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Bharati Mukherjee and the American Immigrant: Reimagining the Nation in a Global Context

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Leah Rang entitled "Bharati Mukherjee and the American Immigrant: Reimagining the Nation in a Global Context." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Urmila Seshagiri, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Lisi Schoenbach, Bill Hardwig

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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a Global Context

A Thesis Presented for
the Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Leah Rang
May 2010

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Abstract

With its focus on immigration to the United States and development of American identity, Bharati Mukherjee's fiction eludes literary categorization. It engages with the various contexts of multiculturalism, postcolonialism, and globalization, yet Mukherjee adamantly positions herself as an American author writing American literature. In this essay, I investigate the intersections between Mukherjee's focus on the American character, culture, and people and developing theories and critical debates on globalization. Through Mukherjee's works, we can see American identity in a state of flux, made possible by the immigrant and the relationships established between the transnational individual and America. Mukherjee's immigrant characters challenge and expose American mythology from the American Dream of individual achievement to the canonical literature of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, rewriting them to show how foundational the immigrant is to American culture. I trace Mukherjee's redefinition of the American character in and through three successive novels – *Wife*, *Jasmine*, and *The Holder of the World*. In *Wife*, Mukherjee challenges America's adoption of multiculturalism because she considers it a means of essentializing ethnicity and both maintaining and enhancing difference. This multiculturalism, as part of America's assumed principles of acceptance, alienates the protagonist Dimple from her immigrant community and the larger American culture, resulting in her violent attempts to force her Americanization. *Jasmine* continues to work against multiculturalism by explicitly inserting the immigrant into the American mythos, reshaping the Western literary canon to include the transnational individual and to assert the immigrant foundations of American ideology. Mukherjee expands her focus in *Holder of the World* as her protagonist Hannah travels to England, India, and the burgeoning United States, rewriting *The Scarlet Letter* to suggest that globalizing forces have been present throughout American cultural history, not just at the end of the 20th century when critical debates began to flourish. Through analysis of these novels, I argue that Mukherjee's reformulation of American character reasserts American ideals by including and developing with the rise of globalization theory.

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INTRODUCTION: TRANSFORMATION AS RETURN

I don't think that the writer starts to work on her novel by saying, "I'm going to invigorate all of American writing." Any writer who does so will end up producing a sterile, agenda-ridden text and not literature. What I, as immigrant writer, hope for is *to transform* as well as *be transformed* by the world I'm re-imagining and re-creating through words. I'd like to think that ideas and feelings generated by my fiction will trickle into other cultures and literatures through translation, and provoke rethinking of what citizenship entails. – Bharati Mukherjee¹

*Re-imagine, re-create, rethink.*² These terms connote going back – a *return* – to an established structure or self and infusing it with new meaning or understanding in order to transform. In 1973, Bharati Mukherjee returned to India after twelve years in North America, both the United States and Canada. Instead of a homecoming, the year-long sabbatical from Canada, chronicled by both Mukherjee and her Canadian husband Clark Blaise in *Days and Nights in Calcutta* (1977), enabled Mukherjee to conceptualize her migrant position: "The year in India had forced me to view myself more as an immigrant than an exile" (Blaise and Mukherjee 296). Through the year as a "desolate tourist" in her birthplace, Mukherjee's conception of her migrant position changes from exile in Canada to immigrant (297); she transformed. In 1988, she transformed yet again and became a naturalized citizen of the United States of America.

Critics have recognized the evolution of Mukherjee's literary characters from exile to immigrant. Fakrul Alam divides her work into four distinct phases characterized by exile, expatriation, immigration, and a concern "not so much with immigrants as with the spatiotemporal connections between cultures" (x)³. Maya Manju Sharma considers Mukherjee's development "from expatriate to immigrant" an internalized perspective, an

¹ Chen and Goudie 91.

² Lois Parkinson Zamora considers the "litany of 're's'" in American fiction as evidence of an "anxiety of origins" that motivates the intertextual strategies that reveal the multiplicity and indeterminacy of national foundations. *The Usable Past* 6.

³ See Alam "Preface."

“inner world.”⁴ Both of these formulations, however, neglect the importance of the nation as an imagined cultural space within the literature of immigration. Alam’s first three divisional terms rely on a nation for definition: an exile *from* a nation, an expatriate *of* one nation *in* another, and an immigrant *from* one nation moving *to* another. The fourth category ignores the importance of the immigrant as the agent that *creates* the connections between national cultures. Although rightfully concerned with the immigrant’s self-fashioning with her concern for the individual’s “inner world,” Sharma, too, fails to stress the importance of the nation. These critics neglect to discuss *how* the nation imagined in Mukherjee’s literature transforms and is transformed by her protagonists, rendering immigration more than a tale of individual adaptation and change.

By asserting the importance of the nation, however, Bharati Mukherjee demonstrates that the transformation that results from immigration is multidirectional. The immigrant does not simply enter a nation, disrupt it, or change because of it; a relationship develops between the individual and the nation, which enables the nation to transform as well. Transformation occurs through confrontation with the global and subsequent reinvigoration of the nation. As a newcomer from another culture, the conspicuous immigrant clashes with American culture and highlights inconsistencies in both its present and its past. As Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt note,

the act of immigration magnifies the *consciousness of identity* – in other words, whereas marked identity and its accompanying questions and looks may not be anomalous for women in their homeland, it becomes an elusive entity after immigration necessarily questioned by white Americans. (34)

⁴ See Sharma “The Inner World of Bharati Mukherjee: From Expatriate to Immigrant.” See also Gurleen Grewal 182.

By illuminating the contradictions between a cultural mythology of tolerance and a present that emphasizes difference or neglects immigrants' place in history, Mukherjee's immigrants seek to solidify their identity by propelling Americans out of their stagnancy or isolationism in an increasingly globalized world. This relationship is one of constant negotiation between the individual and the nation and between the nation and the world. Mukherjee asks Americans – immigrants included – to *re-evaluate* themselves and their nation through a *return* to their mythological roots and a *re-imagining* of their national identity.

Given Mukherjee's Indian origins, her focus on America, and her immigrant experience and immigrant characters, we must ask ourselves where we situate her fiction. Is her literature postcolonial? Immigrant? Indian? American? Indian-American? World literature? Immigrant literature? She adamantly identifies herself as an American author, but her conception of America does not necessarily exclude her from any of these literary categories. Mukherjee uses her literature as a means of imagining America as a space that joins, conflates, and complicates these discourses because of the individuals who cross – and have crossed – its borders.

Because of the polygenetic cultural origins of Mukherjee's immigrant characters and their⁵ global movement, the relationship between the immigrant and the nation develops in the context of globalization and its discourses. In accepting the international immigrant, the nation must acknowledge the impact of increased mobility and communication and the possible threats a "shrinking world" has on its boundaries. In this

⁵ I use the gendered "she" pronoun only because Mukherjee and her immigrant protagonists are all women in the novels I will discuss throughout this essay.

essay, I seek to consider Mukherjee's characters as they change both in individual texts and in Mukherjee's entire literary corpus, understanding them as a series of engagements with the changing view of the nation, particularly in relation to ethnicity and cultural diversity with immigrants. Through three of Mukherjee's novels – *Wife* (1975), *Jasmine* (1989), and *The Holder of the World* (1993) – I trace the development of multiculturalism, transnationalism, and the larger project of globalization that enables these discourses. By simultaneously concentrating on the individual immigrant while expanding the national focus to accommodate global forces, Mukherjee claims the immigrant's rightful and vital place within America and the nation's resilience in a continually evolving world.

Radical social changes in the twentieth century forced America to acknowledge its shifting relationship to nations across the globe and to redefine itself culturally to accommodate its growing contact with peoples across the world. Advances in transportation and communication technology connected America to the world, expanding American culture to the globe but also bringing the world into America. Wars spanned the globe and journalism and television media brought the images of the World Wars into every citizen's awareness. European powers relinquished or lost their imperial holdings. Immigration boomed at the turn of the century with an influx of typically white Europeans and again after 1965, when the national origins quotas of previous U.S. immigrations policies were lifted, resulting in a new wave of typically non-white

immigrants from the Third World.⁶ By 1990, almost eight percent of Americans were foreign-born, forcing Americans to acknowledge other cultures as they literally moved next door (Portes and Rumbaut 6). The influx of cultures forced Americans to ask anew what parts of their culture and nation were fundamentally “American.”

Emerging literatures brought the crisis from the political level into the cultural. As a discourse in which authors can imagine and develop different representations and ideals of America, literature provided a transformative site for writers such as Mukherjee who wrote against the normative white ideas of an America that excluded them. Early twentieth-century literatures of European immigrants focused on the hardships of living in America but also on its promises. In her autobiography *The Promised Land* (1912), for example, Mary Antin, a Russian Jewish immigrant, depicted lives of poverty and alienation, but ultimately she resurrected the American mythos of religious freedom and paradise. Other migrant Jewish writers, such as Abraham Cahan, Anzia Yeziarska, Henry Roth, and Bernard Malamud (whom Mukherjee found particularly enlightening and influential to her own writing),⁷ fictionalized the difficulties of assimilation and acceptance in America. Writers from the second wave of American immigration, however, wrote at the intersection of this early twentieth-century American immigrant tradition and the rise of postcolonial literatures and theory – propelled especially by the 1978 publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* – that increased the awareness of cultures

⁶ See Daniels; Portes and Rumbaut.

⁷ Mukherjee speaks of her inspiration from Malamud: “I was sitting in the kitchen reading Bernard Malamud’s *Selected Stories* that the writer had sent me himself and suddenly, out my self-despair, I said, ‘My God, he is writing about the Jewish community, about their attempts to accommodate to and assimilate American culture or about their failing to do so, which is precisely what I want to write about my own community’ (Collado-Rodríguez “Naming” 61). Mukherjee also named one of her sons Bernard after the writer.

both within and without the United States and the production and publication of ethnic literatures from non-white sources.

Many Asian American writers, such as Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston, figured immigration struggles in terms of generational conflict between the actual immigrants themselves and their American-born children,⁸ and critics regarded their writing as insulated by national origin instead of participating in American culture, often defining these authors and their subjects by hyphenation: Asian-American, Chinese-American, et cetera. Gloria Anzaldúa, a Latina writer and critic, introduced America to the concept of borderlands that, while affirming the liminal spaces between cultural identities, remained separate from a unified American culture, in fact positing that such a universalizing concept did not exist.

All of these racial and ethnic distinctions circulating within American literature and criticism at the end of the twentieth century challenged the monolithic existence and nature of a universal American culture. Fears of the dissolution of national culture by globalization led to prolific critical production, collected in notable volumes such as Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake's 1996 *Global/Local* and Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi's 1998 *Cultures of Globalization*. Postcolonial studies generated much discussion as well, particularly in critical efforts to situate the United States in terms of postcolonial theory. The year 2000 saw the publication *Postcolonial America*, edited by Richard C. King, and *Post-colonial Theory in the United States: Race, Ethnicity, and Literature*, edited by Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt. The adjectival phrasing of the

⁸ See Lowe 62-3 for a more detailed discussion of generational conflict in Asian-American immigrant writing.

first volume, as well as the contents within, frames America as a postcolonial nation, which assumes that all of its inhabitants and cultural productions are in some way postcolonial, while the latter volume supposes postcoloniality not strictly as an objective state but as a subjectivity, and it applies postcolonial theory to the individuals writing about and within the nation, including immigrants like Bharati Mukherjee. Following closely behind these volumes, *American Literature and Post-Colonial Theory* (2003), edited by Deborah L. Madsen, considers postcolonial theory “a powerful approach to ethnic literatures of the United States,” and Inderpal Grewal investigates the circulating discourses of *Transnational America* (2005) through a postcolonial lens. Revathi Krishnaswamy describes the ambiguity of distinguishing between these two theoretical concerns with globalization and postcolonialism:

It is indeed unclear whether contemporary globalization theory has been made possible by the postcolonial challenge to older Eurocentric forms of globalization premised on the centrality of the nation and narrated in terms of modernization or whether postcoloniality itself is a consequence of a globalization premised on the marginalization of the nation, especially in the domain of the cultural and the imaginary. (107)

The overlap and ambiguity⁹ of the terms suggests frustration with imagining America in a global context through either theoretical stance. The variety of these works in literary criticism show a concern with trying to define the nation as a whole in its relation to the world around it and with increased consideration of its immigrant citizens.

In 1996, Mukherjee began an interview by strongly dissociating herself with postcolonial studies, deeming it “an inappropriate category in which to place my works”

⁹ Simon Gikandi wonders if the ambiguity of globalization is the reason for our determined engagement with it. He asks, “Is it possible however, that we are eager to embrace globalization and its images or fictions because of its amorphous character?” (643).

because of its dependence on the specific colonial and historical legacies of her country of origin, India (Chen and Goudie 76). Removing herself from a distinctly postcolonial categorization refutes the criticism she has received for the Western-infused Catholic school education that largely informs her writing.¹⁰ Instead, as Inderpal Grewal asserts, Mukherjee's fiction became more accessible to the American reader because of her identification as "an American of Bengali origin. Mukherjee's cosmopolitanism coexisted easily with her belief in the nation-state as the guarantor of rights and privileges as well as with a stable ethnic identity that was not seen as conflicted with her American identity" (39). Mukherjee's association with America, with the destination of immigration, then, takes precedence in the politics of immigrant identity.

Mukherjee has repeatedly affirmed her status as an American citizen, both by law and in literature. By rejecting hyphenation for its "politics of hate and the campaigns of revenge spawned by Eurocentric patriots on the one hand and the professional multiculturalists on the other," Mukherjee labels herself neither "Indian(-)American" nor "Asian(-)American" but distinctly and solely American, a self-empowering act that "demand[s] that the nation deliver the promises of the American Dream and the American Constitution to all its citizens" ("Beyond" 33). The rejection resists the nation's contemporaneous policies of multiculturalism that emphasize difference; while at the same time, it seeks to restore American culture to its ideological origins. In defining her relationship to the nation, Mukherjee implies that only an immigrant (or, perhaps, an ethnic American conscious of her immigrant descent) with transnational consciousness can re-envision the nation in a way that forces readers to remember the

¹⁰ See, for example, Bose 48 and Roy 130.

promises of an American Dream and re-evaluate the nation's relationship to its ideological roots.

Mukherjee's idea of the American implies a double movement – a progressive movement forward from immigrant to citizen, which requires a movement *backward* in search of origins. The originary quest serves an important function in the American mythos as a tool of revision. Mukherjee's characters' embark on this quest to legitimize their inclusion in America and suggest that America's origins are immigrant in nature, not only in literal transplantation but in the way each citizen conceptualizes the nation. In other words, the American consciousness *is* an immigrant consciousness.¹¹

For Mukherjee, a stronger American culture requires the nation to constantly reassert its foundational beliefs by accepting the immigrant and the transnational cultures she brings with her and by accommodating the global forces that continue to shape individuals and nations. In her novels, Mukherjee forces America to return to its origins by invoking America's scripted narratives. She positions her protagonists in the mythologies of the frontier and American individualism, in the literary canon, in the contexts of liberal American multiculturalism rhetoric, all spaces that either exclude or

¹¹ Obviously, this generalization favors the immigrant and overlooks Native Americans or American Indians whose history with European settlement and the birth of the United States is a painful and bloody one. However, the influx of non-native peoples and their brutal conquest of the land, coupled with the founding of a nation distinct from Native American tribal nations, rendered Native Americans immigrants in their own land (see Singh and Schmidt 6). Or, rather, they have been so marginalized and left out of the American canon and imaginary that writers such as N. Scott Momaday and Leslie Marmon Silko, of what has been called the Native American Renaissance, have begun their own literary restorative acts to place Native Americans back in the American canon. Mukherjee does not ignore American Indians but rewrites their presence in the ambiguity of an (American) Indian/ (national) Indian construct that equates the two identities, an admittedly problematic appropriation. Further exploration into Mukherjee's (or other immigrant or minority writers') acknowledgement of Native Americans could be particularly illuminating and useful to dispel or analyze these problems.

limit the immigrant. Lisa Lowe's influential work *Immigrant Acts* describes the disparity between national culture and immigrants' influence:

If the nation proposes American culture as the key site for the resolution of inequalities and stratifications that cannot be resolved on the political terrain of representative democracy, then that culture performs that reconciliation by naturalizing a universality that exempts the "non-American" from its history of development or admits the "non-American" only through a "multiculturalism" that aestheticizes ethnic differences as if they could be separated from history. In contrast, the cultural productions emerging out of the contradictions of immigrant marginality displace the fiction of reconciliation, disrupt the myth of national identity by revealing its gaps and fissures, and intervene in the narrative of national development that would illegitimately locate the 'immigrant' before history or exempt the 'immigrant' from history. (9)

Mukherjee seeks to highlight the "gaps and fissures" between American reality and American ideology and reinsert her characters in these spaces in order to re-present America as a more complete nation. By placing a non-Anglo or non-Western immigrant in these recognizable narratives that most natural-born (white) Americans regard as their birthright, Mukherjee subversively rewrites them, defamiliarizing the narratives in order to assert the immigrant's place in the nation's history and cultural imaginary. Furthermore, her rewriting imagines a reinvigorated America, a new nation that accommodates and adapts to the external changing world.

At the same time that Mukherjee restores the immigrant to an extant canon, she also carves out a new space for her own literature. Her writing differs from the immigration literature of the early twentieth century like that of Mary Antin, with its assimilationist doctrines that sought to absorb and reform the immigrant into a centralized Anglo-American culture in the flawed melting-pot mythology. Nor does it follow many of the patterns established by other (post-)ethnic and borderland writers who only seek to

show the inconsistencies of American culture and deeply embedded intolerance. In their Introduction to *Post-Colonial Theory and the United States*, Singh and Schmidt offer an illuminating and detailed discussion of these two different postcolonial schools in U.S. literature. The postethnicity school is assimilationist,

the ultimate form of ‘consent’ narrative, when past conflicts are left behind (made ‘post-’) for a radically remade identity transcending the past. Instead, the borders school understands that such divided or border identities descend eternally from the contradictions within modernity itself, from the moment that the ‘Americas’ were ‘discovered’ and the struggle began to define whether these ‘Americas’ were an alternative to or a proof of Europe’s claim to be the superior civilization. (13)

Hence, the borders school more readily recognizes the inconsistencies and imperfections of U.S. culture. Mukherjee’s approach somewhat mixes these two schools. She recognizes America’s “gaps and fissures” but offers a solution for closing them; she desires neither to assimilate to a homogenous American culture nor to raze it, but to re-imagine it through a new formulation, a symbiotic and hybrid relationship between individual and nation that incorporates and responds to global transformations.

Throughout this essay, I trace the developing relationship between individual and nation through three of Mukherjee’s novels. Chapter One explores Mukherjee’s second novel *Wife* (1975), which tells the story of a young Indian immigrant named Dimple, a woman traumatized by the incongruities between her expectations of America and the actual process of Americanization. The first of Mukherjee’s novels set in the United States, *Wife* offers the author’s first sustained portrait of America as a whole, a culture defined by a crippling multiculturalism that emphasizes ethnic difference and permits segregation, thereby preventing hybridity. The enforced difference and isolation of the

Indian community in *Wife* ultimately destroys Dimple. Despite the impediment that multiculturalism presents the immigrant, *Wife* still justifies leaving tradition-bound India for America, a place with the possibility of transformation and change. Mukherjee thus exposes the inconsistencies and problems of a multicultural America but suggests a re-imagined and accommodating American mythology that recognizes the importance of its immigrants and its immigrant foundations.

Chapter Two argues that *Jasmine* (1989), Mukherjee's third and most famous novel, still reacts against multiculturalism as a localized practice in America, but Mukherjee goes to great lengths to show how globalization informs the practice. She focuses more closely on the individual protagonist Jasmine, who smuggles herself into America from India and constantly reforms herself in order to escape the paralyzing associations with ethnic difference created by multiculturalism. Jasmine explicitly inserts herself into American mythology, inverting it and infusing it with her Indian origins to legitimize her place in the national history. She retraces the path of European immigration and frontier immigration and redefines the terms of individualism and Hollywood's "cowboy and Indian" rhetoric. In so doing, she shows not difference but similarity with the American Dream and mythos, melding with it in an act of transformative hybridity that reinvigorates the natural American citizens and redefines the nation as movement and negotiation instead of fixity and stagnation.

The rise of globalization studies in the 1990s prompted Mukherjee to reevaluate the individual's influence on the national culture in the context of the shifting relationship between the nation and the rise of a global society. With *The Holder of the World* (1993),

Mukherjee expands her focus significantly. In Chapter Three, I argue that Hannah Easton's global travels and Mukherjee's conspicuous rewriting of Nathaniel Hawthorne's canonical *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) both restore the transnational individual into American history but also solidify the nation against impending fears of globalization. Mukherjee shows the global forces that not only preceded the 1776 Revolutionary War but actually *created* the American nation. She also presents America – and history in general – as subject to different perceptions and therefore always needing re-evaluation and revision, both made possible by acknowledging and incorporating global discourses.

Because of Mukherjee's concern with the nation in the changing global context despite (or, rather, because of) her narrow focus on one immigrant protagonist, her scope is broad but distinct. One critic, Rajini Srikanth, repeats the word “bold” to excess when discussing Mukherjee as she “boldly inserts herself into the American literary canon” to both positive and negative effect (187). Mukherjee's boldness, according to Cynthia Sauling Wong, showed innovation and new perspective:

Mukherjee is perhaps the first Asian American writer to exhibit a full awareness of the global context of contemporary Asian immigration: she deconstructs cultural clichés, looks beyond the push-pull between two nations to acknowledge the reality of the world economic system, and sets her tales against a background of intertwined, transnational economic activities and mass uprooting. (54)

I demonstrate that Mukherjee goes beyond even Wong's approving evaluation, for she brings the “intertwined transnational” setting into the foreground of her fiction, making it a key force that reshapes the relationship between the individual and the nation and provides new outlets for globalization in the spaces of the reimagined American literary canon.

CHAPTER ONE

WIFE AND THE LIBERATION OF THE INDIVIDUAL IN MULTICULTURAL AMERICA

On October 3, 1965, the United States passed a revised Immigration and Nationality Act abolishing the quota requirements of the 1920s that had limited the number of immigrants based on country of origin, allowing for a new wave of immigration from the Eastern Hemisphere. With the influx of immigrants came new cultures, traditions, and literatures. To cope with the radical shift in its ethnic composition, the United States fashioned itself into a multicultural society with the intention of reinstating the ideals of the American Dream – tolerance and opportunity for all, especially the immigrants who ostensibly created the nation in the first place. As Lisa Lowe asserts in *Immigrant Acts*, her landmark work on Asian-American fiction,

Culture is the medium of the *present* – the imagined equivalences and identifications through which the individual invents lived relationship with the national collective – but it is simultaneously the site that mediates the *past*, through which history is grasped as difference, as fragments, shocks, and flashes of disjunction. It is through culture that the subject becomes, acts, and speaks itself as “American.” (2, italics original)

Lowe privileges culture over political change or governmental notions of citizenship as the site of national belonging because of its immediacy and transformative power.

Culture rather than politics – “America” rather than the United States – serves as the mediating force for immigrants because it blends the temporal past and present with the spatial location in America. A person belongs to a culture by virtue of the similarities, “imagined equivalences” and relationships she can draw between her individual self and the nation. Despite the legal shift caused by the Immigration Act, however, American culture continued to define itself based on national origins, implementing a multicultural

society that strove to identify (non-white) people based on where they came from and their pasts, not their current location or their present existence in America. Such a social formulation burst the *e pluribus unum* narrative of the American nation into fragmentary cultural groups that made immigration a crisis of identity for both the immigrants and the nation.

This multicultural situation confronts Bharati Mukherjee in her personal life and in her early fiction, particularly in *Wife* (1975), her second novel, and she both exposes and challenges it. Mukherjee wrote *Wife* while living in Canada, where she experienced racial discrimination and violence, which she attributed to the country's structure of enforced cultural difference. Though Canada did not officially adopt a Multiculturalism Act until 1988, the government introduced the institutionalized idea in the 1970s, during which time Canada began to define itself culturally as a mosaic, a metaphor which stresses the brokenness and disparateness of its materials and presents only a semblance of unity.¹² In her essay "American Dreamer," a publication adapted from a paper delivered for the Iowa Board of Humanities in 1994 titled "Beyond Multiculturalism: Surviving the Nineties," Mukherjee lists the faults of multiculturalism:

The multicultural mosaic implies a contiguity of fixed, self-sufficient, utterly distinct cultures. Multiculturalism, as it has been practiced in the United States in the past 10 years, implies the existence of a central culture, ringed by peripheral cultures. The fallout of official multiculturalism is the establishment of one culture as the norm and the rest as aberrations. At the same time, the multiculturalist emphasis on race- and ethnicity-based group identity leads to a lack of respect for individual differences within each group. (34-5)

¹² In 1971, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau announced a "Policy of Multiculturalism within a Bilingual Framework" to the Canadian House of Commons. Although he states that "no citizen or group of citizens is other than Canadian," he continues to assert a fundamental Canadian identity to which ethnic groups must defer (particularly by way of language): "They [ethnic groups] will be encouraged to share their cultural expression and values with other Canadians." See "Statement."

The idea of ethnic or cultural groups' self-sufficiency suggests that the culture works on its own merit as a separate entity that obscures any diversity within each group, thereby withholding agency from the individual, particularly the immigrant. Furthermore, the cultural history purported by the group eradicates personal history, identifying people by their group affiliation rather than their individuality. Although Sam B. Girgus claims that "theories of ethnicity in America have tended to project such a balance between the particular and the universal ... that in adhering to one's ethnicity and group origins, one also can achieve true American identity" (60), these theories seem to rest not on a balance but a deferral of the particular to the universal or collective, which maintains the insurmountable distinction between the two. Multiculturalism thus asks individuals to conceive of themselves not as continuous beings but as a series of cultures replacing one another, a sequence that prohibits change through the negotiations of hybridity, leaving both the nation and its individuals in a state of fixed difference.

In *Wife*, Mukherjee exposes and challenges the hardships a multicultural society places on an immigrant or a minority. She sets the novel in the United States to reveal both the nation's limitations in multiculturalism and the discrepancies between a policy of cultural difference and the American Dream of individualism and opportunity. In her portrayal of Dimple, a newlywed who immigrates from India to the United States and suffers under the disempowerment and pain caused by a multicultural society, Mukherjee depicts a fixed American culture that negates individual identity in favor of communal identities located in foreign culture, which limits the liberty and success its mythology promises. Only by subordinating both her isolated Indian and American cultural identities

through violence can Dimple assert her individual agency. The violence arises from the frustration she feels in a society that prevents consideration of her past in India and her present in America as a continuum rather than opposing locales and cultures. Hence, Mukherjee exposes the pain of immigration while expressing a hope for the revitalization of American national ideals and enables a return to an American space that enables rather than suppresses the individual.

Embracing an American culture that accommodates rather than replaces or isolates immigrants' originary cultures rejects an assimilationist model of immigration, in which the nation absorbs an immigrant into a dominant culture.¹³ It favors instead a hybrid model in which the immigrant reunites with culture in a fusion that constantly negotiates between past and present cultures to establish a new formulation that best serves the individual rather than the component cultures. As such, the identification with an accommodating American culture – not a multicultural one – constitutes an *act* of self-determination rather than what Christopher Douglas identifies as racial prescriptivism, which yields “statements of [inherited] identity—cultural, religious, or national—[that] trump discussion of practice; essence continually precludes us from talking about existence in meaningful ways” (9). Multiculturalism, in favoring fixed identities – or, in other words, cultural “essences” – suppresses the agency of the individual, especially the activity that fuses cultures in order to redefine the self.

¹³ Christopher Douglas identifies the rejection of assimilation with the twentieth century's third wave of immigration following the 1965 abolishment of national quotas: “the meaning of contemporary literary multiculturalism—its politics and canonical interventions—was determined not so much by those different histories as by the much more recent simultaneous rejection in the 1960s and 1970s of a liberal assimilationist consensus” (5).

We can use Homi Bhabha's formulation of hybridity as a structure for reading the relationship between the individual, the nation, and her past and present cultures as well as a possible solution for the inherent disparities of multiculturalism. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha identifies the liminal spaces between defined cultures as the site for true cultural production:

Terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively. The representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of *pre-given* ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation. (3)

If we identify the type of society that articulates difference as a multicultural one, we see that it does not try to “authorize cultural hybridities” but instead denies them, favoring cultural inheritance that forces the immigrant to identify with the culture of his past, the nation from which she came. As such, the society denies the immigrant acceptance, leaving her with feelings of alienation. A hybridized difference in which the multiple cultures with which the individual – not the nation – yields a new individual, a new American. Dimple's immigrant situation, her own historical transformation from Indian to Indian immigrant, has the potential for negotiation of a new American identity, but a multicultural society's insistence on difference that upholds the “fixed tablet of tradition” prohibits the hybridity that would legitimate her struggles in a new country and culture. Further contextualizing the discussion in the United States, Lisa Lowe provides a more concrete model of engagement with differing cultures, identifying hybridization not as “the ‘free’ oscillation between or among chosen identities” but as an “uneven process through which immigrant communities encounter the violences of the U.S. state...and the

process through which they survive those violences by living, inventing, and reproducing different cultural alternatives” (82).

From the very beginning of *Wife*, the symptomatic alienation and ultimate impossibility of the multicultural finds expression through definition, often a violent act that strips away nuance and actual possibility. Mukherjee provides an epigraph to the novel – a definition from the Oxford English Dictionary: “Dimple: any slight surface depression.” Although definitions imply the fixed meaning of a word, Mukherjee alerts us to the impossibility of fixed reality, for we already see the conflation of a common Indian name with a standardized English word. Before the story even begins, Mukherjee presents Dimple as a hybrid subject existing in the space between English and Indian terms. Neither destroyed nor whole, the “dimple” invites violence to push it toward either completion or incompleteness. Thus, even Dimple’s name reflects a hybrid state.

Survival in America, then, depends on recognizing the potential of such hybridization and rejecting a multicultural society. However, in *Wife*, Mukherjee presents us with a story of an immigrant who does not survive; so long forced to identify with either Indian or American culture, Dimple completely separates herself from any culture whatsoever, relying only on “individual initiative, [for] that’s what it came down to, and her life had been devoted only to pleasing others, not herself” (212). She pleases others by identifying with a group culture that ignores her personal need to change in America and identifies her only by her role – the Indian community sees Dimple as a wife, and multicultural America separates her from itself as an immigrant. At the novel’s end, Dimple murders her husband, and Mukherjee leaves us with an image of Dimple talking

to herself and to the knife that she used to stab him in one elongated run-on sentence that reflects her disintegration into insanity: "...and then she saw the head fall off—but of course it was her imagination because she was not sure anymore what she had seen on TV and what she had seen in the private screen of three A.M...." (213). No longer associated with any culture, least of all a successful, new, hybrid one, Dimple isolates herself completely. She exists as an unrealized transition, a middle ground between the fixed, disparate cultural identities of her immigrant community and the hybrid culture of the ideal America.

The new America – or, rather, an America that actually adheres to its principles of acceptance and possibility – would reunite the individual to her culture(s) rather than supposing culture only belongs to groups, as in the immigrant community into which Dimple settles when she and her husband move to America. Forced by multiculturalism to deny their individual identities and define themselves as a group, the immigrant community has to look backwards to their past and to the culture from which they came. Stuart Hall regards culture not transcendently but in temporal terms: "Cultural identities have histories [that], far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past,... are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power" (225). However, if the cultural power that "plays" with cultural histories is multiculturalism, it will suppose those histories "eternally fixed" and eternally separate and different.

In a power play that subjectively creates these cultural histories and disguises them as objective and totalizing realities for all the immigrants associated with it, the multicultural society often relies on stereotypes or idealized images of Indian culture

propagated by the media. Such focus on the validity of history frames many discussions in postcolonial studies. Edward Said frames much of his study in *Culture and Imperialism* with the “commonest of strategies” of appealing to the past to interpret the present, particularly in cultural terms (3). Studying these strategies illuminates “the extraordinary influence of today’s anxieties and agendas on the pure (even purged) images we construct of a privileged, genealogically useful past, a past in which we exclude unwanted elements, vestiges, narratives” (15). Both imperialists and colonized peoples can serve as creators of “useful pasts” that either validate imperial power with longevity and tradition or construct images of a pre-colonial identity, respectively. Although placed in an imperial context, Said’s framework functions equally as well when considered in a more specific immigrant situation, as in *Wife*. Mukherjee’s immigrant characters look back to their former lives in India and to media representations of that life, constructing cultural images and representations of pre-immigration to distinguish themselves from an exclusive American culture. In so doing, they accept older models of assimilation and repeat the same patterns of difference that multiculturalism assigns them. With both the majority and minority culture accepting the same social formulation, America remains stagnant and resistant to revitalization and individualism.

This American multiculturalism, according to Mukherjee, operates on a center-periphery model which privileges the dominant culture. In *Wife*, Dimple’s community of Indians in America adheres to this model by privileging either Indian or American culture. At an Indian dinner party that the newly arrived Dimple attends with her husband and their host family, discussion centers around a comparison between all things Indian

and American, down to the banality of chickens. One guest asserts, “‘Though our chickens may be smaller and thinner they taste far, far better.’ Everyone agreed with him” (66), substantiating Dimple’s impression that “‘among themselves, India could do no wrong” (63). The drive to compare starkly separates both cultures and allows the Indian immigrants to boast their inherent Indianness, a quality they feel compelled to display and perform.

By comparing and privileging, the community avoids the sense of exile that troubles Dimple. Jyoti Sen, the man fostering Dimple and her husband Amit, said, “‘wasn’t it wonderful that Indians abroad were so outgoing and open-minded” (67). He alludes to the necessity of geographical displacement as a means of emphasizing difference not only between Americans and Indians but between Indians abroad and Indians in India. In so doing, Mukherjee evokes a past and creates a temporal history for her community of immigrant characters. We see the conflict between constructed past and immigrant present when Dimple and Amit first arrive in America and Jyoti Sen greets them at the airport dressed in “‘a red shirt and bright white pants, something a Bombay film star might try to wear.” Dimple cannot take her host seriously, either professionally as an engineer or culturally: “‘She wouldn’t have taken him for a Bengali at first sight” (51). Confronted with the differences of American culture, Jyoti feels compelled to perform an idealized version of the Indian culture he has left, which intensifies – or at the very least, maintains – difference. Dimple, newly arrived to America, has not yet needed to create this cultural past and therefore finds Jyoti unbelievable, an imitator of an Indian. The performativity of the past only emphasizes its

unreality and widens the distance between past and present and, in the immigrants' case, between India and America. It fixes the two cultures in time and space, making change impossible in the present. To use Stuart Hall's terms, such performativity limits the immigrant to the stagnancy of being instead of becoming (5).

As an alternative to performing a fixed Indian culture, Mukherjee's immigrants can opt to perform a fixed American culture, which suggests substituting one culture for another rather than joining multiple cultures to create a new one. In one of Dimple's first and most shocking engagements with American culture, she attempts to buy a cheesecake for dessert (what she considers "a very *American* thing to do" (58)) in a Jewish delicatessen. She tries to *perform* an Americanness that one cannot simply adopt, and she ultimately emphasizes her difference from it. The proprietor of the deli mocks Dimple angrily for attempting to buy a non-*kosher* dairy product, for failing to understand cultural practices, leaving her feeling as though "she'd come very close to getting killed on her third morning in America" (60). This scene highlights Dimple's alienation because she displaces herself in favor of adopting a culture to replace her own, and the results shock her enough to fear death brought on by her environment's inability to accept disparate cultures.

Mukherjee stresses cultural performativity to emphasize the clash with the ideal vision of America as the land of opportunity that embraces change, development, and diversity. Mukherjee ultimately wants to identify Americanness as a cultural identity that immigrants cannot *perform*; nevertheless, they try. Even before moving to the United States, Amit tries to acculturate Dimple by taking her out. She dislikes having to eat with

a knife and fork, “but eating with her fingers, Bengali-style, in a restaurant, seemed terribly uncouth” (22). That one could learn to practice a culture, even in so quotidian a manner, without ever experiencing it, emphasizes performativity rather than character. Amit believes that urging his new wife to perform as “American” initiates the Americanization process. However, for these characters, the concept of “Americanization” exists only in noun form. Actual Americanization implies change; instead, the characters cultivate an Indian identity that performs a fixed version of culture in the United States and call it Americanization. Neither Indian nor American culture actually interacts or develops, for they remain fixed. As Amit teaches Dimple Western practices while they reside in India, he prepares for a future already defined and resistant to change.

In the U.S., Amit and Dimple enter a community of like-minded Indians centered around the performativity of both American and Indian culture, as with Jyoti Sen’s Bollywood costuming. The inability to adequately perform either of these cultures results in moments of terrible confusion. These moments offer the true, visceral experience of the immigrant, the difficult negotiation between two cultures. The immigrant community in *Wife*, however, quickly quells these moments that meld past and present and promise change in the individual. When Meena Sen admits that she suffers from headaches when trying to understand native English-speakers, “the admission of inadequacy filled the air,” and Jyoti quickly moves the conversation away from his wife’s confession (54). At that moment of “inadequacy,” Meena no longer performs; she experiences the confusion of an immigrant in a new culture with a new language to learn. Though brief, this scene

gives us a rare view of another immigrant experiencing the alienation Dimple felt when trying to buy cheesecake. So careful are they to preserve their insular community and perform their Indian pasts, the Indian characters remain static and unwilling to negotiate cultures into something new and American.

Americanization, for these characters, means the discarding of Indian culture for an American replacement, which uses the logic of assimilation. Ina Mullick, the Indian immigrant whom the Indian community regards as “more American than the Americans” (68), theorizes the “great moral and physical change” of American immigration as the “Before and After,” which formulates immigrant identity in temporal and exclusive terms. Ina represents the After while Dimple remarks, “I’m always a Before...I guess I’ve never been an After” (95). Dimple’s present tense, coupled with the eternal “always,” implies continuity rather than successive stages of identity. Because Dimple asserts her Before status in America, she unconsciously breaks down the spatial barriers of India and America and regards her identity as continuous rather than a series of cultural identities, of Befores and Afters.

Despite her Indian origins, Ina, the quintessential American, does not exemplify fusion or hybridity. She performs her Americanization, no longer a process but an adopted fact; as a process, it would infer constant negotiation between two or more present cultures. Ina’s theory replaces one with the other, leaving neither time nor space for such negotiation: “Ina has this theory about Indian immigrants. It takes them a year to get India out of their system. In the second year they’ve bought all the things they’ve hungered for. So then they go back, or they stay here and vegetate or else they’ve got to

live here like anyone else” (77). According to Ina, the immigrant must expel India, completely sever the past from the present, in order to assume an American identity. Furthermore, once the immigrant has removed the past, she can no longer retrieve it. For Ina, this process becomes a succession of supplemental cultures that are ultimately separable and distinguishable from each other and from the self. Separating India and America so completely simultaneously upholds the differences espoused by multiculturalism and encourages constant comparison between cultures rather than fusion.

I must emphasize here how these cultural distinctions result from *Ina*, who has been influenced by the macrocosmic multiculturalism of the nation. Anindyo Roy indicts Mukherjee for

attempt[ing] to clear a space for her aesthetics in order to posit a system of easily recognizable forms of ‘identity’ and ‘difference.’ These forms are clearly indicative of the stabilization and commodification of a colonized culture by a postcolonial writer whose own authorial gaze corresponds to that of the Orientalizing West. (129)

While we cannot (and should not) so easily dismiss arguments that expose Mukherjee’s Western affiliations and ideals, Roy fails to consider how she creates characters who support and enable this system. Intentionally, her characters dramatize difference, and Mukherjee can thus write their performances ironically in order to critique the multicultural system they support. She illuminates an American culture “clearly indicative” of *instability* that needs an immigrant subjectivity to revitalize it, to reinstate the individualism at the core of American mythology.

In *Dimple*, Mukherjee presents an immigrant who unconsciously considers herself

a continuous individual, not one composed of a succession of cultural identities. But the pressures of multicultural America prevent her from claiming a personal past and lead her to strive to maintain an (impossible) distinction between India and America, often through force and violence. Soon into her marriage, before she has moved to America, Dimple discovers that she is pregnant. Rather than seeing the development positively, as proof that she can fulfill her wifely duties and please her husband with a child, Dimple “gave vicious squeezes to her stomach as if to force a vile thing out of hiding” (31). She takes pleasure in the associated vomiting, delighting in the violent expulsion of an element from her body as a substitute for her desire to discharge the child. She refuses to name or identify the child, only angrily dismissing “it” as evidence of the unfairness of wifhood and her helplessness. Temporarily, Dimple displaces the rage she feels for her baby onto external objects. In a fit of rage, she beats the baby clothes her mother-in-law had sewn, inadvertently injuring a mouse hidden within the folds. Seeing the bleeding mouse leave the garment pile, she chases it, screaming as “a woman transformed. And in an outburst of hatred, her body shuddering, her wrist taut with fury, she smashed the top of a small gray head” (36). Upon closer inspection, the dead mouse looks pregnant. Here, Dimple enacts her rage and asserts herself, legitimating her emotions and individuality.

Dimple ultimately succeeds in “skipping her way to abortion,” jumping rope until she forces a miscarriage. More than impeding her rights as an individual, the baby “cluttered up the preparation for going abroad. She did not want to carry any relics from her old life” (43). A child would serve as a reminder of the past; growing up in a new

country to immigrant parents, the child has the potential to truly hybridize the two cultures and assimilate with more ease than Dimple or Amit could. The baby would serve as a reminder of the Old World, the India that the couple intends to leave behind. For these characters, especially for Dimple, an immigrant must completely distinguish between places of origin and destination, thereby rendering India and America mutually exclusive categories. The abortion coincides with arrival of the news that Amit and Dimple could move to the United States; Dimple is still recovering in the hospital when Amit learns of their impending immigration. Only with the removal of obstacles wholly reminiscent of India – like a child who does not yet have the capacity to perform “American” – can they embark on a new life. In order for their immigration to succeed, Dimple believes that “everything has to be brand-new. That’s essential” (42).

The need for such visceral violence to divide the two cultures foregrounds Mukherjee’s distrust of multiculturalism, its emphasis of difference and its inability to allow fusion. Dimple quells her violent energy in America, leaving it behind as an aspect of a former self. She passively accepts the confusions of the new world around her, trying to interpret the immigrant community of Jyoti Sen and his Indian acquaintances. The violence Dimple encounters in America directs itself at her (as in the case of the Jewish delicatessen) rather than emanating from her. While the violence of vomiting or killing pleased her in India, hostility originating from an external source proves disturbing. Television exposes Dimple to American news broadcasts and fictional soap operas through which she realizes that “talking about murders in America was like talking about the weather” (99). The ubiquity of these reports and the discussion of violence in small

talk situations eventually desensitizes Dimple to that particular kind of aggression; she accepts it as part of American culture and performs it with appropriate flippancy.

Accepting American culture via television and the media effectively equals accepting a cultural idealization, much like Jyoti's Bollywood attire presents an Indian performance.

Confronting external violence in human form, however, proves more difficult for Dimple, for in the fallibility of humanity – the impossibility of people to actually meet the standards of an idealized culture or perfectly perform “American” – lies the potential for destroying the multicultural boundaries Dimple has established. When Ina Mullick brings her radical American friend Leni Anspach to Dimple's apartment, they enter into a heated argument, and Leni breaks an ashtray in anger. Later, Ina throws a pillow and breaks the homeowner's vase. The other women's spontaneous aggression threatens

Dimple most:

Girls like Ina and Leni broke too many things, Dimple reflected. They didn't kill things the way Dimple did—deliberately, excitedly—and they didn't let things die and things didn't just die on them accidentally...they killed randomly through some principle of intolerance and profound detachment that Dimple could only think of as American, and beyond her. (188-9)

Spontaneity implies identification with emotion or, if this violence is a product of culture, Americanness that allows no room for the deliberation needed for performativity. The Americanness that Dimple identifies differs from the idealized culture she sees on the television; instead, Ina and Leni's America welcomes the individuality of expression, even violent expression. They force Dimple to confront the disjuncture between the real and illusory. Intolerance for the simple sake of intolerance may not offer the best representation of American culture, but even as negatively as Dimple perceives these

women's actions, the detachment from any cultural conceptions of the American norm liberates the individual.

Here, Mukherjee presents America as a space that permits such self-assertion, however negative the potential consequences. Mukherjee does not suggest that individuality can only exist when completely detached from culture because that would result in the same problem as separating two cultures so completely from one another. The problem lies with allowing cultural identity to overpower individual identity, to lose the person in the struggle for ethnic validity. The United States, because of its youth and immigrant foundations, provides a space wherein one has the potential to fuse both individualism and culture – personal history and past history.

When seeking to completely obliterate her Indian past by aborting her child and moving to the U.S., Dimple also seeks to distance herself from her personal past as though it were only a figment of her culture rather than fundamental to her identity. In her reflection of Ina and Leni's destructive habits, Dimple misrepresents herself, for she figures her acts of violence as "deliberate" and lacking in the other women's spontaneity and intolerance. Her attack on the mouse in India and her miscarriage, however, are the products of an intolerable situation – her trappings in traditional Indian wifedom, itself a product of a cultural history that (as Dimple sees it) privileges the group over the individual. Dimple's realization of this privileging comes soon after her marriage when she moves into her husband's family home and under the thumb of her mother-in-law. Dimple resents that she cannot decorate her own room, and she learns quickly that her naïve expectations that marriage "was supposed to be the best part of getting married:

being free and expressing yourself” did not match the reality of an India that suppressed the individual in favor of communal tradition (20). In fact, the exigence for this novel comes partly from Mukherjee’s return to India, her discussions with married friends, and her frustration with the conditions women face in matrimonial Indian roles:

I was writing a second novel, *Wife*, at the time, about a young Bengali wife who was sensitive enough to feel the pain, but not intelligent enough to make sense out of her situation and break out. The anger that young wives around me were trying so hard to hide had become my anger. And that anger washed over the manuscript. I wrote what I hoped would be a wounding novel. (Blaise and Mukherjee 268)

Though Mukherjee intended that the manuscript as a whole should indict a cultural practice, she displaces her anger onto Dimple and shows how her character, the wife, can not only be wounded but can wound. While she had tried to end her pregnancy deliberately, the mouse Dimple attacked surprised her and the chase that ensued showed no evidence of planning. In defining violence in the cultural terms of America or India rather than in herself, Dimple tries to maintain a distinction between cultures. She cannot accept the multifariousness of violence even in herself.

Dimple dismisses or neglects the spontaneous aggression of the mouse incident because it happened in India. Once she immigrates, she casts off her past as a means of distinguishing between her past and her present in America. The rise in violence in Dimple’s character climaxes with the death of the mouse and of her child; had she not forcefully discarded remnants of her past with the fetus and the move, her private violence may have escalated and become public. When in America, she placates her violent tendencies and suppresses her individuality for the sake of cultural performativity – the role of dutiful immigrant wife.

As her time in America unfolds, Dimple begins to realize the impossibility of separating past and present, India and America, as the society dictates. Realizing the futility of her situation, of accepting a cultural role that overshadows her identity, “the unfairness of what life had done to her overwhelmed Dimple. There would be no thrilling demolitions, merely substitutions” (151). She had used violence in India to express her aversion to her circumstances. Despite the misguided nature of her aversion – her desire to create distinction between India and America – the violence asserts individuality by either destruction, as with the abortion, or fusion, expressed in sexuality.

At first, when Dimple allows the violence to resurface with fantasies of Amit’s and her deaths, “her own intensity shocked her—she had not considered herself susceptible to violence—so she tried to explain it away as unnatural sexual desire” (117). Dimple reads sex as a violent act, for it imposed a child on her that she did not want. In America, she and Amit occupy a home left by the Mookerjis, a couple consisting of an Indian man and an American woman on sabbatical. Dimple cannot ignore the implications of the Mookerjis’ matrimonial and sexual union, the biological hybridization of cultures. Though still distinguishable as two different people and representatives of distinct cultures, the Mookerji union amalgamates them, and their home serves as a constant reminder of fusion. As she encounters more Americans in this home, Dimple begins to realize the impossibility of maintaining multicultural distinctions, and her violence mounts. She abandons the need to “demolish” and seeks to force hybridization by sleeping with Milt Glasser, Ina’s American friend.

Dimple's affair with Milt, however, works as a metaphor for multiculturalism, for it seeks to substitute her Indian marriage with an American relationship, to supplement one culture for the other and therefore maintain the distinction between the two. She identifies Milt as the quintessential American with whom she can engage in meaningless small talk; he knows how to squeeze money from the government, considers himself a jack of all trades, and has a number of vague plans and contacts that imply possibility – "He was, to her, America" (175). If Milt is America, then Dimple believes she can relieve her distress by sleeping with him, thereby adopting his culture and discarding her own. Dimple envisions their affair as the fictionalized play of television. After sex, Milt lounges on the sofa as Dimple sits awkwardly nearby. She wants to punish him for disrupting her romantic illusions: "She wanted to jolt him, accidentally, of course, so that he could witness her agony. He had no right to read the paper and spoil beautiful endings" (198). After sex, the two remain disparate, seated at opposite ends of the couch. Their intercourse failed to offer Dimple unity in the way she had imagined or hoped.

Because it remains rooted in and maintains multicultural difference, the affair ultimately solves nothing; Dimple's violence continues to intensify and consume her. Though she had fantasized about death and killing for months, Dimple decides to murder her husband spontaneously, with the kind of immediacy she recognized as distinctly American in Ina and Leni. Although brief, the murder scene that ends the novel provides a last, concise glimpse into the pain of immigration and the radical violence – and consequences – necessary for the individual to assert herself. Amit chastises Dimple for spending too much money, for not behaving as a wife should. Knife in hand, Dimple

approaches Amit by appropriating and performing the role of dutiful wife and tricking Amit into thinking that the circle she traces around his mole is an expression of sexual desire rather than outlining a target. However, Dimple's newfound consciousness of her performance finally enables her to realize her agency and assert herself; she abandons all convention, dissolving into a stream-of-consciousness as she stabs Amit seven times. She deludes herself into thinking that the action proves the completion of her Americanization, for she has merely adopted the fiction of America: "Women on television got away with murder" (213).

The novel ends with this dissolution into insanity and illusion, but Mukherjee has more invested in *Wife* than just a cautionary tale of believing and performing cultural identities. We should not consider the murder itself a positive development, as some critics imply Mukherjee intends. Brinda Bose suggests that for Dimple (as well as for Jasmine in Mukherjee's next novel), "murder evolves into an acceptable signifier for discarding nostalgia and starting over; it is neither the end nor even merely the means to an end: it is a beginning. Once the home-country" – (represented by Amit) – "has been relegated to the recesses of rejected memory, and the new life is looked forward to with hope, the process of defining a new identity can begin" (53). Bose's totalizing criticism, however, assumes difference between "home-country" and new country and supposes that one can reject a past, breaking cleanly between past and present. We receive no indication that Amit's murder suggests a beginning, if only because it ends the novel and leaves Dimple deranged. Because she falls to such a state of insanity and loses all self-possession, we cannot consider this murder parallel to her abortion, either. For Dimple,

ending her pregnancy implies the possibility of a new life completely devoid of vestiges of India, but her entire stay in America shows us the impossibility of that distinction. In killing Amit, Dimple offers no (misguided) hope for a new beginning; the act results from disappointment as she realizes that she cannot perform America either by having sex with an American or in marriage to Amit.

Dimple does not wholly fail, though, because she acts and asserts her individuality apart from the role governed by a cultural history: “Individual initiative, that’s what it came down to,” she finally realizes, “and her life had been devoted only to pleasing others, not herself” (212). In acting, Dimple grounds her identity in America, for despite its multiculturalism, Mukherjee still considers America the space most welcoming to transformation. Mukherjee acknowledges that Dimple’s immigration has been one of “misguided Americanization” (qtd. in Sharma 16), but in the end Dimple finally transforms not into an Indian in America, nor into an American, but into an American with an Indian past.

Through accepting the violence of her past in India and engaging with the same person she had been as she kills Amit, Dimple establishes a continual self, one fully integrated into both India and America. She reclaims the origins of her own identity. Dimple’s journey shows the degree to which the histories are entwined and inseparable. In considering Dimple’s accomplishment in the face of her tragedy, we need not lose sight of the distinctiveness of *American* writing that Mukherjee seeks to establish. Mukherjee provides America as the space in which these entanglements can come to light for characters to wrestle with, even if the struggle results in violence and irresolution.

Such is the immigrant situation, particularly in America. By identifying the United States as a place of potential transformation, Mukherjee solidifies the boundaries of the nation, creating an insular world wherein the central conflict of multiculturalism in the 1970s and 1980s resonates as a distinctly national problem. She conceives the characters in *Wife* as immigrants because they must cross national lines and grapple with an already existing national discourse. Writing about immigrants, then, necessitates a project of writing about a nation, and vice versa, because “for Mukherjee writing a text means writing a cultural context as well, in the sense that text and context merge to constitute an environment for freedom and creativity” (Girgus 60). As long as the conception of America remains so fixed, its internal conflicts – even (multi)cultural ones – will remain problematic and destructive for the American immigrant. By creating a novel in which a character like Dimple *can* attain “freedom and creativity” in a national space which champions these ideals, Mukherjee allows communal and personal pasts to converge in ways that can possibly liberate a globalized subject.

CHAPTER TWO
JASMINE AND THE UNSETTLING OF AMERICAN MYTH

With her move to the United States and her subsequent naturalization,¹⁴ Bharati Mukherjee shifted her focus from an exiled or excluded expatriate protagonist to an immigrant fully integrated into the national culture. Her characters no longer identified primarily with the culture and community *from* which they had come but with the nation *to* which they had moved. This transition from expatriate to immigrant shifts the focus from identification with a group culturally rooted in the past to an individual identity developing in the present. In the transition from *Wife* to *Jasmine*, Mukherjee's third novel, this shift occurs not only in Mukherjee's characters but in their relationship to the nation. Through its multicultural lens, the nation (America in both of these fictional cases) sees only group identity, especially when the immigrant community isolates and defines itself in terms of cultural performativity. In *Wife*, the protagonist Dimple struggles with the cultural performativity of the Indian expatriate community in the United States. Suspended in a multicultural society that emphasizes and maintains ethnic difference, this community lives in the cultural past of India, leaving individuals like Dimple no space to live in the American present or future. Ultimately, the isolated community inhibits Dimple's ability to meld with American culture and "Americanize" to achieve true immigration status. The United States (and, largely, the more cultural

¹⁴ In 1980, Bharati Mukherjee gave up her full professorship at Montreal's McGill University and moved to New York, establishing permanent residency in the United States. Still harboring resentment towards Canada for her experiences of discrimination, Mukherjee came to appreciate America while continuing to live and work in the U.S., eventually becoming a naturalized citizen. America was not idyllic; within a year, Mukherjee "had been robbed and attacked and cheated...[but] in her opinion, American society at least allowed a new immigrant like her to slug it out, while Canadian society degraded South Asians even though it permitted them to be citizens" (Alam 35-6).

notion of “America”) serves as a mere backdrop, a setting in which the story unfolds. Because no fusion between cultures or between individual and nation could ensue, the nation remains unaffected by Dimple’s presence at the novel’s close, despite her significant mental disintegration. Thus, although Mukherjee establishes America as a place wherein individual change can and does occur, the nation remains fixed and troubled, a space where Dimple’s story could be representative instead of exceptional.

The dream of American opportunity, for Mukherjee, means not only that a newcomer to U.S. shores can *experience* change but that the immigrant can *enact* change, transforming the way the nation is imagined. In a speech that she would later publish as an essay entitled “American Dreamer,” suggesting both the optimism of America and the revisions needed to make it more inclusive, Mukherjee outlines her authorial project:

As a writer, my literary agenda begins by acknowledging that America has transformed me. It does not end until I show that I (and the hundreds of thousands of recent immigrants like me) are, minute-by-minute, transforming America. The transformation is a two-way process; it affects both the individual and the national-cultural identity. The end result of immigration, then, is the two-way transformation: that’s my heartfelt message. (“Beyond” 34)

In this formula, the individual and the nation play the significant roles, not the immigrant community that resists integration or a multiculturalist policy that accepts such resistance. Additionally, Mukherjee’s anger at the cultural roles assigned to Indian women informed much of *Wife*. In her third novel *Jasmine*, published in 1989, Mukherjee moves beyond the Indian community and her resentment for Canada to focus on the individual and America. Mukherjee not only highlights the interaction between the individual immigrant and the “national-cultural identity,” she emphasizes the complex and pervasive dependency of the national culture on the transnational individual. In executing her

“agenda” in a specifically literary form, Mukherjee proposes literary discourse as both a source of cultural identity and the site for cultural change. In *Jasmine*, Mukherjee evokes America through its popular media and literature and upsets it by rewriting the Indian immigrant into its national mythology.

Change for the national-cultural identity thus begins with a changing individual, particularly one who cultivates her identity by moving across national borders. *Jasmine* chronicles the movement of an Indian woman from India to the United States. With each new location to which the protagonist migrates, she assumes a new identity, one that adopts the apparent clichés of the American immigrant experience in order, ultimately, to subvert them. Jasmine moves from hapless illegal immigrant defined by vulnerability to the modern service of an *au pair* to an immigrant wife presented as orientalized trophy. But while each of these cliché roles seems to confine and define her as subordinate, Jasmine’s mobility and transformation reveals a character who redefines herself by using the common tropes of American immigration as a platform from which to grow, not as an end result.

Born as Jyoti in the Punjabi village of Hasnapur, Mukherjee’s adventurous and spirited narrator kills a rabid dog, learns English, hand-selects her husband, and seeks to defy the fate portended for her by a village astrologer. Her husband, Prakash Vijh, a progressive man who shuns the strict traditions of India and plans to travel to the United States for university studies, names her Jasmine to distinguish her from such conventional roles as the dutiful Indian wife. Prakash uses his wife to completely reject Indian culture, for which he feels contempt. As Jasmine recalls, “He wanted to break

down the Jyoti I'd been in Hasnapur and make me a new kind of city woman. To break off the past, he gave me a new name" (77). As a result of the couple's progressiveness, Prakash becomes the victim of a Sikh attack meant for Jasmine and her "whorish" ways. Intending to perform *sati* with her husband's clothes, Jasmine completes Prakash's journey to America, relying on a jaded ship captain to smuggle her into Florida. There, Half-Face, the captain, violently rapes her, and she metamorphoses into the Hindu goddess Kali to murder him.

A compassionate woman named Lillian Gordon finds the hapless Jasmine¹⁵ and teaches her how to act like an American, all the while calling her Jazzy. Lillian eventually helps Jasmine move to New York City. After a disillusioning time spent there with the family of Devinder Vadhera, Prakash's former professor, Jasmine works as an *au pair* for a New York couple named Taylor and Wylie Hayes and their adopted daughter Duff. Taylor dubs her Jase, and even with the upset of Wylie's adultery and departure, Jasmine finds happiness in New York. The arrival of Prakash's murderer in New York compels her to flee to Duff's birthplace in Baden, Iowa, where she becomes Jane, the pregnant companion of crippled farmer Bud Ripplemeyer and mother-figure to Du, an adopted Vietnamese refugee. From Jyoti to Jane, Jasmine transforms as she moves and because she moves. Jasmine defines herself by dynamism, energetic change arising from a transnational identity that allows her to merge with the American culture and revitalize it from its multicultural stagnancy.

Through so many changes in name, role, and geography, Jasmine's narrative formulates her identity as multiplicity, but in Jasmine's engagement with cultural

¹⁵ In general, I will refer to the narrator as Jasmine in reference to the book's title.

literature and mythology, Mukherjee cultivates a whole identity. No longer does the immigrant stand outside the national imagination; she unites with it by reenacting it and joining American mythology with the cultural traditions from her Indian past. In this way, Jasmine asserts herself as a continuous individual who cannot be discarded and replaced as Prakash had intended. As Jane, she describes Jyoti's childhood encounter with the astrologer in the novel's opening words - "Lifetimes ago" (3). She extends the acknowledgement of a plurality of identities to each immigrant individual in general, and specifically to Du, her adopted Vietnamese son, claiming that "We've been many selves" (214). Multiple "lifetimes" suggest that she narrates the stories of distinct individuals, not a continual self, since the term implies the standard linearity of birth, marriage, and death. Each narrative of self engages with the tropes of birth and death until the very end of the novel when Jasmine "cries through all the lives I have given birth to, . . . for all my dead" (241). In most – if not all – cases, she produces and rejects every new self she cries for through violence.

Violence plays a chief role in *Jasmine*, as it did in *Wife*, because it provides a vehicle for transformation and individual expression. Characters like Dimple in *Wife* and Prakash in *Jasmine* believe that the immigrant needs to sever ties with her past in order to survive. Mukherjee acknowledges the pain of the immigrant's necessary break from her origins in a 1998 interview, claiming that "if you're going to not remain an expatriate, then there has to be a traumatic, painful kind of break with the past." But she also implies that such a break does not infer a complete rejection and replacement, for "after that [break] you might reclaim little bits and pieces of it [the past] and fit them into your new

life in a different way, but there is no easy, painless way to make the change; otherwise you're burrowing in nostalgia" (Desai, Barnstone, and Mukherjee 141). Part of the traumatic transformation comes from the abrupt spatial break the immigrant makes when she leaves India and thrusts herself into a foreign culture, but the pain diminishes slowly as the subject mingles with the national culture and, in Mukherjee's novels, becomes Americanized. Refusing to change and clinging to a culture that one has left behind would leave the immigrant "burrow[ed] in nostalgia," but completely rejecting an originary culture can prove just as damaging. Successful immigration melds the original and new cultures, and successful Americanization recognizes and accepts the intersections of multiple discourses through the forceful – and often violent – entry of the immigrant.

Because Jasmine reinvents herself multiple times, the initial traumatic break from India recurs in a pattern of waxing and waning pain. In *Jasmine*, violence allows the immigrant to create a new self through ostensibly killing an old identity: "There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself. We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams" (29). The violence of the rabid dog attack on Jyoti scars her, leaving a mark in the middle of her forehead – a third eye resembling the Hindu god Shiva's that allows her, throughout the novel, to speak prophetically and retrospectively of her multiple selves. Although it originates from an external source, the violence of the Sikh bombing that killed Prakash also compels Jasmine to abandon India and her past selves to join with the collective pool of immigrants "dressed in shreds of national costumes, out of season, the wilted plumage of intercontinental vagabondage"

(101). The most notable and explicit violence, however, occurs upon her arrival to the United States. Though Jasmine continues to alter herself and adopt new personae within the borders of the nation, the transition from India to America resonates most clearly and violently since it represents the shift not only from one identity of Jasmine to another, but from one nation to another.

Once Jasmine reaches America, Half-Face, the captain of the smuggling ship that brought her to the Florida shoreline, takes her to a seedy motel and cruelly rapes her. As Half-Face stands before her, naked and erect, Jasmine experiences a moment of clarity: “for the first time in my life I understood what evil was about. It was about not being human. Half-Face was from an underworld of evil. It was a very simple, very clear perception, a moment of truth, the kind of understanding that I have heard comes at the moment of death” (116). She compares Half-Face to Yama, the Vedic lord of death. Although fearful for her physical life, Jasmine speaks also of the death of another self, and this time, a particularly human one. Breaking the otherwise alliterative strand of names and personalities beginning with the letter “J”, Jasmine transforms (and, as Mukherjee later describes, “mythologizes herself”) into the Hindu goddess Kali, “visualized as having a red tongue, a triangle hanging out, as she’s doing a dance of destruction of evil” (Mukherjee; Desai, Barnstone, and Mukherjee 140). After Half-Face violates her, Jasmine showers and slices her tongue with a knife, appropriating Kali’s red tongue, and then stabs her rapist to death. Deterred from her mission to burn herself in the practice of *sati*, Jasmine instead burns only his and her clothes and photographs and walks away to experience her “first full *American* day, . . . traveling light” (121, emphasis

added). Destroying the material remnants of her past allows her to embark on an American present and future. This episode represents a more brutal break between selves because it moves from one nation to another, and it thus requires a more substantial break that transcends even humanity into the larger realm of cultural mythologies.

More important than the break and Jasmine's consequent survival and success in America, are the materials Mukherjee uses to make the break – the cultural discourses of India and Hinduism, in particular – which suggest not cultural replacement but fusion and adaptation. Jasmine survives the fate of a vulnerable illegal immigrant to America by asserting her Indian cultural origins. Jasmine's multiple identities in America reflect the multiplicity of Hindu deities which have grown as a way of absorbing diverse provincial traditions, rituals, and ideologies.¹⁶ Because of this cultural incorporation, we can view deities as composites in which no one definition or identity exists in practice.

Interpretation and adaptation become viable approaches to these deities and, as Mukherjee shows, to Jasmine. Religion, then, serves as an outgrowth and mirror of cultural identity and practice. By referencing Hindu deities and “mythologizing” her title character, Mukherjee demonstrates how a transnational subject can adapt her past to survive her present despite geographic relocation in America. Jasmine's childhood scar – her “third eye” – imitates Shiva, who often appears seated in deep meditation or dancing and beating his drum in the cosmic dance of destruction. Although she has the same “third eye,” Jasmine defies the image of stillness in Shiva's meditation, for she constantly acts, moves, and reforms. But Shiva, too, represents a very active force as the god of destruction in the relationship with the two other major deities – Brahma the creator and

¹⁶ See Flood 148.

Vishnu the sustainer. Shiva's devotees often see him as all three characters – creator, sustainer, and destroyer – and thus maintainer of the cosmic cycle.¹⁷ When Jasmine kills Half-Face, Mukherjee invokes Kali as both a destroyer and provider of life. Jasmine, too, creates and destroys selves.

The multiplicity of Hindu deities often results from the worship of *avataras* or incarnations of a great deity like Vishnu or Shiva. As multiple embodiments of *one* entity in multiple fashions, we can see how multiplicity and the continuity of identity can exist simultaneously, as in Jasmine. As a derivation of Rudra, an outsider deity given to paradoxes like destruction and healing, Shiva also appears as a deity originally excluded from the Vedic pantheon but later accepted through his actions.¹⁸ As an immigrant, Jasmine also faces exclusion, but through engaging with these Hindu myths in American space, she inserts herself and her origins into American culture. She merges Hindu epic tradition with the American cliché of the “fresh off the boat” immigrant, thus reimagining America as both accepting and amenable.

Inderpal Grewal offers a useful concept to explain the development and impact of this movement of Indian discourses with(in) America. She calls the circulation of international discourses “transnational connectivities,” which develop within the context of the globalization of the marketplace that increased mobility through technological advances in transportation and communication and allowed cultural ideas to flow across

¹⁷ See Flood 151.

¹⁸ For a full summary of the Daksha myth and the reading of Shiva as outsider, see Flood 150. See also Knipe 29 for further details on Rudra as the outsider god.

borders¹⁹. Grewal defines “transnational connectivities” as intersecting “networks of knowledge and power, cosmopolitan and ‘global,’ that traversed and rearticulated national boundaries” and that “enable multiple nationalisms and identities to coexist as well as to shift from one to the other,” much like Jasmine’s multiple identities (2-3, 37). She specifically engages with the Indian diaspora in America, whose exposure to American technologies and broadcasting exposed them to the American Dream: “These multiple subjects emerged because the American Dream, by the end of the twentieth century, linked itself to American discourses of multiculturalism and diversity” (7). This exposure ultimately enabled Indians to survive, and it gives Jasmine a space in which to absorb American culture, even its views of other nations such as India. Despite the mobility of the discourse itself, Mukherjee continues to critique America’s national multiculturalism in *Jasmine* as a fixed cultural identity that forces immigrants like Jasmine to articulate their differences and adopt the stereotypes they have been exposed to in order to survive. Furthermore, transnational connectivities “suggest that mobility of persons no longer remains the salient issue but rather that moving discourses recast notions of settled and unsettled subjectivity as well” (11). With subjectivity defined less by national boundaries than by mobility and change, these notions of transnationality render America especially ineffectual, a *nonamenable* society that keeps Indian and American cultural discourses separate.

¹⁹ For an in-depth discussion of the importance of technology in *Jasmine*, see John K. Hoppe “The Technological Hybrid as Post-American: Cross-Cultural Genetics in *Jasmine*.” While technology has a substantial influence on the individual, it rises in importance on the level of the national to the level of the global, as Inderpal Grewal indicates with transnational connectivities. Because of their greater impact on those levels, technology becomes an even greater force in Mukherjee’s later novels that broadcasts the nation as a whole on the global stage: *Holder of the World* and *Desirable Daughters*, which I discuss in Part II.

Although Grewal argues that transnational connectivities (spawned by an understanding of globalization that emanates from national superpowers like the United States) enable members of the Indian diaspora to survive when they reach America's shores, the adaptability appears one-sided. The United States remains trapped in a stagnant culture that blindly clings to the rhetoric of the American Dream, an unrealized promise that ignores the internal fragmentation of its own past and its current multicultural policies. If multiculturalism proposed a means of realizing the American Dream of inclusion and opportunity for all, the immigrant reveals the disconnect between the dream and lived reality. Mukherjee's evocation of Indian cultural discourse within *Jasmine's* American setting seeks to expose the fragmentation and offer a solution of cultural fusion.

To consider the damages of relying on a flawed cultural mythology, we can look to Lisa Lowe's assertion that "the national institutionalization of unity becomes the measure of the nation's condition of heterogeneity" as a useful link between the immigrant and the national culture. Inspired by Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* and "conceptual totality", she writes,

If the nation proposes American culture as the key site for the resolution of inequalities and stratifications that cannot be resolved on the political terrain of representative democracy, then that culture performs that reconciliation by naturalizing a universality that exempts the "non-American" from its history of development or admits the "non-American" only through a "multiculturalism" that aestheticizes ethnic differences as if they could be separated from history. In contrast, the cultural productions emerging out of the contradictions of immigrant marginality displace the fiction of reconciliation, disrupt the myth of national identity by revealing its gaps and fissures, and intervene in the narrative of national development that would illegitimately locate the 'immigrant' before history or exempt the 'immigrant' from history. (9)

As an Indian immigrant denied the mythical American opportunity as she enters the country, Jasmine reveals the “gaps and fissures” of America. She must intervene and create opportunity by inserting both herself and her Indian cultural past into American cultural history. She joins the discourses of Hindu deities with the discourses of American opportunity and freedom, offering hybridity between discourses and between the nation and the individual as a solution. National change requires the interaction of the immigrant with the entire culture. An established relationship leads to recognition of the immigrant as not only a dynamic, revitalizing force in America but an essential part of the nation’s history and development. Hybridity between the immigrant and the nation, then, engages the American past as well as the immigrant’s present.

The complex interplay between continuity and transformation, between a single self and multiple selves, deserves attention and clarification, not only because it informs Jasmine as a character but because it provides the means through which the individual can influence and change the nation: hybridity. In her oft-cited essay on *Jasmine*, “‘We Murder Who We Were’: *Jasmine* and the Violence of Identity,” Kristen Carter-Sanborn dismisses the transitional properties of Jasmine’s multiple selves in order to assert Jasmine’s personae as a series of violent substitutions. Because Mukherjee roots Jasmine’s transformation in the Hindu spiritual dimension with the metamorphosis into Kali and the underlying theme of reincarnation, Carter-Sanborn regards Jasmine’s identity substitutions as deferral to either the traditionalist India that Mukherjee seeks to discard or the orientalizing stereotypes of the West, a deferral regarded as regressive and ultimately a denial of personal agency and individual continuity. Instead, Mukherjee

presents us with an alternative to this either-or formation, a conscious adoption of Western stereotypes – particularly American – and Indian traditional beliefs in order to highlight their intersections and assert the agency of Jasmine, the immigrant adopting and transforming them.

Although stark and traumatic, Jasmine’s transformations do not completely substitute one identity for another, which would assume that each identity is wholly disparate from any other. Jasmine’s first-person narration analogously links the multiple men in her life as husbands, and she refers to and narrates episodes in the lives of Jyoti, Jasmine, Kali, Jazzy, Jase, and Jane as part of her personal past; she relates them all to the central “I” that continues to move. In New York, when she encounters Sam, a marine iguana from the Galápagos Islands, Jasmine remarks that “Truly, I had been reborn. Indian village girls do not hold large reptiles on their laps” (163). She defines herself in constant reference to past identities and therefore avoids a completely new self. And again, when Sukhminder, the Sikh responsible for Prakash’s death, appears in New York, Jase fears him because of the hurt he caused Jasmine. The encounter compels her to move to Baden, Iowa, the birthplace of her adopted charge Duff, which implies that even though she leads a radically different life because of her geography and family situation in New York, even Duff’s adoption does not disrupt her individual continuity; the pattern of movement and rebirth is possible even for non-immigrants.

In order to maintain a continual self through multiple lifetimes, Mukherjee styles Jasmine’s narrative through the Indian discourse of reincarnation, already inferred by Jasmine’s comparison to Shiva. Mukherjee identifies with the Hindu belief:

I was born into a Hindu Bengali Brahmin family which means that I have a different sense of self, of existence, and of mortality than do writers like [Bernard] Malamud. I believe that our souls can be reborn in another body, so the perspective I have about a single character's life is different from that of an American writer who believes that he only has one life. (Carb and Mukherjee 651).

While Jasmine only occupies one body throughout the novel, reincarnation supposes continuity and an eternal self. The repeated transition from death to (re)birth in *Jasmine* occurs figuratively, through hybridity, which ideally joins two separate entities into one to create a new third. The resultant transformation is genetic as opposed to Du's hyphenization, which maintains disparate cultural identities in the spirit of multiculturalism (222)²⁰. Mukherjee figures survival and adaptation in America in a traditional Hindu belief structure; American opportunity develops through reincarnation.

Though Jasmine experiences multiple rebirths in her narrative, no physical birth takes place in the novel; her pregnancy by Bud Ripplemeyer at the novel's close never comes to term in the story. Birth results, instead, from the relationship between two individuals, Jasmine and each of her "husbands." While physical intercourse never took place in Jasmine's marriage to Prakash, "Later, I thought. We *had* created life. Prakash had taken Jyoti and created Jasmine, and Jasmine would complete the mission of Prakash. Vijn & Wife" (97). In America, Jasmine's relationships with Half-Face, Taylor, and Bud all result in new identities - Kali, Jane, and the unnamed post-Jane at the novel's close. Despite the shared nationality of these men, the characters they birth are distinct from one another. Using the metaphors of David Cowart, they emerge not as sameness produced from the "much-maligned figure of the 'melting-pot'" but as "perennially new and different alloys of national identity" (73). These new alloys or characters emerge as

²⁰ Mukherjee speaks against hyphenization more thoroughly in "Beyond Multiculturalism" 33.

single, stronger metal through fusion, which Mukherjee describes as “seeing that what seems opposite really is simply part of the same whole” (Desai, Barnstone, and Mukherjee 143).

Each new self, each new alloyed identity, appears stronger and fixed, but Mukherjee eventually exposes fixity as illusory. Varying approaches to hybridity in postcolonial theory offer differing explanations of hybridity, but variability remains a central feature. Homi Bhabha regards hybridity as an interstitial space – restless and in constant internal negotiation.²¹ Thus, the temporality of Jasmine’s personae renders them liminal, in between a splintered past but inevitably propelled toward a new future. But Robert J. C. Young, approaching hybridity from its genealogical development in race theory, argues for a type of binary between the fixity and fragmentation of identity: “fixity of identity is only sought in situations of instability and disruption, of conflict and change... The need for organic metaphors of identity or society implies a counter-sense of fragmentation and dispersion” (4). Behind each new, present identity that Jasmine produces through hybridization, then, lies a new, past fragmentation made up of different selves. Jasmine constructs her personal and cultural past(s) retrospectively, avoiding linearity in her narrative and thus avoiding a teleological progression in the creation of these alloys. However, each new hybrid identity allows Jasmine, as Mukherjee says, to “reclaim little bits and pieces of [the past] and fit them into your life in a different way” (Desai, Barnstone, and Mukherjee 141). Such reclamation of a heterogeneous past and present is the constant negotiation that sustains Bhabha’s liminal spaces. The continual, diachronic (re)creation of hybrid identities provides the energy for Jasmine’s migration across

²¹ See page 17 above.

America and positions her for interaction with not only its individual citizens but its national culture, changing both.

As a rejuvenating force, hybridity fuses the fixed disparate discourses of multiculturalism that uphold stereotypical identities. F. Timothy Ruppel acknowledges these stereotypical characterizations and asserts that Jasmine does, too. He argues that Mukherjee employs them in order to critique the way the West identifies individuals like Jasmine with these generalized categories and cultural assumptions that ignore and eliminate individual histories. This practice

insulate[s immigrants] from the historical trajectories that set this population in motion, the contradictions and ruptures that have propelled them out of their native culture. This insulation involves a substitution, a metalepsis, where a sociopolitical effect is defined as a cause. As a result, these ‘strange pilgrims’ become the originary cause of scrutiny, interest, or benevolence of a discourse that seeks to situate them in teleological narratives of Western civilization and progress, rather than as the effects of these same narrative gestures...*Jasmine* attempts to disrupt this even flow of narrative historiography with a counter-discourse that thematizes prior narratives of enforced identity—narratives that through accumulation and repetition seek to define and circumscribe identity as a fixed and available resource, constituted wholly by another’s desire. (182)

By invoking such a damaging metalepsis, a series of metaphors so removed that their original meaning can be lost, Ruppel invokes Gayatri Spivak’s strategic essentialism and builds on her notion of the pragmatic use of stereotype for immigrants’ survival. We see this same dilemma in *Wife* and, in broader terms, multiculturalism as well, when the individual’s personal history is discarded not by the individual but by an outside force as a sacrifice to a group identity. Jasmine does not substitute herself, nor does she discard her personal history²², for her first-person narration constantly evokes it. Following

²² Brinda Bose, for example, asserts that for Jasmine (as well as for Dimple in *Wife*), “murder evolves into an acceptable signifier for discarding nostalgia and starting over; it is neither the end nor even merely the

Ruppel's reading, by consciously enacting these stereotypical roles, Jasmine asserts her mobility and agency in order to survive the immigrant experience.

Furthermore, these stereotypical roles call attention to the larger cultural discourses that support and propagate them. As Malini Johar Schueller maintains, Jasmine enacts the stereotypes because she recognizes herself as the personification of the oriental other "in the popular U.S. cultural imaginary." In this method of survival in America, "she fashions herself on this recognition at the same time as she casts off from self-consciousness (being) whatever is not recognized because we as readers know that the being ('who I am') of Jasmine far exceeds her role as mysterious sex goddess" (94). Schueller's reading suggests that Jasmine's mobility and adaptability depend on an engagement with the national "cultural imaginary," and she reaffirms the centrality and transcendence of the central "I" that resists definition by these external cultural structures. As Jasmine adapts and changes, even through the adoption (and subsequent dismissal) of different stereotypes, she challenges the immobility of an America that would continue to uphold and circulate such traditional ideas without accepting and adapting to others. At the end of the novel, as Jasmine faces the decision of leaving Bud for Taylor and Duff, Taylor asks, "'Why not, Jase?...It's a free country'" (239). Although America claims to root itself in freedom, the phrase "It's a free country" has become a cliché and, especially with our knowledge of the limitations of immigration and multiculturalism, false. Yet Jasmine acts on the promise, asserting her freedom of transformation and movement by leaving with Taylor. Simultaneously, Mukherjee

means to an end: it is a beginning" (53). Though she implies that personal history is dismissed, she leaves room for the suggestion of continuity since none of the selves end, they only constitute new beginnings.

exposes the fractures in the American ideal while inserting an Indian immigrant into its cultural foundations to actually realize its promises.

Accordingly, we can understand the rhetoric of freedom, a central feature of America, as one of the cultural discourses that Jasmine engages and revises. Critic Brinda Bose links the pervasive violence of immigration to this freedom and argues that Jasmine's need for violence arises from the American culture itself, from the "freedom of choices thrust upon her" once she discards the traditional duties of her Indian wifehood in the fire pit after Half-Face rapes her: "What drives [immigrant women] to react with violence, then, is their frustration at other people's inability to understand their changing needs and desires, now that they are no longer confined to the social and cultural patterns of their past" (57-8). Instead of a calming, equalizing force, freedom for the immigrant involves violence and instability. Because "other people" can neither understand nor accommodate her changing identity, Jasmine must leave them and continue to adapt. Her mobility, both in the geographical sense and the (linked) individual sense, results from the "freedom of choices" and the myth of infinite opportunity that define the American Dream. Because of her motion throughout the novel, moving from city to city within America, Jasmine enacts this national cultural principle more than the American citizens she leaves behind.

Jasmine's mobility springs from her agency; she moves when she makes choices. When Jyoti kills the rabid dog and scars herself, developing her "third-eye," she renders the village astrologer who foretold her fate ineffectual. From the opening scene, then, Mukherjee presents us with the prominent theme and conflict in *Jasmine* of fate versus agency. Although she did become an exile and a widow, as he foretold, Jasmine refuses –

or, rather, *chooses not* – to define herself by such roles and assumes her own fate of constant transition. Migrancy, then, constitutes the necessary condition for agency, and vice versa. Jasmine moves from exile to expatriate to immigrant within the national boundaries of America, and she adopts new “husbands” for each of her new selves: “I have had a husband for each of the women I have been. Prakash for Jasmine, Taylor for Jase, Bud for Jane. Half-face for Kali” (197). Here, marriage serves as one of the elements of a life cycle, but not in the sense that Jasmine must play the role of docile, obedient wife. Prakash, in his progressiveness, refuses to give her the child that would solidify her identity as a proper Indian wife because “he was afraid of youthful pregnancy, of children bearing children. He talked to me of muscles tearing, of the girl’s body only *looking* mature, no matter what the rituals, the feudalisms, said” (116). Prakash even talks of making her a partner in his business – Vijn & Wife or, more appropriately outside of traditional roles, Vijn & Vijn. Although Jasmine intends to perform *sati* after Prakash’s death, she chooses mobility and opts to travel to the United States to do so, thereby removing herself from the geographical location of the culture inspiring her action. Mobility, the ability to uproot, leave, and claim one’s “land” or identity in the wilderness of the expanding and reforming American landscape also comprises an important part of American culture, in addition to freedom.

Of her other “husbands” besides Prakash, Jasmine chooses to transform and murder Half-Face. By raping her, Half-Face mars the purity of the perfect widow intending to perform *sati*, and Jasmine feels that “death was being denied” (121). She then inverts the passive construction of the situation and *causes* death, thereby assuming

Half-Face's role of Lord Yama. As for Taylor and Bud, she voluntarily leaves both of them, choosing another path. In fact, she never fully occupies the wifely role since she and Prakash never consummated their marriage and she never legally marries any of the other men. While some critics understand Jasmine's "marriages" as submission to men and Mukherjee's writing, therefore, as surrender to and laudation of an orientaling West²³, I interpret the marriages as evidence of adaptability in the trope of the reincarnation lifeline from birth to marriage to death. Once again, we see the confluence of Indian and American discourses that enable the immigrant's survival and success in America.

This hybridization of the transnational immigrant, herself a hybrid subject, and the stagnant nation creates, in Bhabha's formation, an uneasy interstitial space that forces the nation to identify, examine, and negotiate its internal contradictions. In "DissemiNation," Bhabha sees the internal contradictions of the nation as a result of double-writing (dissemi-nation) of the culture as imagined and the culture as revealed through history (299). For Mukherjee, this double-writing results from the imagined American Dream of opportunity juxtaposed with the limitations that multiculturalism places on the individual, particularly the immigrant. Hybridity, "in its most radical guise of disarticulating [the] authority" of the nation, interrogates the nation's cultural practices in order to upset its fixed identity.²⁴

To challenge American culture and expose the fissures of such a fixed identity and a fragmented past, *Jasmine* more explicitly engages with the nation's cultural

²³ See Carter-Sanborn, for example.

²⁴ For a more sustained discussion of hybridity in *Jasmine*, see Geraldine Stoneham's "It's a Free Country": Visions of Hybridity in the Metropolis."

mythology. Upon immigrating to America, Jasmine geographically follows the path of national settlement by Europeans. In so doing, she metonymically enacts national progress, thus reinserting the immigrant into the national historical consciousness. Remembering Lisa Lowe's formulation, Jasmine's path reinscribes the immigrant as the developing force of American history instead of merely its progenitor "before history" or an inconsequential figure "exempt from history" (9). Jasmine's Indian origin redefines the immigrant in this American consciousness, broadening the definition to include the East in the formation of the country, thereby proposing a more inclusive and transnational origin, a move Mukherjee makes on with a larger scope in *Holder of the World*.

Jasmine first lands in Florida, site of St. Augustine, the first continuous European settlement in the present-day United States. Going ashore, she "waded through Eden's waste: plastic bottles, floating oranges, boards, sodden boxes, white and green plastic sacks tied shut but picked open by birds and pulled apart by crabs" (107). Simultaneously she evokes the pilgrim's rhetoric of the Promised Land while exposing the decay – or, perhaps, false reality – of such a notion, thereby undermining the nation's authority in its own past narrative of progress. From Florida, Jasmine moves northward to New York City, the nation's prized cultural metropolis. She describes it as "an archipelago of ghettos seething with aliens" (140). Here, in the city into which millions of European immigrants poured to live the American Dream, Jasmine sees greed and beggars. Though families like the Vadheras have changed the landscape of not only New York City but American immigration in general, America's national mythology privileges the European immigrants who arrived by way of Ellis Island; to those

privileged immigrants did the American Dream hold merit, and they were the people who could truly test its promises of opportunity and acceptance in the great melting pot (the same assimilationist symbol that Cowart replaces with the alloys metaphor).

Perhaps one of the most idealistic accounts of the American Dream based on the melting-pot mythology arises from this tradition in the work of Israel Zangwill, an English Jew who fictionalizes the hope the United States held for immigrants as a site of ethnic and religious assimilation in his 1908 play *The Melting-Pot*. The protagonist, a Jewish man named David who escaped the brutality of pogroms in Russia, proclaims that “America is God’s Crucible, the great Melting-Pot where all races of Europe are melting and reforming... Germans and Frenchmen, Irishmen and Englishmen, Jews and Russians – into the Crucible with you all! God is making the American” (288). David’s Eurocentric speech hails Ellis Island as the mouth of this great melting-pot, a great promise for all who pass through.

For Mukherjee, as for many other immigrants and citizens of the United States, the problem with the melting-pot rests in the dissolution of individuals and ethnic differences into one homogenous mass. Mukherjee does not want to advocate assimilation to a single identity or universal equivalence for all Americans, nor does she seek to emphasize difference or hyphenated identity as multiculturalism does:

The American mythology about the melting pot certainly helps others to come and say, Yes, I have a place here. The unfortunate part of the practice has been the nineteenth-century notion that you make yourself over following an Anglo or Puritan model. What I’m saying is that it’s not like a salad, in which every bit of lettuce or radish or tomato or cucumber retains its original shape and taste...but a stew in the sense that the stewing process has changed everything; the broth has become what it is because every bit has given some of its juices, some of its taste.

I'm looking for every side to break down in some way and constantly create a new whole. (Desai, Barnstone, and Mukherjee 141-2).

The notion that the melting pot metaphor “certainly helps others” implies that it helped a nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sensibility that perceived America as the place of acceptance. The prominence of the European immigrant, as in Zangwill’s play, excluded other immigrants from the American imaginary. After the Immigration Act of 1965 and the lifting of the national quotas, American immigrants no longer came primarily from the West. However, by continuing to uphold the Anglo-melting pot model, America ignores and excludes other immigrants like Jasmine. As an Indian, Jasmine disrupts the historical notion of the New York immigrant and exposes the failure of both the assimilationist melting-pot dream and the multicultural “salad” in the city, leaving room only for a hybrid “stew” whose constant negotiations of its elements “create a new whole.”

For five months, Jasmine resides in this city that held such promise for immigrants. She lives with Professorji and his family in Queens, witnessing firsthand the disappointment of reality in America, for the former professor now deals in human hair and hides his professional decline from his family and Indian community. While living with Professorji, Jasmine experiences the same ethnic, communal isolation that Dimple experienced in *Wife*, stark evidence of the failure of multiculturalism. But life in New York also means life with Taylor, Wylie, and Duff, and in their “apartment on Claremont Avenue across the street from a Barnard College dormitory,” she “became an American” (165). Though initially welcomed into their home as an *au pair*, Jasmine eventually finds acceptance in their family as a trusted member, mother, and, upon Wylie’s adultery and

departure, wife. The families in New York – both the Indian Vadhera family and the Hayes family, in Jasmine’s experience – indicate a heterogeneous city ethnically unmelted, un-fused, and disunited despite the shared experience of family dissolution.

Jasmine’s sudden move to Baden, Iowa, from New York engages with the American mythos on two levels. The movement westward clearly mimics the romanticism of American settlement. Settling west was America’s Manifest Destiny, a geographical realization of the dream of opportunity for all. Mukherjee’s engagement with America’s western romance constantly disrupts cultural history by infusing it with double meaning. She employs the classic American figures of “cowboys and Indians,” obviously referring not only to rhetoric of the Old West but Jasmine’s (and her) own origin in India, but she obscures the significance of these characters. While she and Du watch a news report of an INS raid on illegal Mexican immigrants, Jasmine “thought I heard Du mutter, ‘Asshole.’ And I realized I didn’t know who were the assholes, the cowboys or the Indians” (27). Jasmine conflates the meanings of “Indian” as well as “cowboy,” hinting that not only Mexicans but Americans work as cowboys, and she further complicates the rhetoric by associating the Mexican immigrant with Vietnamese Du and her Indian self, both immigrants. More than invoking the classic American Western tale, the movement west toward California, made by Du and eventually Jasmine, Taylor, and Duff, inverts the traditional America immigration story and highlights not Ellis Island but Angel Island, the site of mass immigration from the East instead of the West.

Most significantly, Mukherjee plays with frontier rhetoric. She evokes Frederick Jackson Turner's influential "frontier thesis," which relocates the melting-pot, the site of American fusion, to the moving frontier line of nineteenth century western expansion. For Turner, "In the crucible of the frontier the immigrants were Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race, English in neither nationality nor characteristics" (23). Like Zangwill's play, Turner's thesis exhibits Eurocentrism. The New York metropolis failed to fuse Indian immigrants into America, and the more rural frontier excludes them as well. By following both United States expansion and the movement of the melting pot, Jasmine continues to insert herself, the Eastern, Indian immigrant into the prominent metaphors of the American mythos, particularly at the sites of supposed change, transforming promise into practice.

As a symbol of the American heartland, Iowa serves as one such site, where Thomas Jefferson's yeoman farmers and the honest simplicity of American labor supposedly offer opportunity to anyone. Yet this very belief in simplicity and farm independence cripples Bud Ripplemeyer, Jane's Iowan "husband" and father of her unborn child. The very definition of the "American father from the heartland," Bud, a banker, paralyzes himself with his own American idealism (224). As Harlan Kroener, an independent farmer dying under the pressure of corporate business farming, confronts Bud about his finances, Bud "walked in *front* of Harlan" as a sign of goodwill between men that existed only in a cultural imagination, and Harlan took advantage of the situation and shot Bud in the back. Bud "was stupid, believing in John Wayne bravery

and codes of Hollywood honor,” emulating the classic hero of the Hollywood western and putting himself in a wheelchair as a result (198). American mythology has thus seeped into popular media entertainment, which defines America in even more fictionalized terms and makes Bud’s adherence to American ideals or imaginary identities even more unfortunate.

The easy and wide circulation of Hollywood images immediately places *Jasmine* in a broader context, as does Mukherjee’s insertion of her protagonist into not only a strictly American culture, but a more extensive Western literature. More particularly, she writes Jasmine into the role of the very proper woman, an Anglo ideal of femininity. By placing a hybrid character from India in the role of the civilized Western women in these novels, Mukherjee again upsets cultural mythology, this time on a broader scale than just the American mythology. Throughout *Jasmine*, Mukherjee references the Pygmalion myth, particularly George Bernard Shaw’s 1913 play. Jasmine, thinking about her renaming, retrospectively compares Prakash to Professor Higgins, and for Taylor, “I had been until that time an innocent child he’d picked out of the gutter, discovered, and made whole, then fallen in love with” (189). In the play, Henry Higgins reforms the poor speech and demeanor of Eliza Doolittle to make her socially acceptable. However, as Mukherjee shows through the novel, Jasmine changes through her own agency, often through disruptive violence.

While it possesses hints of Pygmalion revision, the relationship between Jasmine and Bud suggests the famous Tarzan novels of Edgar Rice Burroughs: “Bud calls me Jane. Me Bud, you Jane” (26). Jane, the fair, civilized American girl, wins the heart of the

primitive Tarzan. After living in the African wilderness his entire life, Tarzan, who is actually the English aristocrat Lord Greystoke, leaves the jungle and becomes civilized for his love. He says to Jane, “You are free now, Jane...and I have come across the ages out of the dim and distant past from the lair of the primeval man to claim you—for your sake I have become a civilized man—for your sake I have crossed oceans and continents—for your sake I will be whatever you will me to be” (Burroughs 216). Here, the male character transforms himself, yet the Burroughs tale does not parallel but complicates Mukherjee’s. As the masculine character opposite his “Jane,” Bud does not will himself to change; Jasmine transforms of her own will, eventually rejecting the Jane role. Like Burroughs, Mukherjee questions the level of “civilization,” refinement, or acceptance in America as opposed to the exoticized origins of the protagonist, either Tarzan or Jasmine.

The crippled state of Jane’s lover evokes Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), a classic work of literature in the Western canon: “Maybe things *are* settling down all right. I think maybe I am Jane with my very own Mr. Rochester” (236). Jasmine’s association with *Jane Eyre* relates not only to her life in Iowa but to her previous employment in New York City, for both *Jane Eyre* and Jasmine work as caretakers. Identifying Jasmine with Jane, Brontë’s English protagonist, seemingly contradicts the postcolonial revisionism of Jean Rhys in her 1966 *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which resurrects Caribbean Bertha Mason and reinserts the immigrant into the Western canon. Instead of simply giving voice to the immigrant, however, Mukherjee conflates the traditional subject and the Other, rewriting the Indian-born immigrant into the Western literary canon.

Perhaps the most important literary reference and subversion in *Jasmine*, however, engages both the American heartland and the classic text of colonialism, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902). Jasmine's arrival to the United States aboard Half-Face's *The Gulf Shuttle* reenacts Marlow's narrative setting of *The Nellie*, for each ship carries the narrator, the captain, and four other passengers – immigrants and crewmen, respectively. The geographical setting of *Jasmine* upends the mission in *Heart of Darkness*; instead of the European West penetrating the heart of the African Congo, the orientalized subject penetrates the American West: "Out there... On the edge of the world, in flaming deserts, mangled jungles, squelchy swamps, missionaries save the needy. Out There, the darkness. But for me, for Du, In Here, safety. At least for now. Oh, the wonder! the wonder!" (21). Mukherjee inverts even the setting, darkness and light, in her rewriting of Kurtz's infamous last words "The horror! the horror!"

By broadening the scope, confronting Western literary traditions and cultural imaginaries, and inserting her immigrant self into these narratives to reverse and subvert them, Jasmine exposes the transnational connectivities that deny the fixity and insularity of the American cultural identity, much as Marlow exposes the cruel and disjointed inner workings of the colonial system. Reversing the enactment of multiculturalism provides further exposure. As the only character with mobility in the novel (excepting, perhaps, Du), Jasmine distinguishes her individual self from the collective, stagnant white Americans. Mukherjee contrasts her migrant protagonist with the current multiculturalism of America by placing them all in the same American mythology. She treats the Americans as an ethnic group in a multicultural framework, stereotyping them

by their “generic pasts,” their “baseball loyalties...passed from fathers to sons,” and their collective ignorance of the failure of multiculturalism (202, 8). These Americans believe in the fulfillment of the American dream and their own cultural tolerance, but their actions expose the dissonance between this ideal and reality. Though Bud becomes Jasmine/Jane’s lover, she knows that “Bud courts me because I am alien. I am darkness, mystery, inscrutability. The East plugs me into instant vitality and wisdom” (200). Bud identifies the immigrant as other instead of American and emphasizes ethnic differences. Taylor, too, believes he has moved beyond intolerance. He chastises Jasmine for her reincarnation beliefs: Very, very, *very* Indian, Jassy....You don’t believe that, do you? You can’t, you’re more modern than that” (59). Taylor would have ethnic distinctions and beliefs disappear altogether in a more “modern” assimilationist model.

Because of these characteristics in the nation’s individuals, Jasmine must insert herself into America’s cultural historiography and rewrite it to reinvigorate it so that the nation can move beyond its static, insular identity. She highlights “larger global forces” of migration, which, as Arjun Appadurai claims “have done much to show Americans that the past is usually another country. If your present is their future...and their future is your past...then your own past can be made to appear as simply a normalized modality of your present” (30). Appadurai shows how transnational forces such as the immigration of an Indian girl to America’s heartland challenge the nation’s cultural identity in the past and the present and disrupt the temporal linearity of the identity. By tracing the path of settlement in America and engaging with (and subverting) its cultural mythologies, Jasmine lives the nation’s past in the narrative present. Simultaneously, however, she

provides a model for its future, a model of motion and hybridity that can revise and reinvigorate the nation.

At the novel's end, Taylor and Duff appear in Iowa, and Jasmine leaves the American heartland to journey west with her adopted family and Bud's unborn child. They reach no final destination in the narrative, but Jasmine retains her state of perpetual motion, and her namelessness at the end promises a new hybrid identity. Though constantly changing her self, we see that she has changed another as well; Taylor has left New York, mobilizing himself as a result of his association with the immigrant Jasmine. By asserting her transforming individuality and living the nation's cultural past, Jasmine revitalizes at least one American body. Since *Jasmine* avoids conclusion, Mukherjee does not permit us to see if the national culture as a whole changes under the influence of Jasmine. Whether or not Jasmine transforms the national imaginary is less important than illuminating the *possibility* that she *can* change it. While disrupting the past implications of the American Dream and exposing its failures, Mukherjee maintains the spirit of opportunity within the bounds of the nation. She meets her literary goals by writing of this possibility, by exposing the fissures in both the immigrant and the nation to reveal the deep connections between them, thus mapping out a two-way, reciprocal, and potentially successful Americanization.

CHAPTER THREE

THE HOLDER OF THE WORLD AND THE RESTORATION OF GLOBALIZATION TO AMERICAN CULTURE

In her fourth novel, *The Holder of the World* (1993), Bharati Mukherjee introduces Beigh Masters and Venn Iyer, an international couple with lofty research goals. Beigh, an American asset hunter, searches for a legendary diamond named the Emperor's Tear by researching and recreating the history of Hannah Easton and the literary masterpiece she inspired, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Venn, an Indian immigrant, works to construct X-2989, a program that will make virtual time travel possible. Art motivates one, technology motivates the other. Beigh's project is personal, inspired by her participation in a Yale seminar and the subsequent research project that unearthed a distant blood relation to Hannah, and it focuses on a particular individual. Venn's work, in contrast, inputs the objective information of "all the world's newspapers, weather patterns, telephone directories, satellite passes, every arrest, every television show, political debate, airline schedule" into a virtual reality program to create a general sense of a past place and time. Despite their apparent differences, these projects converge in *The Holder of the World*, not only to allow Beigh to travel in time to hold the Emperor's Tear, but in their ability to collapse time and space to reveal complex relationships between individuals, nations, and global cultures (5). Beigh's American Puritans seminar "set in motion a hunger for connectedness, a belief that with sufficient passion and intelligence we can deconstruct the barriers of time and geography. Maybe that led, circuitously, to Venn," who realizes the potential flaw in his X-2989 technology,

that “the past presents itself to us, always, somehow simplified. He wants to avoid that fatal unclutteredness, but knows he can’t” (11, 6).

These related ideas of “connectedness” and “clutteredness” drive Mukherjee’s novel by situating both a piece of the American literary canon and an American individual in a global context. Mukherjee questions *The Scarlet Letter*’s insularity and the individual’s national identity, ultimately exposing their transnational origins and influences in both the past and the present. Basing her text in extensive historical research, Mukherjee (through Beigh) connects seventeenth-century Puritan New England with a substantial Eastern trading business, and she fictionalizes the consequences of such international connections by rewriting *The Scarlet Letter* as motivated by and dependent on global forces. Mukherjee dramatizes the influence of globalization on each individual in the nation through Hannah’s transforming characters as she travels through and engages with the cultures of New England, England, and India, where she becomes the Salem Bibi.

By focusing on an individual to critique the American cultural institution and expose its global genealogy, Mukherjee expands her focus from the relationship between the individual and the nation. Tracing Hannah’s international migrations moves beyond the immigrant narrative of *Jasmine* in which the protagonist encounters and develops with and by a singular national identity. Because Hannah’s relationships with each nation are so (trans)formative, *The Holder of the World* depicts *multiple* immigrations that change not only the protagonist but the national cultures that she encounters.²⁵

Mukherjee thus establishes an analogous relationship: the individual influences the

²⁵ See also Drake 64: “‘immigration’ is transformation in multiples.”

national imaginary as the national culture influences the global.

Rather than collapsing the analogy and dismissing the nation by dissolving its borders, Mukherjee gives renewed energy to America and its culture. Written in the 1990s, in an age when debates about globalization began to circulate heavily through the academy, popular media, and national politics, *The Holder of the World* responds to fears of the dissolution of the nation.²⁶ Such fears interpret the influx of immigrants and their transcultural beliefs and practices as well as the output of “natural” Americans to countless points on the globe as the cause of a culture no longer rooted or united geographically, nor visibly distinct from the multitude of cultures within its seemingly arbitrary borders. In *The Holder of the World*, Mukherjee claims globalization not as a new reality nor even as a long-extant one in American culture; she recognizes the historical pervasiveness of what Inderpal Grewal usefully defines as transnational connectivities, or, “networks of knowledge and power, cosmopolitan and ‘global,’ that traversed and rearticulated national boundaries” (2-3).²⁷ Global connectivities were not only present at the founding of the nation or the writing of *The Scarlet Letter*, they *created* America and the novel. This understanding thus reaffirms America as a nation and culture built on immigration and transformation and legitimizes it in relation to the globe. By emulating Hawthorne’s frame narration in *The Scarlet Letter*, Mukherjee not only connects her novel to an American literary classic, she links the custom-house narrator and Beigh Masters, Hester Prynne and Hannah Easton, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Bharati Mukherjee, America and the globe, and the past and the present. Drawing

²⁶ See, for example, Appadurai, Buell, Dirlik, Gikandi, and the edited collections of Jameson and Miyoshi or Wilson and Dissanayake.

²⁷ For further discussion in relation to *Jasmine*, refer to page 42.

attention to such a complex array of connectivities and “clutteredness” secures Mukherjee’s place in the American canon and the American nation as both a product and a narrative of globalization. Through an examination of the comparative relationships between individuals, nations, and the globe established by Mukherjee in *The Holder of the World*, I argue that Mukherjee’s project restores and reaffirms American culture. None of these categories of individual, nation, or globe prove self-sustaining, however, for they constantly overlap, but this is Mukherjee’s point. A character such as Hannah Easton, identified alternately as an American, Hester Prynne, or a transnational subject, crosses all of these categories and demonstrates the constant negotiations between local and global relationships.

Mukherjee’s concern throughout her novels with establishing relationships between the individual and the nation corresponds to the dynamics of globalization discourse that she addresses in *The Holder of the World* – particularly in the 1990s, when she wrote the novel – and the fears of national dissolution associated with it. The national/individual relationship correlates with the global/local nexus at the core of globalization theories. In Mukherjee’s fiction, the national culture and the individual have a dynamic (and, as I have argued in Chapter 2, *hybrid*) connection that, while uneven, is reciprocal and symbiotic, producing constant transformation. The global/local distinction drawn by sociological and literary theorists works in the same way. Roland Robertson, writing at about the same time that Mukherjee composed *The Holder of the World*, identifies two tendencies in globalization discussion: “growing interdependence across the world on a number of different dimensions,” particularly economic but, increasingly,

cultural, and “the globalization *of* institutions, collectivities and practices” usually relegated to specific localities, like regions or nations (176). The “growing interdependence” causes global forces to impact local or national discourses while the “globalization *of* institutions” flows in the opposite direction, uprooting and spreading the local onto a global framework. Robertson sees no contradiction between these tendencies, and thus regards globalization as “the twofold process of the particularization of the universal and the universalization of the particular” (177). In discussing the two directions of influence in the global/local nexus, Robertson acknowledges different approaches or accommodations made for each tendency but gives no primacy to either, implicitly suggesting that they flow with equal force.

In the hybrid relationship Mukherjee maps out for her individuals and American culture, the sides never appear so balanced; they constantly negotiate and struggle for power. Other globalization scholars have noted this more tenuous relationship and sought to disrupt and challenge the global/local binary. Cultural historian James Clifford views the bifurcation not as a both/and construct favored by Robertson but as an either/or formulation that “*either* favors some version of ‘globalism’ self-defined as progressive, modern, and historically dynamic *or* favors a localism ‘rooted’ (not routed) in place, tradition, culture, or ethnicity conceived in an absolutist mode” – that is, a mode that denies the kind of transnational or polygenetic origins that Mukherjee seeks to restore (qtd. in Wilson and Dissanayake 6). Fredric Jameson likewise rejects Robertson’s “utopian vision of ‘globality,’” but neither does his formulation of globalization accept Clifford’s either/or distinction. Instead, in the global/local relationship, “such relations

are first and foremost ones of tension or antagonism....in them each term struggles to define itself against the binary other” (Jameson and Miyoshi xii). Jameson’s “definition” of globalization as an unstable and “untotalizable totality which intensifies binary relations between its parts – mostly nations, but also regions and groups” coincides with Mukherjee’s vision of negotiation between the global and the national as well as the national and the individual, and it also sets up the comparative framework that illuminates the connectivities between not only nations but between individual characters in *The Holder of the World*.

To establish the level of complexity and “clutteredness” that can reveal globalizing forces in both America’s past and present, Mukherjee uses the particularity of the individual to illuminate the global context of her characters and America. Investigating naming practices, for example, establishes connections between characters and reveals transnational influences that immediately broaden the novel’s perspective to the global level. Throughout Mukherjee’s literary corpus, naming plays an important role, often signaling agency or transformation. Choosing a new name means choosing a new identity. Even with a new name given by another character (as often happens to the protagonist in *Jasmine*), the character’s adaptability to the name and its implications shows the power and creativity of the immigrant. Names are never isolated or empty of meaning, and often their connections to different discourses or contexts illuminate cultural connections and global forces.

As the frame narrator, Beigh Masters initiates many of the connections between individuals, both in the novel and outside of it, by exploring naming practices as cultural

artifacts. Motivated by her undergraduate degree in history and her job as asset hunter, Beigh researches her own genealogy and ancestral past. She locates the etymological origins of her surname in England: “Back on the scepter’d isle, three hundred years ago, we were Musters, or musterers. A clever vowel change, in any event” (10). Beigh acknowledges her immigrant origins, thus setting herself up as an American subject. The significance of her last name rests not only in each of its multiple meanings but in its very multiplicity and the fine lines between definitions. In the strictest sense, Beigh “musters” or “gathers” information through her research in books and museums, looking at cultural artifacts like *The Scarlet Letter*, Mughal paintings, and embroidery attributed to Hannah in order to create, learn, and “master” an individual’s personal past – both Hannah’s and her own, since Beigh finds they are related. The larger importance, however, rests in the *creation* of the past by seemingly insignificant changes like modifying a single letter. In researching these small changes in her personal past, Beigh seeks to restore the connections between her ancestry and her present, which translates into a restoration between “the scepter’d isle” and her American identity. She applies this methodology to Hannah’s history as well, mustering the historical facts of Eastern trade with colonial America and the literary facts in Hawthorne’s novel and constructing a narrative to meaningfully explain the data.

The significance of Hawthorne’s name, too, rests on a single letter. Ashamed by his grandfather John Hathorne’s participation in the Salem Witch Trials, Hawthorne added a “w” to his surname to differentiate himself from his heritage. By linking Beigh’s and Hawthorne’s syntactical play, Mukherjee reminds us of Hawthorne’s rewritten past.

She draws a parallel between Hawthorne and Beigh Masters as authors of history and of this American tale. Mukherjee also aligns herself with Beigh Masters (and, thus, Hawthorne) since the two women share the same initials.²⁸ The nameplay leads to broader meaning: as Julie Newman notes, “all names become *bundles of relationships*,” – or, alternately, connectivities – “forcing the reader to think always in terms of multiple rather than monolithic referents. Every letter has its alternative meaning, or meanings; reinscription is embedded at every level of the novel” (23, emphasis added). The metanarratological weaving together of these three authors connects them through time and fosters comparison across gender and cultural lines. The United States has canonized Hawthorne as decidedly American, while Beigh has linked herself to her English roots, and Mukherjee immigrated from India.

This string of comparisons among the “authors” of Hester Prynne/Hannah Easton/Salem Bibi’s history highlights the multiplicity of origins of one individual’s story. Since these authors all write recursively of an American past they claim as their own, they all seem to share what Lois Parkinson Zamora describes as an “anxiety of origins” that drives Americans to cultivate community by linking themselves to a shared past of cultural practices and events. Connecting to a shared, national past through its literary culture works in “ways that are dialogical (multiple and coexisting) rather than competitive (singular and successive)... This American anxiety generates literary structures that are inclusive, relative, heterogeneous, synchronic” (Zamora 5). In connecting the American, English, and Indian roots of authors of an American story,

²⁸ See Collado-Rodríguez “Naming” 64 for Mukherjee’s discussion of making the historical narrative her own, leading into the discussion with her initials.

Mukherjee draws attention to the multiplicity of American cultural origins.

In past works like *Wife* and *Jasmine*, Mukherjee had primarily focused on the interplay of her Indian subject with a white American society, imagining hybridity (in all its possible forms) as a solution for both immigrants and native Americans alike. In taking globalization and a larger set of multiple origins into account, Mukherjee expands her vision toward a larger process of integration that Cyrus R. K. Patell calls “cultural polygenesis,” which more adequately explains American culture at the end of the twentieth century because it “move[s] beyond the duality implicit in the hybrid model of ‘both/and’ to a model that captures the interplay of multiple hybrid states” and “seeks to understand how individual identities or cultures arise from a multiplicity of sources: it investigates how separate identities and cultures merge and transform one another” (178, 179). To escape the implicit duality, this polygenetic approach that Mukherjee adopts does more than assume that individuals or nations become hybrid through the cultural mixing of more than two original identities; it suggests that the origins themselves are multiple and hybridized, and a singular or non-global identity does not exist. A polygenetic originary quest for America or an American subject, then, invites constant reinterpretation of the present, for one must always reformulate the past in response to the discovery – or, rather, the restoration – of multiple influences.

Nowhere in Mukherjee’s fiction do we see this polygenesis more clearly than in *The Holder of the World*, an investigation into one woman’s history. On first glance, it appears that Hawthorne, Beigh, and Mukherjee all claim one literary (and, for Beigh, ancestral) “origin” – an American colonial woman who has an affair with a forbidden

man and gives birth to a daughter, Pearl. The society deems the woman and her daughter Other and distinguishes them from the homogenous norm. Together, the woman and her lover produce a sort of hybrid daughter who crosses either moral, racial, or cultural lines, depending on either Hawthorne's or Beigh's/Mukherjee's retelling. In investigating the polygenetic origins of Pearl's mother, Mukherjee refigures the American character and establishes connections that cross the globe.

In Hannah, Mukherjee presents a definitively American character, one born of (im)migration and transformation. Hannah's grandparents immigrated to the New World on the *Angel Gabriel* in 1633, on an actual British ship of the same name, built for Sir Walter Raleigh for his final 1617 voyage to America (Haines and Haines 331-2). Known for his expeditions to and writings about America, Raleigh represents the discovery of the New World, and his literature was among the first to imagine America for an international audience. Connecting Raleigh to Hannah's ancestors allows Mukherjee to situate them in a traveling, transatlantic history and gives them a trajectory from England to America that Hannah will later reverse. With their infant daughter Rebecca in tow, Hannah's grandparents moved from a colonial center (Beigh suggests Boston or Rhode Island) to Brookfield, Massachusetts, a Puritan colony in Nipmuc Indian territory. In 1668, Rebecca married Edward Easton, an immigrant from England and a former employee of the East India company, and two years later gave birth to Hannah. A year later, Edward died of a bee sting.

Hannah spent six years with her widowed mother, losing her when the Nipmuc attacked Brookfield. Rebecca had taken a Nipmuc lover, and she forged her murder in

order to escape with him in 1675. Here, as in *Jasmine*, Mukherjee plays on the ambiguity and Newman's "bundle of relationships" in the term "Indian," for Hannah will also have an affair with an Indian man on the other side of the globe. Beigh's lover, Venn, is also Indian, though he was born in India and immigrated to America as an infant, reversing the route Hannah took to India – or, perhaps, retracing the path Pearl took. Adopted by a nearby farming family, Hannah takes on the name Fitch and moves with them to Salem, site of the infamous 1692-3 witch trials that caused Nathaniel Hawthorne to add a letter to his family name. As a port town with a veritable trade economy, particularly with the East, Salem brought many travelers and seamen into contact with its inhabitants, including Gabriel Legge, a rakish sailor with a penchant for telling elaborate stories of his travels, particularly to India. Though crooked and untrustworthy and the murderer of Hannah's friend Hester Manning, Hannah married Gabriel and sailed with him back to England because "she, too, longed for escape" from the stifled knowledge of her mother's affair and a stagnant community (67). By the time she left America's shores, Hannah had transformed herself twice, adopting the names Fitch and Legge, and moving from the woods to Brookfield settlement to Salem, then headed for England. She reverses the immigrant trajectory retraced by *Jasmine* and moves out from the American frontier and back to the colonizing center, in some ways searching or exploring her own American origins through geographic movement.

Hannah's subsequent move from England to India, then, suggests that her origins lie not in the Western nation of England but in India. Though neither Mukherjee nor Beigh provides a blood lineage to support this supposition, each offers the possibility and

acknowledges the global flows of commerce that connect India, England, and America, among other countries. Hannah's journey also eventually leads her back to America, making her journey circular, interconnected, and hostile to monogenetic readings of her cultural ancestry. Through placing Hannah in India, a country supposedly foreign to the American, Mukherjee forms new connections between characters of different cultural origins, and she assembles a comparative framework that supersedes these differences. By relating Indian characters with Hannah, Mukherjee does not suppose they are identical or interchangeable; instead, she illuminates global forces that, through national economies and agendas, generate relationships between international individuals that travel, inform, and create national cultures like that of America.

Hannah forms her most striking relationships with other individuals while in India, and these bonds created with non-Western people transform Hannah in what she retrospectively calls her "translation," a term connoting foreign rather than domestic – or local – exchanges. Her voyage to and residence in India forces encounters with other characters that produce change: "She was alert to novelty, but her voyage was mental, interior. Getting there was important, but savoring the comparison with London or Salem, and watching her life being transformed, that was the pleasure" (104). Hannah also employs a comparative framework to make sense of the transformations spawned by her global experiences and relationships.

While residing in White Town at Fort St. Sebastian, an East India Company hub and English settlement in India, Hannah meets and eventually befriends Bhagmati. Because Bhagmati was born with the name Bindu Bashini, Mukherjee links Bhagmati

and Hannah (and Jasmine and Dimple) as characters with names and identities in constant evolution. Hannah makes the connection with naming practices herself, “[spinning] the alliterative name like a ball on the tip of her tongue” and realizing that “Hannah Easton Fitch Legge was dying” and about to transform yet again (222). Henry Hedges, an English merchant and colonist, employed Bindu, renamed her Bhagmati, and adopted her as his mistress, his *bibi*. Hannah later renames her Hester, after her murdered friend in the New World, thereby equating Bhagmati and Hester Manning for their individual qualities of loyalty and compassion, not their nationality. Bhagmati likewise renames Hannah, establishing a reciprocal relationship: “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. The friend who had indirectly brought her to the Coromandel Coast” (271). The reciprocity of the renaming removes the violence and suppression of agency associated with imperial naming processes, for it takes the nature of sharing rather than imposition. Both women also adopt the name *bibi*, as a reflection of their status as mistresses to a man of different cultural origins. Francisco Collado-Rodríguez regards this designation and the *bibi* link between the women as a celebratory one: “Male hate, religious fundamentalism, and destruction are, in this way, opposed by the female insistence on amalgamating into the other race. Indian or white American, females reflect one another on different narrative levels and in reality” (“Facing” 222). Because Indian Bhagmati has an Anglo partner and white Hannah adopts an Indian lover in Jadav Singh, Mukherjee shows the two mirroring instead of replicating each other, reiterating the reciprocity of their relationship.²⁹ Both Bhagmati and Hannah absorb a

²⁹ See also Nalini Iyer’s “American/Indian”: “The similarity between Bhagmati’s experience as victim

different culture's name and transform one another through their association.

Hannah's affair with Raja Jadav Singh, a Hindu King in Muslim India, transforms her into the Salem Bibi, an amalgamated title that mixes her American and Indian selves. As his bibi, Hannah upsets the colonial power structure of white domination and imposition. Yet she still manages to exoticize the relationship with the Raja, for "it was here in India that she felt her own passionate nature for the first time, the first hint that a world beyond duty and patience and wifely service was possible, then desirable, then irresistible" (237). Hannah considers her sexual awakening in both spatial and comparative terms, contrasting Indian culture with the New England Puritan world of "duty and patience and wifely service" that condemns Hester Prynne. But the comparison does not simply establish a duality that emphasizes difference; instead it fashions connections between the experiences of Hannah and Rebecca: "She had traveled the world, a witness to unimagined visions, merely to repeat her mother's folly, and to live her mother's life over" (238). Hannah's repetition breaks through cultural difference and collapses geographical distance to assert a universality of experience. Yet only through travel, through global experience, can Hannah – and Mukherjee – construct these connections.

For in *The Holder of the World*, Mukherjee (and her characters) *constructs* connectivities as much as she *exposes* them. As we saw with Hannah contemplating the name Bindu Bashini and connecting it to her own name changes and transformations, Hannah considers her traveling experiences in a narrative of self-referentiality, which

turned survivor with that of Hannah's suggests that one's identity is not completely circumscribed by one's racial or ethnic origin, and it is tempting to read the growing friendship between the women as a paen to universal sisterhood" (37).

ascribes subjectivity to what, on first glance, appears to be an objective restorative historical tale.³⁰ We can consider the exposure of Beigh's "connectedness" as the reading of a restored history, but what about Venn's "clutteredness"? Mukherjee's attention to a collection of narrators and authors (Hawthorne, the Custom House narrator, Beigh, Venn, and Mukherjee herself) does more than highlight their interconnectedness and the polygenetic origins of a single historical account; it calls our attention to the *writing* of that account and, by extension, American and global histories. But as Mukherjee claims in an interview, "It was not that I wanted to write *about* history; I was trying to do the reverse," to have history write the individual and for the individual to imagine history to expose the subjectivity of written history overall. She continues:

As somebody writing in the 1990s I soon became bored creating a straight historical novel, and it wasn't until suddenly Beigh Masters, who has my initials, popped into my head with her boyfriend from MIT...that I was able to possess the novel: it became not a historical novel but *my* novel. So what I'm saying is that, as an individual, I don't really see the point in writing a historical novel that is simply a passive retrieval of past data. I need to experience history and have my readers experience history rather than be told historical information. (Collado-Rodríguez "Naming" 63)

Mukherjee's project thus consists not only in restoration but in the complexities of experiencing that history. By establishing the multifarious connections between individuals and national cultures through globalization, Mukherjee enables complexity and "clutteredness" in the interplay between American history, *The Scarlet Letter*, and *The Holder of the World*. In (re)writing, however, she asks us to consider what happens when the author's focus narrows to one specific individual, event, or text.

³⁰ Francisco Collado-Rodríguez notes, also, the palindromic nature of Hannah's name, making her a mirror of herself and "commenting on the fact that the Other doubles our very selves and that there is no necessity to be scared of that which belongs to another country or which appears to be foreign" ("Facing" 222).

What happens when an author “unclutters” the complexities of history? Dangerously, “uncluttering” often focuses on a unilateral tale that ignores the kind of recursive wandering that we see in Hannah’s account. An “uncluttered” report of Hannah Easton would reveal only monogenetic origins and a text like *The Scarlet Letter* that ignores global forces for the sake of establishing an isolated national literature. As Judie Newman asserts, “What is incontestable is that globalization is as much about the perception of globalization as it is about the phenomenon itself” (5). Therefore, the fear that globalization will dissolve a national culture or the general avoidance and omission of global influences in literary or historical accounts of the past shapes perspective and “unclutters” the past to the detriment of the national culture. By calling attention to the self-referentiality of the characters and of the text of *The Holder of the World*, Mukherjee suggests that *all* historical narrative results from the limitations of individual perspective, even her own. She prefaces the explanation of her project (above) with an act of temporal location: “as somebody writing in the 1990s.” The 1990s, an era fraught with the concerns of globalization and familiar with discourses of deconstruction and postcolonialism, creates a particular American subject, as Mukherjee acknowledges. The seventeenth century and the nineteenth century, when Hannah lived and Hawthorne lived, respectively, created different subjectivities altogether.

Beigh recognizes the particularity of Hannah’s experience:

At the age of thirty, *Hannah was a pure product of her time and place*, her marriage and her training, exposed to a range of experience that would be extreme even in today’s world, but none of it, consciously, had sunk in or affected her outer behavior. I want to think, however, that the forces of the universe (for want of a more precise concept) were working within her. (220, emphasis mine)

In recognizing that despite the motivating “forces of the universe” – perhaps, the transformative forces of globalization – Hannah has flaws that limit her engagement and understanding of India and her Indian relations, Beigh acknowledges her historical and cultural perspective and the effect it has on the way Hannah inscribes meaning onto the world around her. When Hannah first moves to the Coromandel Coast and moves into Henry Hedges’s house, she believes “the household ran itself—Hannah didn’t think of it as being run by the servant woman and the peons” (128). Mukherjee ascribes these incorrect perceptions to Hannah in order to present an American in both positive and negative lights, thereby restoring a multifaceted and more accurate historical perspective. In her name changes and cultural transformation, Hannah demonstrates the American penchant for transformation and adaptation, but her attempts to appeal to Jadav Singh and the Muslim Emperor Aurangzeb in the belief that she has the power to halt an ongoing religious war reveals what Mukherjee considers “the dark side of the American will... to transform the *other*, to control the *other*” (Collado-Rodríguez “Naming” 66). Hannah’s alternating expressions of both the light and dark sides of this American will show a character negotiating her identity in the face of global experience.

However, we must remember that all of Hannah’s interpretations and reactions come to us via Beigh Masters. The only tangible evidence Beigh has of Hannah are depersonalized artifacts such as paintings and records that she researches through her asset hunting. Beigh, then, draws the connections between these artifacts and inscribes Hannah’s perspective on them in order to make meaning of the complexities she has unveiled in her research. Beigh, too, succumbs to the limitations of perception. Because

she “invent[s] secretive excuses” to explain Hannah’s actions and tries to defend or explain away Hannah’s complicity in an orientalist discourse that ignores “the servant woman and the peons” or constructs the East as an exotic place for sexual awakening, Beigh positions herself as a self-righteous researcher. We also cannot forget that Beigh approaches the historical facts and evidence with an agenda – to find a famous diamond, a quest reminiscent of the capitalist and exploitive endeavors of imperialism.

In Venn’s time-collapsing program, Beigh’s goal of finding the Emperor’s Tear and resolving the story she has constructed of Hannah’s time in India leads her exactly to her desired destination, to the moment when Hannah passes the diamond to Bhagmati, who thrusts it into her body to “feel the organs, the flesh, the bowels of history” before dying (283). Although all of the notes and research that Venn input into the program focus on Hannah, Beigh assumes the identity of Bhagmati. Though she had constructed Hannah’s story throughout the novel, infusing it with her own culturally-determined perspective, in the final scene Hannah remains distant and visibly separate while Bhagmati, the character not linked to Beigh through bloodlines, links seventeenth century India and twentieth century America. Beigh identifies wholly with neither Bhagmati nor Hannah but with both in shifting relationships.

Mukherjee thus reveals that Beigh also is “a product of her time and place,” but in using Venn’s program to collapse time and thus focus only on geography, Beigh shows a willingness to reimagine her own production, to trace her own polygenetic origins through both her blood and cultural heritage. Thus, scholars that focus on the potentially Orientalist aspects of Beigh’s narrative and Hannah’s story miss the point. Rajini

Srikanth calls the novel “predictably Orientalist” and suggests that “*no one* is sketched with any nuance in these accounts—the Englishwomen, the Englishmen, and the Indians all are given predictable lines to utter, predictable roles to play, in the grand narrative of East meets West” (190). For Srikanth, Mukherjee presents an absolute and straightforward text containing characters with fixed identities. On the contrary, through the multiple narrations and the self-reflexivity of the characters, Mukherjee calls our attention to the instability of the text and its interpretive possibilities.³¹ In restoring and reconsidering her origins, Beigh can transform her present perceptions – by the end of the novel, she cares little for obtaining the diamond itself; instead she cares for living and experiencing the final interaction between Hannah and Bhagmati and for exposing the global history of *The Scarlet Letter*.

The “clutteredness” and complexity that define the globalized individual affect not only the production of *The Scarlet Letter* but larger national literary discourses as well. *The Holder of the World* obviously seeks to rewrite and restore the historical accuracy of Hawthorne’s classic American novel, but an attempt to “unclutter” the book’s context and view it as a monogenetic entity negates the globalizing forces that could have led to its development. Simon Gikandi situates globalization discourse in not only a cultural context, but, more specifically, a literary one, marking “the premature privileging of literary texts—and the institutions that teach them—as the exemplars of

³¹ For a broader discussion within the context of contemporary American literature, see Collado-Rodríguez’s interview with Mukherjee in which they discuss the “existence of a contemporary literary trend in which historical information goes hand in hand with the implementation of metafictional devices that tend to undermine the reader’s belief in historical truth” (“Naming” 63).

globalization” (632).³² To avoid isolating *The Scarlet Letter* and, by extension, American literature, Mukherjee does not limit herself to the American canon. Instead, she weaves into the narrative both high, classical texts like the story of Sita from the Hindu *Ramayana* and the lower, popular texts like the English Raj narrative and the American captivity narrative of Mary Rowlandson.

The comparative framework established by the conflation of these literary texts seeks not to privilege one over the other or to necessarily universalize the experience; instead, Mukherjee establishes a collaborative interplay made possible only through globalization. This democratic approach to culture is embodied in the Mughal artwork featuring the Salem Bibi that inspires Beigh’s research, for these paintings disallow the dominating focus of a single subject and instead feature an array of figures, demanding a multi-focal perspective.³³ Rebecca Walkowitz suggests that “contemporary literature in an age of globalization is, in many ways, a comparative literature: works circulate in several literary systems at once, and can—some would say, need—to be read within several national traditions” (529). As Hannah (im)migrates to England, India, and back to America, she takes the literary discourses with her, transferring the texts to different cultures and changing them because of the way in which they are read by and within foreign contexts.

One of these mobile texts that Hannah travels with and translates into learned experience, *The Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*

³² Gikandi credits this cultural situating of globalization primarily to Arjun Appadurai and Homi Bhabha. Despite Gikandi’s discussion of the problems with delegating globalization discourse to English departments, the point, for Mukherjee, is that literature in the 1990s had become the locus for these debates and the site for best exposing globalization.

³³ See Drake 68 for further discussion of Mughal artwork in the novel.

(1682) established the captivity narrative drama in American fiction. Mary Rowlandson's abduction and imprisonment by King Philip's warriors reveals the clash of two cultures, one native and the other immigrant and foreign, and is therefore also a product of global movements. The narrative became a seventeenth-century bestseller, exposing a large number of readers to its contents; Hester Manning "brought Hannah the book that she insisted everybody, *everybody*, was reading" (51). The presence of Mary Rowlandson's narrative in *Holder of the World* compels Hannah to compare the story of Indian captivity with both her mother's Nipmuc involvement and her stay with Jadav Singh, again breaking down geographic barriers and creating complex literary associations that she can personally experience. By rendering the name "Indian" ambiguous and locating the story equally in American and in India, Mukherjee rewrites the captivity narrative as well.

Though not a captivity narrative in the same manner as Mary Rowlandson's account, the British Raj narrative shares similarities, for both genres feature the clash of a colonial subject with an exoticized native Indian.³⁴ The subject in both of these narratives is a white woman – Mary Rowlandson, Rebecca, or Hannah. The alleged rape of a white woman by an Indian man serves as a recurring theme in the British Raj narrative, and a fear for the American traveling woman as well, which is perhaps why Rowlandson takes great pains to reassure her readers that no Indian violated her during her captivity.³⁵ Mukherjee upsets the narrative of rape, for both Rebecca and Hannah (and Beigh)

³⁴ I am indebted to Nalini Iyer for information on the British Raj narrative. She lists E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* and Paul Scott's *The Raj Quartet* as prime examples. See especially Iyer 42.

³⁵ Susan L. Roberson provides a more in-depth discussion of Rowlandson and "American Women and Travel Writing," particularly in relation the increased recognition of sexuality for mobile women.

willingly enter into affairs with their Indian men. Hannah, “the Lady[,] pushed the Lion of Devgad down on the carpet” and plays the role of seductress (229).

Even when characters read a text contradictorily, as Hannah and Bhagmati read the narrative of Sita in the *Ramayana*, we see them interacting through literary discourse, influencing one another with their different interpretations. Drawing on the recitations of Venn’s mother, his friend’s grandmother, Hannah, and Bhagmati, Beigh offers multiple versions of Sita’s story, in which the demon Ravana takes Sita captive. Although her husband Rama rescues her, he questions her honor during her imprisonment, and Sita proves herself the exemplar of wifely devotion by throwing herself into the fire. The captivity and rape tropes connect to the Rowlandson and Raj narratives, but more importantly, the Sita story illuminates the collaborative interplay of cultures as different characters interpret it to reflect themselves and their global relationships. Beigh introduces her record of such interpretations by acknowledging that “orality... *is a complex narrative tradition*. Reciters of Sita’s story indulge themselves with closures that suit the mood of their times and their regions” (176). The legend, then, becomes relative to the location in which it is told and to the reciters themselves, based on their experiences.

Although Bhagmati teaches the story of Sita to Hannah, who relates every detail to her own circumstances, their impressions of Hannah differ. Bhagmati regards Sita as a model of ideal womanhood and the storytelling as continuation of tradition: “it’s all that Bhagmati knew, or had ever been taught” (176). Hannah, however, questions the story and Bhagmati’s oral discourse by asking, “Did all this happen, exactly as you’re telling

it?” (172). Though she relates the circumstances of Sita’s capture to her own, Hannah challenges Bhagmati and Sita by inverting the story; as Nalini Iyer notes, “Mukherjee presents Hannah’s story as the opposite of Sita’s” because Jadav Singh does not imprison but rescues Hannah, and she seduces him rather than Jadav Singh abducting her.

Bhagmati, too, resists complete identification with Sita, for she did actually experience rape and dismissal by her family but nevertheless survives on her own with no rescue from a Rama-figure. Both Hannah and Bhagmati thus “appropriate and adapt Sita’s story to reconcile and understand their individual experiences as women” (Iyer 38). The traveling discourse thus establishes complex interactions and relationships between women of different cultures. It resists an act of “uncluttering” that would make it an isolated literature only relevant to Indians. Hannah absorbs the story and carries it back to America, permitting it to influence and transform her not because of its existence but because of its ability to be rewritten and reinterpreted.

Mukherjee’s use of *The Scarlet Letter* works in the same way. She regards *The Holder of the World* as restorative to American cultural history, and she not only restores a global perspective to Hawthorne’s novel but experiences it by her act of rewriting. As Judie Newman argues, “rewriting *The Scarlet Letter* is not so much an act of counterdiscursive contestation” - (thus requiring only historical restoration) - “as a claim to a place at the table with the canonical elite” (15). Mukherjee’s adoption of *The Scarlet Letter* actually reaffirms its place in the American canon because of its ability to be constantly reinvented and reworked by those in different times and from different cultures. She renders the novel adaptable and constantly transformative. These qualities,

the same as those Mukherjee expects from immigrants and all citizens, makes the novel truly American.

Because she identifies the novel with the American character *through* exposing its engagements with globalization, Mukherjee can reaffirm the national culture in hopes of dispelling the fear that globalization will completely dissolve the nation. With literature, she reflects the optimistic argument of Frederick Buell, who in 1998 defined “globalization as a national recovery narrative” that identified U.S. culture as “something different: the attempt to recreate official national culture out of the very heterogeneity and heteroglossia that were supposedly undoing it” (565, 552). A product of globalization, Hannah experiences and supports the literal founding of America, helping create it culturally and politically in 1776. As Jennifer Drake aptly describes the result of *The Holder of the World*, “Mukherjee’s writing creates fullness in short takes, crams a world of detail into fragments of story, compresses constant motion, travel, discontinuous overload. This is how immigration feels; this is how America feels” (70). Mukherjee relishes in the resulting “clutteredness.” She exposes the polygenetic cultural origins of American literature by restoring globalization to the national narrative, and, through the relationship reestablished between the nation and the globe, she also reaffirms the nation.

CONCLUSION: DYNAMIC DESTINY AND AMERICAN LITERATURE

Beigh Masters, the frame narrator of *The Holder of the World*, opens the novel and introduces herself with an admission of multiplicity: “I live in three time zones simultaneously, and I don’t mean Eastern, Central, and Pacific. I mean the past, the present and the future” (5). From the beginning, Beigh orients herself spatially and temporally. “Zones” connotes bordered space, and these temporal distinctions are American, which locates her within the bounds of the United States, or at least in the Western Hemisphere. Yet the story that she weaves throughout the novel journeys from America to England to India and back, and from present to past and back, always suggesting a future for immigrants that will enable and acknowledge global experiences.

Throughout her works, Bharati Mukherjee anticipates such a future through an act of return, searching for the polygenetic origins of both individuals and nations. She reminds Americans that they are all immigrants, if not literally then by inheritance, and she reveals how a host of cultures contributed to the making and continuous refashioning of America. Broadening the scope from individual to nation, a focus she increasingly expands throughout her successive novels, actually allows her to move back to a more personal quest in her later novels. In *Desirable Daughters* (2002) and *The Tree Bride* (2004), Mukherjee mythologizes a progressive Indian ancestor and the lives of herself and her two sisters living different lives across the globe. Throughout her fiction, Mukherjee’s focus is particularly literary, which leads her to the written evidence of cultural propagation and mythology, and she explicitly evokes other literary genres and works in order to rewrite them and her immigrant characters into these cultural

discourses, melding them together to create new subjects.

Yet in recovering the polygenetic origins of the American nation, its culture, and its individuals, it seems that Mukherjee acknowledges the dissolution of the nation as a result of globalization, where the transnationality of individuals supersedes and breaks the boundaries they cross. Such a view bestows upon Mukherjee's work – its development in response to globalization through discourses of multiculturalism and transnationalism and her practice of revisiting the American canon to show its cultural multiplicity – a sense of defensiveness or delusion about the solidity of the nation, not a sense of celebration in its adaptability.

But Mukherjee's project is not one of privilege. If the relationships she strives to establish between the individual and the nation are those of reciprocity and constant negotiation, then the relationship between America and the globe is as well; as Arif Dirlik writes, both “the globalization of the USA...and the transnationalization of American societies...have to do with the ‘worlding’ of the USA – bringing the USA into the world as well as bringing the world into the USA,” which “present[s] important challenges on how to speak about the USA without falling into the ideology and hegemony of Empire (“American” 288). Mukherjee dispels Empire models of center and periphery by showing not only how America adapts in response to globalization³⁶ but how other nations change as well. India, the typical starting point for many of her characters, develops, too: in *Jasmine*, Prakash Vihj adopts a liberal tone and begins to reject the traditional matrimonial roles that limit the woman, and the war between the Hindu Raja Jadav Singh

³⁶ I claim that America “responds” to globalization instead of created it in a McWorld model (see Szeman) because of Mukherjee's privileging of interconnectedness between cultures and polygenetic origins, thereby rejecting globalization as a periodizing term and a discourse distinct from national development.

and the Muslim Emperor Aurangzeb in *The Holder of the World* shows the physical clashes that define a nation by conquest. The connections Mukherjee draws between India and America reveal, as Wai Chee Dimock identifies them, “input channels, kinship networks, routes of transit, and forms of attachment—connective tissues binding America to the rest of the world” that are “*active on both ends*” (3, emphasis added).

In depicting a world in flux but still identifying with the United States, Mukherjee rejects the supposition that Americans do not need any outside knowledge of chronology or history³⁷ and reveals the complexity of the nation’s interactions with different literatures from the *Ramayana* to *Jane Eyre* and with different sciences from time travel to the chaos theory of physics. Chaos theory, a “scientific interpretation of the universe” that Mukherjee infuses into her novels, posits that “perhaps behind the apparent chaotic condition of life and behind many irregular physical systems lies order, manifested in complexity” (Collado-Rodríguez “Facing” 218). It is often associated with the butterfly effect, in which one small and apparently minor action can significantly influence a sizeable event across the world. One individual’s story can thus create or change a nation because one person, herself a product of various discourses, pushes on the complex systems that traverse the globe. For Mukherjee, these systems and the inherent relationship within, such as that between individual and nation, constantly shift: “I believe there is an underpinning structure but not in a stable sense: my key phrase here—also related to chaos theory—would be *dynamic destiny*. You are given choices but you also have to cope with the choice” (Collado-Rodríguez “Naming” 69). Identification with

³⁷ See Dimock 2-3 for a discussion on how American Studies in the university has adopted this limited view in its approach to American literature.

America is thus a choice; American mythologies and literature particularly allow the kind of recursion and rescripting that permit Mukherjee to reveal the complexities of national-global interaction, and she “copes” with her national choice by inserting herself and immigrants into an established yet developing national literature.

By choosing but not privileging, Mukherjee works in a temporal and spatial continuum like that described by Thomas Bender: “[r]ather than shifting our focus from the nation to some other social/territorial unit, we would do well to imagine a spectrum of social scales, both larger and smaller than the nation and *not excluding the nation*” (8, emphasis added). In discussing and responding to globalization, the nation does not give way to the globe, it merely becomes another part of a larger comparative framework on which the individual and the globe are also parts. Using such a framework to read the complex relationships Mukherjee reveals in her fiction allows us to see the metanarrative of American literature that she establishes. She broadens the literary perspective by writing a new type of literature that Rebecca Walkowitz calls “comparison literature,” which “ask[s] us to understand comparison as the work of scholars, to be sure, but also” – and, for Mukherjee, especially – “as the work of books that analyze...the transnational contexts of their own production, circulation, and study” (534).³⁸ Walkowitz’s formulation fits into what seems to be a growing trend in literary studies absorbing and interpreting globalization. Wai Chee Dimock’s and Laurence Buell’s collection, *Shades of the Planet*, treats American literature as an “entry point” or subset to the planet and

³⁸ Inderpal Grewal’s *Transnational America* and even Arjun Appadurai’s *Modernity at Large* are deeply concerned with moving discourses and circulation of texts, ideas, and people, which leads to authors’ consciousness and writing focusing on these issues, as applied in Walkowitz’s comparison literature construct.

world literature, and Dimock endeavors to prove that American literature can only be understood *through* the histories of other nations and cultures (8; *Through Other Continents* 3).

As part of this new American literature that recognizes itself and its citizens as belonging to a complex global system, Mukherjee's fiction also asks whether other nations could do the same. Despite its status as a younger nation, could other national literatures identify America as one part of their origins? If so, does this displace or destroy a Western hegemony premised on the center-periphery model? If Mukherjee's comparison literature model can be adopted and further developed – as she continues to do in her own work – the adoption would further demonstrate the adaptability of American literature and culture, its ability to constantly negotiate itself and its relationship to an increasingly connected (and *connecting*) world. Immigrants who choose America as part of their “dynamic destiny,” too, can invest in and influence a nation that allows them to celebrate their origins and reform themselves from exile to immigrant to citizen and back again.

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