perpetuates the illusion of wholeness, the narrator's slipping between roles and vanishing between them, and presents an actual possibility for an ethics.

This is the reason why, throughout *Jasmine*, the narrator's different identities are figured as ghosts or spirits and why it is important that the novel takes the form of someone looking back, placing memory as its organizing principle. Very early on, before the reader is introduced to the narrator's story, Jasmine sees that “in the white lamp light, ghosts float towards me. Jane, Jasmine, Jyoti” (21). These are ghosts because they are partial beings, partly dead (the narrator having moved on), partly still alive (still active

in the formation of who she is), none of which solidified into the narrator's “self.” Nor do these ghosts follow each other in natural succession: the narrator is Jyoti, then she is Jasmine, then Jasme, and then Jane. Rather, each of these ghosts interacts with the others. Even the narrator's latest reincarnation (Jane) can inform the first (Jyoti): “My grandmother may have named me Jyoti, Light, but in surviving I was already Jane, a fighter and adapter” (40). In this way, the “genetic” model of identity is not linear or temporal, but spatial. It is as if, rather, all the “individuals” that the narrator has been are laid out flat on a table top, and the narrator's actual being is constituted by the movement, the *shuttling*, between these individuals: “Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttled between identities” (77).

This notion of “shuttling” is reminiscent of one of the most important works in the post-colonial field since its inception, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's “Can the Subaltern Speak?” In this essay, which she later expanded and included in her *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, Spivak attempts to find the essence of a single woman, the Rani, outside of the remits of colonial discourse. Yet Spivak does not posit either Said's or Foucault's model of the self (because it is not a matter of choosing between the self as the humanist subject or object of discourse), but rather a model along similar lines to these in Mukherjee's: “Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling.”¹⁴ Here, Spivak characterizes the shuttling within discourse, the movement of the self between the various identities produced by the cultural milieu, as a *violent* process. Mukherjee would not disagree: the process of identity formation she shows her narrator passing through is certainly violent and harrowing—not the least in Prakash's death, the narrator's rape, and Bud's shooting (for which she blames herself because she was not “Karin,” not able to be the “perfect” American wife). However, Mukherjee also sees it as a positive and, ontologically ethical, means of being.

Let me return, now, to the "ethics of exile" and the place for "self-transformation" in it. A subject who is outside of and above the cultural discourse does not carry out the notion of self-transformation; no such stable subject exists in Mukherjee's notion of being-as-shuttling. However, this does not preclude the notion of agency, or, rather, the notion of an applicable ethics. This is clear at the end of the novel, when the narrator decides to leave Bud for the uncertainty of life with Taylor. The ethics of exile is not a choice between identities (between Jane or Jasme), but a choice between reification and instability; it is the active choice to actively interrupt and re-create the self, to plunge the static self into the turmoil of exigency and chance.

The narrator proclaims, "Adventure, risk, transformation: the frontier is pushing indoors through un-caulked windows. Watch me re-position the stars, I whisper to the astrologer who floats cross-legged above my kitchen stove" (240). There is no certainty to this way of living, merely a promise to re-position the stars by reference to the new self. It does not suggest a destruction of the past. The astrologer who opened the novel and presented the narrator with a reified version of fate at the very beginning of her life is not dismissed, is not forgotten, but is included in the numerous positions within discourse between which she shuttles. This is the fate of the exile: to be not merely the object of discourse, but of its interruption, its re-configuration, and its reformation.

In her novel of 1994, *The Holder of the World*, Mukherjee takes up a number of the themes that she dealt with in *Jasmine* from a different perspective. Once more, the novel involves a life narrative, filtered through a framing narrative that draws attention to the exigencies of memory and of history. And, once more, the central figure in that life narrative is a woman and an exile, this time Hannah Easton, a seventeenth-century American woman from Salem who travels with her husband to India. Once more, we see the process of exile as a process of self-transformation: Hannah begins her journey as a

good Puritan woman and concludes it as the "Bibi" (the name given to black mistresses of white colonialists) of a Hindu prince, a woman defined by the sensuality of the East. The nature of this self-transformation is marked because of the enormous divergence between West and East that the historical setting provides, increasing the feeling of absolute alterity, the utter "Otherness" that separates the two cultures. This self-transformation, placed as it is at the very beginning of modern colonialism, acts as an index to the (post-) colonial question that was less explicit in *Jasmine*. It explicitly enters the "postcolonial field," which "Edward Said writes about" and to which "modern anthropologists can no longer return with their erstwhile certitudes."¹⁵

The Holder of the World presents a reversal of the situation in *Jasmine*. Seventeenth-century Salem was, of course, an English colony, too. Through the novel's main character, the Western colonized subject (nevertheless a Westerner) goes East to another colony ("the Other" colonizing the other "Other"). Through Hannah, *The Holder of the World* reconstructs the primal scene of colonial discourse, the moment of the first clash of Western and Indian civilization. Nonetheless, Mukherjee does not represent this clash as a political or materialistic altercation, but in terms of how the discourse of colonialism functions over the political realities of the colonial situation. Even before Hannah travels with her husband, Gabriel, to India, she is seduced by her husband's tales—by narration, by words, his obvious fabrications—and Gabriel's discourse of travel is placed firmly within the tradition of the exoticization (and therefore Other-ing) of the sub-continent in sailors' tales. "She thrilled to his sea-faring yarns. He had jumped pirate ships in Madagascar. He had slept in the Garden of Eden, inside an Asian mountain guarded by angels. Children enchanted the deadly cobra with a mere piped melody. [. . .]"

The soil of Hindustan was ground up sapphire" (67). It is also notable that in Gabriel's tales the Orient is presented as both a sensual paradise (the "soil" that was "sapphire") and a

prelapsarian one (for he “slept in the Garden of Eden”). It is more voluptuous than mundane Salem, as well as having a prior religious claim. The imaginary homeland of “India” is a contradictory construction, not a single reality. Throughout this novel, Mukherjee is less interested in the actuality of Indian life than she is concerned with its status as an imaginary construct:

The New World was hard and savage; it was soft and bountiful. It was evil, it was innocent. [...] Probably every colonist and every Englishman ascribed to one or many of those views, serially or simultaneously, whatever the nature of their mutual contradiction. (72)

The fact that a view can be subscribed to “serially or simultaneously” involves a certain paradigmatic shift. Mukherjee is not trying to say that those Englishman who held these views were even changeable or hypocrites. Rather, she is pointing up the way the discourse that constructs the New World operates, its strange logic, the way that reality is reformed and deformed under the Western eye. The Western eye places the New World in a series of opposition with itself, and from this opposition, arises the ambivalence that opens up within the migrant when he or she enters a new landscape. The eye alters the landscape, just as the person who sees is also altered. That there may be a contradiction in the shifting landscape does not, for Mukherjee, alter its power to form a reality that many believe to be “true.”

But it is not merely India, the colonized state that is an imaginary construct of the colonial imagination. England, too, is presented as an imaginary homeland, “a fantasy England” (127). Nevertheless, this homeland across the sea was just as ambivalent as the new colonial land; the colonists also thought “serially or simultaneously”: “England was refined and cultured; it was soiled and sinful” (72). The situation, then, that Mukherjee presents in *The Holder of the World* is more complex than the suggestion proposed by Said, among many others, that the Orient is a construction of the West (a West, he seems to suggest, that gains stability by opposing itself to the mysteriousness

of the New World.) Rather, while remaining in opposition, the two worlds can change each other, their discourse entering into a strange game of cultural tag, in which the two worlds can never hold the same position, but continuously circle each other.

It is clear that, as Chakrabarty has noted in his study of precisely this colonial moment, “‘India’ and ‘Europe’ [...] refer to certain figures of imagination whose geographical referents remain somewhat indeterminate.”¹⁶ Not only are the geographical referents indeterminate, but so are the actual limits of their cultural and symbolic weight; there are many contradictory significations involved in the representation of “India” and of “England.” However, no matter what the contradictions at the hearts of the imaginary lands, the most important (and, again, imaginary) aspect of colonial discourse is the placing of the two cultures in opposition with each other: where England is dour, India is fruitful and colorful; where India is sinful, England is a bastion of virtue; where England is corrupt and decadent, India is pure and innocent. The oppositions abound. As James Clifford points out in discussing the general operations of colonial discourse, there is a tendency to dichotomize the relationship between the “Occident” and the “Orient,” binding them in an us-them contrast.¹⁷

It is noticeable that though the colonists themselves can, in many ways, be considered exiled from their homeland, the ethics of exile does not function in their discourse. There is no self-formation, no reinvention, and no deformation. For example, the way in which the wives of the East India Company men react to their husbands’ relationships with their Bibis, is extremely telling. “Black bibis know their place, so a wife’s safety lies in assigning them a place that is harmless” (133). The response of the women to the new culture—a culture that is more sexually liberal, where the marriage bonds are more fluid—is to cast the Bibi in the class structure of the land the Occidental women have left behind. The Bibi is not threatening because she has been given a place in the social hierarchy where she is “no more than a cute little pet”

(131). This minimization of the threat is not purely a psychological transference of the sexual threat posed by the Bibis; it is a cultural reaction. They are pets: they are reduced to not only something harmless, but also something genderless and animalistic. The connection that might have linked the English women and the Indian women (their femininity) is denied through the simple act of denying that the women are even human.

Not only are the Bibis reduced to something less than human, but they are even denied the dignity of being individuals. They are stereotypes from the store of stereotypes that make up the shared colonial portrait of the native: the Bibis are "devious temptresses, priestesses of some ancient irresistible and overpowering sensuality" (31).

While the ethics of the exile is to exploit the notion of static subjectivity, to de-center it and scatter it among the competing claims of various cultural discourses, the women of Whitetown purposefully reify the selfhood of the Bibi, as Bhabha explains colonial discourse is meant to do when dealing with the colonized "Other":

The stereotype is not a simplification because it is a false representation of a given reality. It is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that, in denying the play of difference (which the negations through the Other permits), constitutes a problem for the *representation* of the subject in signification.¹⁸

The Bibi can be nothing other than the confining limits that colonial discourse places on her, and, being nothing more than an object of sensuality, she cannot, therefore, pose a threat in any of the other areas of the white women's influence.

The importance of the imagined homelands and the Other-ing stereotypes of the colonial imagination, then, is to present a static version of the world, one in which the civilizations of West and East are diametrically opposed. As the narrator of the novel ironically notes, "How comforting a world that can be divided into halves" (270). However, as the latter parts of the novel seem to suggest, the world need not be

ordered in this binary way, and, once more, it is the spirit of the exile that begins to attack the certainty of that edifice. In *Jasmine*, the structure of exile, including the multiplicity of different cultures, brings into question the stability and singleness of the self.

In *The Holder of the World*, the relationship of self to the world is reversed. It is the exiled self (the self that is an exile to itself and enters whole heartedly into a process of self-transformation) that can question the singularity and stability of a discourse that proposes "culture" as a monolithic and an unassailable given. In *The Holder of the World*, the self and culture enter into a dialogic relationship that interrupts the simple singularity of either, making both radically multiple. It is Hannah, "the Bibi of Salem," a woman who gives herself freely to the ethics of the exile, who can disrupt the dualism of the two separate cultures and put to play the point at which their boundaries meet.

As we saw in *Jasmine*, there is a marked ambivalence about the position of the subject on the margins, who belongs to no particular landscape, who has no place to call "home." In *Jasmine* this ambivalence is seen as a cause of personal disintegration and existential difficulty. Only through the extremely personal facets of her life, is the narrator of *Jasmine* able to make some form of resistance and some subversion of the discourse that surrounds her. *The Holder of the World*, however, is drawn on a much different scale, and the ambivalence that is still present—within Hannah who is fragmented between the native Indian and the Puritanism of her homeland, between her assumed English identity and her new place as a lover of an Indian prince—works in a very different way. For on this more epic scale, this ambivalence can be seen as a political weapon of considerable strength. Although Hannah encounters the difficulties of a divided self, the main focus of the ambivalence is how it can alter the discourses within which she is involved. She is considered throughout the novel as someone who could make a difference.

An extremely important aspect of Hannah's life-story is the disappearance of Rebecca Easton,

Hannah's mother, who runs away with a Native American Indian leaving Hannah, who is brought up as a Puritan, with the memory of a mother who gave in to her own sensuality. Although it might appear so at the beginning of the novel, this is not merely a repetition of a common colonialist fantasy concerning the native (the cultured woman who gives into the baser side of her nature and takes a foreign mate). Rather, it is a moment of self-transformation, a transgression of the ordinary boundaries of culture that Hannah seeks to forget, but understands in its fullness when she makes a similar transgression years later by becoming the Raja's Bibi. The experience of her mother opens out into a larger analogy between the colonial situation in America and in India, both in the past and in the future: "[P]erhaps piracy on the Coromandel Coast [. . .] was the seed of the frontier dream, the circus dream, the immigrant dream of two centuries later." An observant reviewer rightly commented that Mukherjee had created "a different kind of multicultural story, one that imaginatively links the 17th-century colonial New World (Puritan New England) with the Old World (England and Mughal India)," without necessarily realizing the full significance of this "different kind of multicultural story." As an American writer, Bharati Mukherjee clearly understands the power of bringing into close contact, and thus into creative fission, the notions of "the frontier dream" (which is still firmly embedded in the American national consciousness as a positive nation-building force) and the negative connotations of the colonial situation in English-controlled India.

Later in the novel, another analogy collapses the notion of a singular India into itself. On her journey, Hannah has produced Christian, Muslim, and Hindu "selves" (268). Her religious transformations, being part of various religious cultures without being of them, allow her to interrupt a single "India." There is a difference, she notes, between the colonizer's relationship with Islam and that with Hinduism: "English attitudes saw Islam as a shallow kind of sophistication; Hinduism a profound form of

primitivism. Muslims might be cruel, but true obscenity attached itself to Hindus" (219). Here, the discourse of colonialism—once more using the tactics of hierarchy and stereotype—separates Islam from Hinduism, making Islam a mirror image of itself while placing Hinduism in the position (previously held by the entirety of "India") of complete and unknowable "Other."

Further divisions and analogies are drawn: the desires of the Company factors and the Muslim Emperor are contrasted with the Hindu minority led by the Raja (the combined force of Western and Eastern imperial might pitted against a colonized resistance), and then, soon after, the Raja himself is compared with the colonizing force. As he calculates the possibility of victory or defeat in the field of battle, he is "as happy as some Company factor figuring a profit" (243). The effect of these comparisons and divisions is to unsettle the simplistic binaries of the colonizer/colonized, to unsettle the simplistic unitary description in a complexity of differences. It does exactly the work of deconstruction as described by Robert Young. It makes an intervention in the dominant discourse "in a way that makes the same no longer the same, the different no longer simply different," yoking "difference and sameness in an apparently impossible simultaneity."¹⁹

This is that which, despite the differences between and within the various cultural formations that Hannah comes into contact with, remains a ruling principle. No matter what orientation the pilgrims, the American Indians, the Company men, the pirates, the Muslim traders, and the Hindu resistance are placed in, no matter on what side of the dichotomy of colonizer/colonized Hannah places them as she disrupts the discourse of binarism, there seems to be one single unifying factor that links them all. Each individual group (not merely the colonizers, but every group) is intent on keeping its cultural and personal identity static, and that is the reason for the continuation of violence and oppression in the colonial situation. Hannah realizes this when she tries to convince the Raja, whom she loves, to give up his duty and run away with her.

He refuses:

She saw that her native New World forgetfulness would be forever in conflict with Old World blood-memory. There was no great unutterable crime, no great analog to a life time's single-minded dedication that had set Aurangzeb and Jadav Singh on their course [. . .] He was a king. They were kings. It was their duty to fight. (253)

What Hannah cannot do is to convince Jadev Singh to do as she has done and open himself up to the self-transformative power of being in exile. He is too firmly wedded to his "imaginary homeland" and his position within it. He is king; that is his position; therefore, he must fight. That is the socially constructed thing for a man in his position to do. What is more, the repetition of the notion of kingship seems to suggest, as to some extent *Jasmine* does, that the structure of holding onto a static cultural identity is in some way patriarchal. Just as the men in *Jasmine* are always the ones who safeguard a static cultural identity, so masculine systems—kingship, hierarchy, and colonial trade—keep watch so that the boundaries of static cultural systems may not be disturbed.

In contrast to the masculine need to dismiss the play of difference, Mukherjee seems to posit the power of femininity to transgress those boundaries. This is not to say that Mukherjee believes it is the nature of womanhood itself that allows these transgressive tendencies. After all, the women of Whitetown are as guilty as the Raja of attempting to hold the boundaries of their cultural system. Rather, there is something about the structural possibilities of femininity—perhaps femininity's marginality within cultural systems—that make it particularly suited to being open to the play of differences and to being part of the ethics of exile. It is Hannah and Bhagmati (Hannah's Hindu servant and friend) who make the most forceful attempts to restructure and reconstruct their identities and, by doing so, to restructure the cultural formations in which they find themselves. Their distinctly feminine friendship blurs the cultural boundaries that separate them: "She wasn't Hannah anymore; she was Mukta, Bhagmati's

word for 'pearl.' And she gave Bhagmati a new name: Hester, after the friend she had lost" (271).

This swapping of signifiers functions in the same way as naming did in *Jasmine*: it both inscribes each woman in the other's culture and, by doing so, disturbs the separation between the Western and the Indian. At the end of the novel, it is Hannah/Mukta and Bhagmati/Hester who travel to the Emperor in an attempt to stop the war, a war that stands as a symbol and ultimate expression of the violence of cultural intransigence. And, according to Mukherjee, it is only Hannah who could make such an attempt, precisely because of her structural position as an exile: "Only a person outside the pale of the two civilizations could do it." Only the exile who is beyond the cultural frameworks that have made her, precisely because she is caught in an unstoppable shuttling between them, can attempt a disruption of their force and their violence.

This is the message of *The Holder of the World*. Yet this message—the one that can be gleaned from the life of Hannah Easton as an allegory or representation that explains the structural position of the exile and the construction and deconstruction of imaginary homelands in the colonial scene—is not in itself secure. The novel's framing device, its narration by Beigh Masters, the "asset-hunter" who pieces together the narrative of Hannah's life from the twentieth century, adds another layer of indeterminacy to our reading and a further complexity and richness to Mukherjee's novel. Beigh's presence as the narrator striving to narrate does not stand in relation to her subject with any certainty; her re-telling of the life of Hannah Easton is a re-telling, one that is conditional and incomplete. She has gathered evidence for eleven years so that she might make a "reconstruction not just of a time and a place, but also of a person" (138). If we were to compare Beigh's reconstruction to the works of post-colonial theoretical discourse, she would be the academic trying to reconstruct the meaning of the colonial subject. Hers would be the same attempt made by Spivak in "Can the Subaltern Speak?"—an attempt to excavate from the ruins of history the meaning of the subject

within her cultural context. However, as Spivak also found, this kind of reconstruction is filled with difficulty, that to reach out might also constitute an “un-grasping”:

The palace was a legend of deferment and difference [. . .] I was halted by the discourse of the European sublime and percolated through it, Kalidasa, the fifth-century Sanskrit court-poet beloved of Goethe, both out of Rani’s reach [. . .] There were no papers, the ostensible reason for my visit, and of course, no trace of the Rani. Again, a reaching and an un-grasping.²⁰

That Beigh’s reconstruction is in question, that it might constitute a “reaching and an un-grasping,” is emphasized by the contrast of her methodological approach with that of her boyfriend, Venn. Venn is inventing a machine that can reconstruct the past in all its specificity, a machine that is able to read all the discursive information of a time and a place and, therefore, reconstruct that time and place in “real-time.” His aim is for veracity and for completeness: “The past presents itself to us, always, somehow simplified. He wants to avoid that fatal unclutteredness.” He wants to be able to reconstruct the past in a neutral way that does not place it in any kind of hierarchy that does not credit any single aspect of a place or time above another. In some ways, he makes the same attempt to step outside of discourse that many post-colonial critics do, attempting to stand above the colonial question and describe its operations as they really are. Venn’s first attempt at creating the past involves a reconstruction of a Boston street on October 29, 1989. Beigh tests the reconstruction and walks on the street, reaches out, and touches a faucet. The experience is disappointing because it has no value, has no object. She asks, “Why did I intercept a lady in her yellow jacket demonstrating faucets in a Kansas City bathroom?” (279).

Venn’s second reconstruction is of the day on which Hannah saw the battle begin on the battlements and is created using Beigh’s preceding narrative. This time the moment is full of visceral excitement: Beigh dodges bullets and canon balls, watches Bhagmati die, and touches the Emperor’s Tear (an enormous diamond, the

search for which began Beigh’s interest in Hannah). However, the difference between the two reconstructions is that the second is based on Beigh’s own personal viewpoint: “[T]he program will give you what you most care about” (281). Compared to Venn’s reconstruction, Beigh’s presents itself as less anchored in the real world. Beigh presents the personal aspect as a positive force, implying that the personal valuation should be placed above a neutral iteration of facts: “I talk about asset hunting, the fact that data are not neutral §. . . § There are hot leads and dead ends. To treat all information as data [. . .] is to guarantee an endless parade of faucets in Kansas City” (279).

This is the danger of a post-modernist approach to the post-colonial question. There is no means for intervention if every datum has the same weight as the next, if every subjectivity is dissolved into a simple combination of electronic signatures. However, this does not mean that we must turn away from a post-modernist perspective and try to return to a halcyonic time when all was certain because the means of our analysis where truth. The criterion for placing value on a particular datum is not its truth, but its *value*.

These are the necessary tactics of the asset hunter. It is not a question of truth, but one of value. As such, Beigh also bypasses Spivak’s dilemma of how one can reach the truth of a subject beyond its own “deferment and difference,” how one can peel aside the discourse and know the truth of a person or a land. Rather, Beigh’s methodology is not interested in the truth, but it offers the value of a tactical intervention. Her Hannah, her India, her story are more valuable because of the intervention that Hannah (as Beigh has rendered her) makes in deconstructing the discourse of static certainty. All data may be equally true (or false) in this conception of the world; but to speak of truth or falsehood means that we are still in the domain of the question of factuality, of the actuality of being. But the intervention necessary in the logic of the asset hunter is one that is made on a more pragmatic basis: What can change the world, or even, as Beigh’s intervention does, what can change the past?

Once more then, we are returned to the notion of ethics, of intervention. Like the narrator in *Jasmine* and like Hannah's intervention to disrupt the discourses of the colonial situation, Beigh's reconstruction of Hannah's history also acts as an intervention. She is not creating truth, but something that makes a tactical incursion into the dominant discourse. In all three examples, Mukherjee's prose injects hope into an area of literature and theory that is usually overtly pessimistic. She suggests that an intervention can be made into the stability and singularity of all deterministic discourses, including the discourses of post-colonialism. It is from this basis that, in her political pronouncements, she has criticized the "bitter, exiled discourse" of immigrants with "their tight defensiveness, their aggressiveness, and their blinkered vision."²¹

She is defiant of a post-colonial literary establishment that believes "if you're India-born, you must write about India and you must write about an Indian woman or peasants being victimized."²² Bharati Mukherjee does not attack colonialism because she is of Indian descent. She attacks all stable monolithic discourses. She deconstructs the colonial discourse, but does not shy away from equally striking against the post-colonial establishment. She does this from the position of the exile: within neither culture, despite being produced by both of them. Her writing, in this way, is infused with the ethics of the exile and deconstructive feminist epistemology. Bharati Mukherjee's novels are a great example of multiculturalism, feminism, postcolonialism and postmodernism and through her ethnically diverse characters, especially her women heroes, Bharati Mukherjee purposely deconstructs the structures of domination in contemporary society.

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Endnotes

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