

***Jasmine* or the Americanization of an Asian**

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One of the significant developments in the US over the past decades has been the revision of the literary canon, that had once been white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant and, needless to add, predominantly male. This meant, not only the incorporation of female authors as well as writers of various ethnic minorities who were or would have been neglected or undermined previously, but also a radical change of direction in the selection process. The standards, be they aesthetic or philosophical, that had been employed as criteria in the old canon were readjusted, in the belief that literature should "not only address itself to matters of transcendent human and artistic significance but also record ... the full variety of American life" (Skardal 97). Paralleled with as well as affected by the emergence of multiculturalism, this evolution made possible, among others, the flourishing of a powerful ethnic fiction by non-Anglo authors.

*Jasmine*, the 1989 novel by the Indian immigrant woman writer Bharati Mukherjee, must be considered among such a fiction. It recounts the Americanization of an Indian first-generation female protagonist and reveals how, while living out one's ethnicity is easier nowadays in multiethnic America, the path to Americanization for a non-Anglo is not without thorns. On the one hand, there are restrictions imposed by the ethnic group; on the other hand, the social decay presented by contemporary "puritan" Anglo-American mainstream brings disillusion. As the novel proceeds between flashbacks of contrastive and conflicting portrayals of mutually alien cultures and locales, the tensions inherent in the process of Americanization of the Asians are admirably displayed. It is these tensions that I examine in this paper.

As a mirror image of present-day America, *Jasmine* exudes violence from beginning to end. However, unlike most other ethnic novels, it is not directed against any hegemonic cultural group such as the Anglos, but constitutes, in the candid, pseudo-picaresque narration by the protagonist herself of her Americanization, one of the harshest indictments of nothing less than the American

way of life itself. I argue that the mainstream reflected in the novel is a waste land characterized by moral decay.

Written in the form of a confessional novel, *Jasmine* is the story of an Indian female protagonist, who is given the name Jyoti upon birth, but then is also called Jasmine, Jase, and Jane during various periods of her life that correspond to different men in it. Born and bred in India, she arrives in the US as an adult. Since she does not come from an ethnic group victimized by the Anglo-Americans in the past or has not herself undergone discrimination while growing up, she is able to pose an uncomplexed, unburdened "novel" eye where her African-American or Native American counterpart would see nothing but racialism and suffering. This is one aspect of the novel that distinguishes it from other ethnic novels, and makes for an entertaining work before all else; farcical in a tragicomic sort of way, as when a character

choked to death on a piece of Mexican food. He was so heavy Carol [his wife] couldn't lift him to do the heimlich maneuver. The waiters were all illegals who went into hiding as soon as police were called. (6)

The novel starts in India. A little girl of seven is told her fortune: she will be widowed and exiled. Although she reacts immediately at the time, a foregrounding of the will and strong-mindedness she will display later, on her way to becoming an American, she believes "I was nothing, a speck in the solar system. ... I was helpless, doomed. ... Fate is fate" (1). In fact, Jyoti-Jasmine herself sums up the plot of the novel by referring to "the war between my fate and my will" (9). It ends, with the prophecy enacted, as she is heading 'west' to California, with all that the West as a myth symbolizes, "greedy with wants and reckless from hope" (214).

A coming of age novel, *Jasmine* equates the course of 'heading west' with reaching maturity. Thus, at first her native India is there, symbolized by a belief in "fate"; implacably depicted as a backward society which treats girls abominably, by denying them education, and marrying them off at eleven, denying them existence even: daughters are considered "curses." Jyoti comes out in the midwife's arms with "a ruby-red choker of bruise around my throat and sapphire fingerprints on my collarbone" (34). As she explains later to the American professional woman by whom she is employed: Jyoti's mother loved her so much she had wanted to kill her, because she and her husband would not have been able to provide her with a dowry.

At age fourteen Jyoti gets married to an engineering student, a progressive man who changes her name from Jyoti to Jasmine, making her "shuttle between identities" (70).

Taking the advice of a former professor who has emigrated to the States, and who writes that there is electricity there twenty-four hours a day, Jasmine's husband

decides to go to America. 'America' appears, in its promise of technology and bright lights, a land for moral improvement.

Jasmine's first estrangement from her own people, or the first stage of her Americanization, takes place as husband and wife examine the brochure of an institution in Florida welcoming Indian "students."

For the first time in my life I was looking at familiar Indian faces and seeing them as strange, a kind of tribe of intense men with oily hair, heavy-rimmed glasses, and mustaches. (83)

As he is about to complete formalities, some of them illegal, to migrate to the US, her husband is killed by a Sikh terrorist. Once over the shock, and appalled by the prospect of quasi-immuration her state of widowhood requires in India, Jasmine decides to follow in her late husband's steps and migrate to America. Armed with forged papers, she becomes another illegal immigrant, reaching US soil through dubious means.

For Jasmine, a good student at school, learning English has been "to want more than you had been given at birth," it has been "to want the world" (61). Now, leaving India seems another exploit in the same direction. "If we could just get away from India, then all *fates* would be canceled. We'd start with new fates, new stars" (77). (Emphasis mine.)

Violence is what Jasmine encounters as soon as she lands. On her first night on US soil, she is raped and then kills the rapist.

Eventually she joins the professor's family. Thus, after a portrayal of India, we have a portrayal of Indians abroad. Jasmine spends months in their New York home, almost never leaving the apartment, because, what business does a young widow have out in the streets! The family live, with the professor's parents in an extended family set-up, in a block in Queens with Indian families as neighbours in thirty-two of the fifty apartments--a distinctive residential segregation they themselves create. They spend their whole free time, when not visiting other Indian families, at home, speaking their native language, watching video-cassettes of Indian movies, "artificially maintaining an Indianness" (128), recreating "a certain kind of Punjab," even if "that Punjab no longer existed" (143). The old parents are the unhappiest:

In India the groom's mother was absolute tyrant of the household. The young bride would quiver under her commands. But in New York, with a working wife, the mother-in-law was denied her venomous authority. The bent old lady who required my arm to make her way from the television to the bathroom had been harboring hatred and resentment of *her* mother-in-law for sixty-five years. Now that she *finally* had the occasion to vent it, Nirmala wasn't around to receive it. This was the tenor of all the old people's complaints--we have followed our children to America, and look what happens to us! Our sons are selfish. Our daughters want to work to stay thin. All the time, this rush-rush. ... There are no grandchildren for us to play with. This country has drained my son of his dum. This country has turned my daughter-in-law into a barren field. (130-131)

The professor, learned and dignified in the eyes of his women folk, so Americanized in the way he pronounces his name, making it sound an Anglo-Saxon one, works, not in academia, but, as Jasmine has occasion to find out, as a dealer in women's hair in a room he rents in the basement of an Indian barbecue shop.

America, after all, is not conducive to moral elevation. The social degradation the immigrants have to suffer through robs them of their essential dignity: "In Kabul, I was a doctor. We have to be living here like dogs," as one of them puts it (124).

The depiction of the Indians trapped in New York, "behind ghetto walls" (129), sad yet so realistic, is one of the most poignant parts of the novel.

A number of points have to be clarified at this stage, before we move from ethnic America to mainstream America. Jozsef Gellen has proposed the term "proto-ethnicity" for the original heritage prior to Americanization, with "ethnicity" coming to mean that culture developed in America (qtd. in Skardal 99). That there is a difference between the two is not only hinted at in the narrator's allusions to "artificial Indianness," or to "a Punjab that did not exist any more," but also made evident in her observation that in the meantime India is also changing:

When I was a child, born in a mud hut without water or electricity, the Green Revolution had just struck Punjab. Bicycles were giving way to scooters and to cars, radios to television. I was the last to be born to that kind of submission, that expectation of ignorance. When the old astrologer swatted me under a banyan tree, we were both acting out a final phase of a social order that had gone untouched for thousands of years.(204)

Another matter to be indicated is the fact that the life led by the professor's family is described by Margaret Mead as a "post-figurative culture," a culture which is unchanging, where at least three generations are involved and norms are passed on by grandparents to grandchildren. What distinguishes such a society is the absence of consciousness and questioning; the society remains unanalyzed by its members (1-24 *passim*). For example, as an Indian widow, remarriage is out of question for Jasmine as long as she stays with the professor's family.

However, what is amiss is that there are no grandchildren to pass the norms on to. "This country has turned my daughter-in-law into a barren field." The 'barrenness' here seems to suggest a pathology both in the ethnicity and in the land, i.e., mainstream America.

For Jasmine, the life she is made to lead with the professor's family, generously hospitable in a manner only Orientals are able to be, is nevertheless another sort of immuration, and, not unnaturally, she wants out. She looks for a job, this time with a forged green card. Nothing demonstrates better the moral rottenness of mainstream America than the unlawful dealings concerning Jasmine's eventual entry into it.

Her introduction into 'white,' 'Anglo' America corresponds to her shedding of her 'ethnicity,' disclosing another facet of expatriate experience:

Once we start letting go--let go just one thing, like not wearing our normal clothes, or a turban or not wearing a tika on the forehead--the rest goes on its own down a sinkhole. (24)

She starts working for the family of a Columbia professor, only to find that Americans are just as barren. The WASP intellectual is unable to father, thus the couple have adopted a daughter for whom Jasmine will act as "caregiver," as they put it.

Just as there are two Indias presented in the novel, there are two Americas: the New York of the professional couple, then a small town in Iowa. Naturally, there is an immense contrast between the two Indias and the two Americas, and Jasmine will remain "shuttled" in between, wavering up to the last minute, up to the last page of the novel, "between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness" (213-214). But then, while the two Indias exhibit the divergence mentioned earlier, the two Americas, in their respective order, only seem to steep deeper in moral and social deterioration. In fact, *Jasmine* is a chilling account and a harsh indictment of the American way of life.

The Indians cling heroically and pathetically to an Indian dream that is static; what characterizes Americans, finds Jasmine, is "fluidity": "the fluidity of American character and the American landscape" (123). She states:

In America, nothing lasts. I can say that now and it doesn't shock me, but I think it was the hardest lesson of all for me to learn. We arrive so eager to learn, to adjust, to participate, only to find the monuments are plastic, agreements are annulled. Nothing is forever, nothing is so terrible, or so wonderful, that it won't disintegrate. (160)

The American Dream has been trivialized by men and women who have had it too easy, taking too much for granted. (Throughout the novel there is a contrast with the hardships in India.) Individual freedom has been abated to instant gratification of an almost animalistic nature: the WASP professor's wife has no scruples breaking her marriage and leaving behind the little girl she adopted, for a man himself married with three children. The couple are unable to procreate, have no sense of family, and prove incapable of manifesting any affection to their child: the adopted daughter knows this, who calls the *au pair* Jasmine mummy. "Truly there was no concept of shame in this society," as Jasmine herself puts it (151).

This is the school where Jasmine is broken into Americanization. Not unexpectedly, she falls for the young WASP professor Taylor Hayes, not so much for what he is but what he represents, the democratic employer serving his servant (148). She falls into the pattern in an amoralistic fashion, replacing in his bed the wife who left. While this is another step forward in her Americanization, it must be remarked that this is again of an illicit nature.

Taylor calls her Jase, giving her a new identity:

Taylor didn't want to change me. He didn't want to scour and sanitize the foreignness. My being different ... didn't scare him. I changed because I wanted to. To bunker oneself inside nostalgia, to sheathe the heart in a bulletproof vest, was to be a coward. On Claremont Avenue, in the Hayeses' big, clean, brightly lit apartment, I bloomed from a diffident alien with forged documents into adventurous Jase. (165)

One lesson she learns from Taylor is "to pull down an imaginary shade": "If something gets too frightening, just pull down an imaginary shade that says RETURN on it and you can make it go away" (165).

By a chance encounter--an act of coincidence which mars the overall tenor of the novel--Jasmine comes across her husband's murderer, who has somehow also migrated to New York. Afraid that he might want to kill her if given the chance, she 'pulls an imaginary shade' on her life with Taylor and the little girl, and flees to Iowa.

In Iowa, she starts working in a bank as a teller and before she knows it, has the fifty-year-old owner of the bank fall in love with her. Bud Rippelmeyer divorces his wife of 28 years and they start cohabiting. He calls her Jane. "Me Bud. You Jane" (22).

But violence catches up on Jyoti-Jasmine-Jase-Jane. Bud is shot by a discontent client. He becomes an invalid, an apt symbol for the America that is unveiled in the novel. He can only have an erection with the help of machines. When he and "Jane" decide to have a child, it can only be through artificial insemination. The barrenness is chronic.

What Jasmine encounters in Elsa County, Iowa and the reader through her is the American Despair. "... discipline, strength, patience, character. ... Most people in Elsa County have lost it" (20). Instead there is despair. Her companion tells her, "Things weren't always this ugly, Jane" (140). There are daughters-in-law who want to put their aged but perfectly healthy mothers-in-law in the Lutheran home; women who start sobbing suddenly; men in debt, unable to keep up payments, blaming bank owners for it and shooting them; youngsters overburdened by their heritage, who commit suicide. "Something's gotten out of hand in the heartland," as the Elsa County Mental Health Center consultant puts it (138). "Last week ... a farmer dug a trench all around his banker's house with stolen backhoe equipment. On TV he said, 'Call it a moat of hate.' ... A man beat his wife with a spade, then hanged himself in his machine shed" (138). Land developers come and offer huge prices for non-agricultural use of traditional agricultural land. They want to build golf courses where there have been farmland from generation to generation and they tempt with their offers the young offspring who have inherited the land. These, however, feel uneasy if they acquiesce. Such a youngster is their next-door neighbour Darrell, who dreams of leaving the region, of starting anew elsewhere, but who cannot let go of a tragic sense of guilt at forfeiting his parents' heritage and

therefore can not depart, and takes his life instead. It is "a way of life coming to an end" (204).

Bud, on meeting her, decides to "make up for fifty years of selfishness" (12). "He thought he could atone for something ... For being American, blessed, healthy, innocent, in love," thinks Jane-Jasmine (203). Bud's former wife explains: "This is puritan country; we're born with guilt or quickly learn it. Guilt twists a person" (204).

So, although he already has two married sons, Bud decides to adopt a Vietnamese child. The newcomer is Du, a survivor from a refugee camp. His parents and his brothers have been killed. One sister, staying in another camp, used to come and feed him insects to make him survive. He did. Now, his new mother Jane-Jasmine reflects:

In the America Du knows, mothers are younger than sisters, mothers are illegal aliens, murderers, rape victims; in Du's America, parents are unmarried, fathers are invalids, shot in the back on the eve of Christmas Eve. (200)

Du becomes the all-American teenager, refusing to talk Vietnamese, watching science fiction movies on television, hoarding gadgets, making friends, getting good grades in school.

And then suddenly, one day, he leaves. His sister has arrived in California. He leaves with a Vietnamese man, speaking Vietnamese with him. "My transformation has been genetic, Du's was hyphenated," considers Jasmine (198). Du leaves saying: "You gave me a new life. I'll never forget you (199). But she knows very well that for Du, "abandonment, guilt, betrayal" meant nothing; "the boy in front of me would consider them banal dilemmas" (197).

Du's departure is the foregrounding for Jasmine's own going away. When Taylor comes with his daughter to Elsa County to reclaim "Jase" and take her "West," this time it is her turn not to have any qualms deserting an aging invalid who left his long-standing wife for her. She is carrying his child, although illegitimate, a child who, conceived for once, will not know its own father and will only have a surrogate father to raise it, just like the other, adopted little girl.

In conclusion, while it is impossible for Jyoti-Jasmine-Jase-Jane to go back either to India or to the ethnic Indian group in New York, her integration into an American mainstream in moral decay appears to be just as problematic.

Leaving behind rape, murder, suicide, violent shooting and betrayal, heading towards a West that is more mythical and symbolical than real, Jasmine puts an imaginary shade on her life with Bud, believing she is acting as an American, shedding "old-world dutifulness." Her utter insensitivity to the sense of "guilt," in tune with the general rottenness, yet so essential to Puritan teaching, shows that she herself has yet a long way to go before she can become truly American, in the sense

that white Americans of an earlier period were. Yet her further Americanization can only signify her being irreversibly engulfed in the social malaise, swamped by the waste land laid bare in the novel. Within that universe, Jasmine's identification with it can in turn only serve as endorsement and bolstering.

The 'coming of age' in the novel has a hollow ring to it, sardonic almost in the Swiftian black humour with which it is recounted. The moral improvement secretly hoped for before immigration has been stood on its head.

Mainstream society takes on the form of a dystopia in the fictionalized America of Mukherjee. The alternative, the multicultural society, offers a picture no less hellish. Vacillating between definitions of identity, Jasmine and the likes of her, such as Du, are doomed to remain in a sort of limbo, hyphenated 'lost souls' unable to find anchor, unable to make commitments, reckless with a hope that is much more vacuous than it sounds. The reader is not told whether Du has reached his West and whether Jasmine will be able to reach hers. Yet even if she does attain it, she is bound to wonder why, in the words of Walt Whitman:

... having arrived at last where I am-the circle almost circled; For coming westward from Hindustan, from the vales of Kashmere, From Asia- ... Now I face the old home again-looking over to it, joyous, as after long travel, growth, and sleep; But where is what I started for, so long ago? And why is it yet unfound?

(from "Enfans d'Adam" in *Leaves of Grass*)

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