

BHARATI MUKHERJEE: THE "WOMAN" QUESTION IN *WIFE AND JASMINE*

We face neither East nor West: we face forward.

(Kwame Nkrumah: conference speech—Spain, 1960)

Bharati Mukherjee situates nationalism in terms of its discursive practices. But, unlike Narayan, Rao and even Rushdie himself, Mukherjee focuses attention on the position of "woman" in relation to these discursive practices. Narayan gave his deviant female characters Western names in order to excise them from the South Indian register. Rao rendered the woman an object rather than an individual who might be capable of achieving subjecthood. Even though Rushdie astutely examines the operations of nationalism, he does so from the male point of view; it is a man, and not a woman, who is granted the challenge to dismantle nationalist discourses in *Midnight's Children*. Contrarily, her prime interest resting upon the situation of the Indian immigrant woman in the United States, Bharati Mukherjee attempts a representation of women in her writing; at the same time, she draws this representation into the sphere of nationalist concerns.

In the novels of Bharati Mukherjee, one detects a departure from those concerns with literary translation which played so significant a part in the writing of Narayan, Rao and Rushdie. Instead, with Mukherjee, translation signifies the very condition of existence of the Indian immigrant. Even more, as a practice, it signifies transculturation, or the shifting between two available discourses by the once-colonized subject. A product of both colonial and post-colonial Indian history, Bharati Mukherjee comments on her generation that:

We were born too late and not late enough
to be real Indians. In the colonial ambiguities
of the mid-forties we acquired our monstrous
habit of loving paradoxes. We loved both the

freedom fighters and the red-faced officers
who carried bullets and pistols.

(*Days and Nights in Calcutta*, 223)

The necessarily contradictory separation of “we” and “other” in the once-colonized subject has led, with Bharati Mukherjee, to a fluidity of nationalist identifications. In an essay, she sets up the terms of her project as a writer:

I would rather be cashed in the other legacy
of the colonial writer, and that is his or her
duality. From childhood we learned how to
be two things simultaneously: to be the
dispossessed as well as the dispossessor.
In textbooks we read of “our” great empire
and triumphs (meaning British), “our” great
achievements in the arts (meaning the Moslem
Moguls) and “our” treachery in the Sepoy
Mutiny (meaning “native” troops). History
forced us to see ourselves as both the “we”
and the “other”, and the language reflected
our simultaneity. In time, after independence
the mutiny became the first great patriotic
uprising, a way of liberation...Perhaps it is
this history-mandated training in seeing
myself as “the other” that now heaps on me
a fluid set of identities denied to most of my
mainstream American counterparts.

(*Immigrant Writing: Give Us Your Maximalists*”, 29)

Here, Bharati Mukherjee is theorizing the contradictory colonial legacy that mandates the fact that the colonized subject sees herself as both “we” (the colonial subject) and the “other” (the colonized Indian “native”). She is articulating the type of contradictory nationalist identification that went generally unacknowledged with an earlier generation of Indian writers. By choosing first to

problematic notions of monolithic “Indianness” by splitting it up into “we” and “other”, and then to open up, within a contradictory space, “a fluid set of identities”, Mukherjee initiates a theory about immigrant writing as a positive force committed to a reinvention and multiplicity of perspectives that together might challenge hegemonic nationalist discourses. She also positions herself against the stability of mainstream American writers, referring not to the post-modern fiction of late capitalist North America, but to the minimalist style of American writing in the seventies which, she claims, has now led to the well-packaged, but thematically vacuous, *American novel*.

Mukherjee’s challenge to hegemonic nationalist discourses takes at least two forms. The first is her examination of the Indian woman who, in the Indian geographical and cultural context, takes upon herself the roles of Sita and Savitri (Indian mythological figures who powerfully represent the ideal Indian wife in Indian socioculture, and who played a large part in Rao’s setting up of normative femininity). In the radical breakdown of the traditional ethos of Sita-Savitri upon the Indian woman’s emigration to the United States may be found Mukherjee’s challenge to nationalist discourses. For this breakdown has the effect of targeting Indian nationalism as a patriarchal structure which manifests itself in the maintenance and celebration of traditional Indian femininity.

The second aspect of Mukherjee’s challenge to hegemonic nationalist discourses shifts to the United States and lies in her re-examination of North American ideological concepts of the “melting pot”. These concepts emerge as shallow because they claim to include gender-stratified otherness non-problematically. In fact, there are, Mukherjee maintains, immigrant women who are not all of them quite “meltable”, who do not desire to “melt down” in a country in which immigration itself has moved from the traditional (European) stock to the non-traditional (Asian) kind [These descriptions are from the interview of Mukherjee with Geeta Kothari]. Thus Mukherjee’s characters may be seen to signal a critique of patriarchal Indian nationalism; at the same time,

however, Mukherjee also produces a critique of American nationalist discourse of "the melting pot". In the case of Dimple in *Wife*, a double disintegration on the Indian and the American fronts leads to her mental breakdown; in *Jasmine*, the main character frees herself from received notions of herself because she begins to see them as mere constructs, and this recognition enables her to then re-imagine and reinvent herself in new modes of thought and behaviour that are neither Indian nor American but both and also beyond both of them.

Having studied the two forms of challenge to hegemonic nationalism that Mukherjee offers in *Wife* and *Jasmine*, we will be in a position to examine her stance on immigrant writing, which posits reinvention of the "self" as "other" and, consequently, identity as a matter of multiple "fluid set of *identities*" (emphasis mine). It eventually points to a meaningful, yet as we will see, problematic, critical intervention in mainstream First World literature.

Born in the mid-forties, Bharati Mukherjee left Calcutta for an M.F.A. and then a Ph. D. in English at the University of Iowa. She taught creative writing at Columbia, New York University, Queens College, and McGill University in Montreal, before assuming a professorship at the University of California at Berkeley. Viewed together, Mukherjee's novels like *Tiger's Daughter*, *Wife*, *Jasmine*, and short stories—*Middleman and Other Stories*—constitute a study of both different and similar Third World perspectives both at home and abroad, where her characters are positioned as marginalized in a dominant culture.

In *Wife* (1975), Mukherjee writes about a young woman's marriage and subsequent emigration to the U.S. At its start, the main character, Dimple, is portrayed as a middle-class teenage Bengali girl on the brink of an arranged marriage. The onset of Dimple's puberty coincides with another anxiety, that of presenting herself as marriageable material for prospective husbands:

On sunny mornings the sight of boxer shorts

hanging out to dry on a neighbor's balcony
made her blush. At night she hallucinated.
Sometimes when she entered the bathroom
in the dark, the toilet seat twitched like a
coiled snake.

(*Wife*, 12)

At the same time, Dimple is obsessed with the fact that her breasts are too small; convinced that she will become an embarrassment to her family as a spinster, she idealizes herself as Sita, the ideal wife.

Dimple models herself after Sita, both before marriage by preparing for the role and after, when

[H]is disapproval was torture; all her life she
had been trained to please. He expected her,
like Sita, to jump into fire if necessary.

(*Wife*, 28)

Her dilemma is that she is caught between two discourses: the traditional discourse (of Sita), which she has internalized, and the progressive discourse of belligerent female editors of magazines in English, which she reads while trying to improve her English. The former is on the brink of collapse because her attempt to be the perfect wife is impossible in its idealism; the latter is inaccessible to her because her lower middle-class background and lack of higher education inhibit entry to a world of politicized women's movements. In silent protest against what she sees as an invasion of her body, and in preparation for her emigration to the U.S., where she wants to make a new start away from the family of her in-laws, Dimple secretly aborts her baby by skipping rope in the bathroom until she drops.

In New York, her life turns into a nightmarish round of Indian dinner parties, sprinkled generously with avid television viewing and reading of *Better*

Homes and Gardens. Her inability to cope with the newness of her surroundings is exacerbated by her nostalgia for home and her husband's refusal to let her work outside the house. Among the people around her are supposedly liberated Indian women like Ina, who, to Dimple's envy, is comfortable around Americans and who belongs to women's groups. Ina exemplifies acculturation at a certain cost, but she is beyond the pale for Dimple, for whom wearing pants means feeling naked:

If I wear pants to eat pizza in the winter, who
knows what I'll be wearing to eat at the Diary
Queen next summer.

(*Wife*, 155).

I can't keep up with you people. I haven't
read the same kind of books or anything...
I just like to cook and watch TV and
embroider, and would you believe it, I got
ninety-eight percent once in my needlework
class?

(*Wife*, 169)

Dimple is increasingly unable to draw distinction between television and the real world, which is itself unreal to her. Living in a high-rise apartment building and watching television news about rape, murder, and theft, she finds the idea of violence gradually becoming an irresistible temptation to her, a way to "make one extravagant gesture in her life". (153). Finally, she cracks under the pressure of maintaining a traditional role in an unfamiliar culture and stabs her husband to death.

Mukherjee's next novel, *Jasmine* (1989), narrates the story of an impoverished farmer's daughter called Jyoti, who is born in the village of Hasnapur, Punjab, India, to which her parents moved from Lahore during the Partition. The fifth unwelcome daughter of a mother who bore nine children and

who tried to strangle her at birth, Jyoti grows up to be a good reader and writer. She is the first girl to be taught English by her schoolteacher:

“God’s cruel”, my mother complained, “to
waste brains on a girl”.

(Jasmine, 40)

When she is seven, she is told by an astrologer that she will be a widow. This prediction turns out to be accurate.

At the age of fourteen, Jyoti marries Prakash Vigh, a city boy from Amritsar who is about to graduate and send off job applications to the U.S. What impresses her most about him is that he speaks English:

To want English was to want more than
you had been given at birth, it was to want
the world.

(Jasmine, 68)

Prakash is a well-meaning, ambitious modern man who wants Jyoti to make a break from her feudal and patriarchal past. He renames her Jasmine in order to make her “a new kind of city woman” (77). He also refuses to have children because she is only fourteen, and her “kind of feudal compliance was what still kept India an unhealthy and backward nation” (77). Living in a tiny apartment and saving money for Prakash’s study in the U.S., Jasmine and Prakash are caught in the communalist crossfire between Hindus and Muslims in Jullundhar, Punjab. Prakash is eventually shot in a sari store by a Khalsa Lion, member of a militant Sikh group, while protecting Jasmine from the group’s denigration of her as sari-clad prostitute.

Jasmine refuses the doomed life of widowhood because her husband had liberated her from cultural backwardness:

Prakash had taken Jyoti and created Jasmine, and Jasmine would complete the mission of Prakash.

(*Jasmine*, 97)

Prakash had been admitted to a Florida university and had already obtained an American visa. With her brother's help, Jasmine forges documents and takes an illegal chartered flight to Europe, from where a trawler carries her and other illegal immigrants to the Gulf Coast of Florida. Upon their arrival, the captain of the trawler, a Vietnam War veteran, takes her to a seedy, deserted motel where he rapes her; soon after, she stabs him. Before he had touched and consequently adulterated the contents of her suitcase (the suit Prakash and she had bought for his stay in America, a white sari marking her status of widowhood, and a small statuette of the god Ganpati), her intention had been to walk to the university Prakash had been admitted to and set fire to herself. But now she sets fire to her suitcase, burning what she sees as her past.

In Florida, she is taken over by a kind Christian woman who ensures her passage to New York. After a depressing stay with an Indian family there, she finds a job as a live-in babysitter for the girl of an American couple. Taylor Hayes is a professor of particle physics and his wife, Wylie Taylor, is a book editor. In their apartment, Jasmine starts to feel "American":

I wanted to become the person they thought
they saw: humorous, intelligent, refined,
affectionate. Not illegal, not murderer, not
widowed, raped, destitute, fearful.

(*Jasmine*, 171)

As the marriage between Taylor and Wylie is falling apart, Jasmine falls in love with Taylor:

I fell in love with his world, its ease, its
careless confidence and graceful self-
absorption.

(*Jasmine*, 171)

He calls her Jase but he doesn't want to change her:

He didn't want to sanitize the foreignness
...I changed because I wanted to. (185)

I bloomed from a diffident alien with forged
documents into adventurous Jase. (186)

But into this peaceful scenario walks Sukhwinder, the Khalsa Lion who had shot her husband. Fearful of being recognized by him, Jasmine flees to Elsa County, Iowa, where she knew Duff, the adopted girl she was taking care of, had been born.

In Iowa, she finds a job in a bank and meets Bud Ripplemeyer, a middle-aged banker, whom she marries. He calls her Jane. Jasmine says:

I have had a husband for each of the
women I have been. Prakash for Jasmine,
Taylor for Jase, Bud for Jane.

(*Jasmine*, 197)

They adopt a fourteen-year-old Vietnamese boy whom they call Du. Jasmine connects strongly with Du; she sees them both as marginalized in a dominant white American culture. The depressed agricultural economy in the mid-West makes Bud's job as a banker precarious. He is shot by a bankrupt client and paralyzed from his legs down. Jane continues to take care of him, fending off his jealous ex-wife and mothering Du. But when Du hears from a Vietnamese friend

that his sister has arrived in Los Angeles, he leaves Iowa to join her. Some days after, Taylor and Duff arrive from New York; they are en route to California and ask Jasmine to come along. Leaving a message for Bud with his ex-wife, Karin—"I have to see Du...I'm not leaving Bud...I'm going somewhere" (240)—Jasmine leaves with Taylor and Duff in their car. What awaits her is "the promise of America"; what she leaves behind is "old-world dutifulness" (240).

In *Wife and Jasmine*, what seems to be taking place is an examination of the Sita-Savitri socio-cultural role in India and the status of Asian immigration in the U.S. One may ask how, in these two narratives, Mukherjee challenges either Indian or American nationalism in her examination of the Sita-Savitri Indian role or her representation of the U.S. from the Asian immigrant's perspective. To a small extent, the answer to this question is implicit in the phrasing of this question. The breakdown of a traditional socio-cultural role model entails a certain failure of nationalist discourse about that role model; cultural representation from a marginalized perspective (that of the immigrant's) brings home the conditions under which this perspective is, in fact, marginalized in dominant nationalist discourses.

What should be at stake for us, though, is a larger historical process by which dominant representations (of "Sita", of "the melting pot") become the signifiers of what can then be called national cultures. How are these representations constructed and how are they deployed as nationalist?

In the case of the colonized Indian subcontinent, what was considered "non-Western" was consistently extracted as "nationalist" by Indian intellectuals. Partha Chatterjee, historian and member of the Subaltern Studies collective in India, has shown this move to be a characteristic one, and one that complicated the entire nationalist quest for difference. Indian nationalism defined its agenda of "non-Western" difference within the very structures of Western nineteenth-

century logical discourse. More recently, Julie Stephens has studied this contradiction in the context of nationalist female representations:

...the rejection of ‘the West’, including Western women, has been part of a nationalist tradition. The opposition between the ‘Indian woman’ as chaste spirituality or maternal sensuality and the unchaste, cold, sexual consumerism of the ‘Western woman’ served to delineate a feminine space that had *fortunately escaped the effects of colonialism*, a space one could designate as “Indian” and, because “non-Western”, ‘national’.

(Stephens, 103)

It is in this context that Sita and Savitri figure largely in Indian nationalist thought. As “non-Western” signifiers of ideal femininity, they should be understood as part of the nationalist agenda of creating difference. And even though Gandhi worked to empower the Indian “Sita” who had subjugated herself for the sake of ideal “non-Western” femininity, Stephens shows that, still, “the liberating experience for women is that of nationalism” (104). In the literary context of female representation, a similar nationalist agenda extracted the “non-Western” side of the Western/non-Western division. Not by accident did Indian critics seek idealized representations of women from writers like Raja Rao; R.K. Narayan did not give his deviant female characters Western names by mere chance. Idealized female representations gratify because they point to a space that is “Indian” as opposed to Western; female characters who stray from the ideal are best rendered as Western(ized). However, in the history of the Western literature and culture also, women have been idealized as the “fairer sex”, as the object of male veneration. Hence, the point needs to be made that, as a patriarchal discourse, nationalism perhaps utilizes female idealizations in order to put a national culture’s best foot forward, as it were. What seems to be most efficacious about this utilization is that it conveniently ensures different and multiple

manipulations of the female subject, who does not self-represent but is represented in national culture as the culture's most perfect emblem. The issue of gender that has been discussed in connection with Indian nationalist practice should be seen as applying to Mukherjee's depiction of American nationalist culture in a slightly different manner. While this issue is too broad to be dealt with here, it seems that dominant discourses of nationalism, including American, have always tended to pit themselves against, yet depend upon, a functionally oppositional Other for their own articulation. In this manner, the function of the black female slave in nineteenth-century American culture may be compared with that of the contemporary Indian immigrant woman in that both serve as indispensable negative signifiers for what white America was or is not.

If one recognizes the discursive role that Sita and Savitri myths play in setting up a powerful tradition of Indian nationalism, one will see how in *Jasmine* and to a small extent, *Wife*, the breakdown of the Sita-Savitri discourse signals a breakdown of the aspect of Indian nationalism that wrapped itself around idealized female representation.

In the *Ramayana*, Sita is the wife of the prince Rama of Ayodhya. Due to the plotting of a jealous stepmother, Rama was sent into exile along with his wife and brother. While in exile in the forest, Sita is abducted by king Ravana of Lanka. After a bloody battle, Rama rescues her. Upon their return to Ayodhya, Rama is crowned as king, but his people's suspicions surrounding the possibly adulterous relationship between Sita and Ravana lead Rama to banish Sita from his kingdom. Rather than bear this strain on her blemish-free character, Sita prepares to burn herself on a funeral pyre in full sight of the people. But the fire god intervenes and saves her. Sita's trial by fire stands as proof of her purity and innocence. In a sequel to the *Ramayana*, there is another cruel twist to the story. Rama's subjects are not entirely convinced by her trial by fire, and Sita, who is pregnant by that time, is exiled from Rama's court. Many years later, she has the

brief satisfaction of seeing her twins recognized by Rama as his sons, at which time Mother Earth acknowledges her innocence by swallowing her.

Another popular myth valorizes Savitri, wife of prince Satyavan. Earlier in life, Savatri had been warned by a seer that Satyavan was to die at the end of a year; undeterred, she marries him. At the appointed time, the Spirit of Death, Yama, comes to carry him away, but he is so impressed by Savatri's fearless devotion to her husband that he rewards her by returning Satyavan to her.

To view these myths as historically distanced from contemporary Indian society is to forget their ideological role of reminding middle-class Indian women to their true estate as wives: to serve the husband is to attain true salvation. In *Days and Nights in Calcutta*, Mukherjee discusses the Indian socio-cultural context in which these two mythological women play such a dominant role:

The trouble, it seemed to me, was that even
in the India of 1973-74 with its woman Prime
Minister and its impressive lists of women in
politics, medicine, law, journalism, and labor
unions, the average woman modeled her life
not on these modern examples, but on Sita and
Savitri of ancient Hindu literature. The stories
of Sita and Savitri were kept alive by oral
tradition, while the modern models were
accessible to only the urban few who could
read newspapers.

(*Days and Nights in Calcutta*, 231)

In both *Wife* and *Jasmine*, Mukherjee sustains a criticism of the traditional Sita-Savitri function in patriarchal Indian society. The extent to which this function is internalized by the young Indian girl coming of age in a traditional Indian society is made clear in Dimple and Jasmine. Dimple's self-abnegation does not allow her to break out of an ill-matched marriage to an uncaring husband precisely because

the strength of the Sita tradition overrides any consideration of her own subjecthood. Torn between the two discourses of Sita and women's liberation (the "modern model" Mukherjee refers to), she tends towards the former because it is recognizable to her. Even though Jasmine is told by an astrologer that her husband will not survive the marriage, she marries him, much as the mythical Savitri marries Satyavan against all odds. Her wifely devotion takes her to the U.S., but already the power of the Savitri discourse has been muted. Prakash envisions a modern India which will transcend feudalism, sexism, caste, class and religion. His making over of Jasmine is part of his making over of himself as a citizen of this new India. Hence, even though the determinant here is still problematically male in nature, Prakash attempts to force Jasmine away from the Savitri discourse of self-abnegation. Yet in time even this "modern" discourse gives way to an "American" one.

Mukherjee's America is the immigrant's America. Her concept of the U.S. relies on this country's sheer power to constantly transform itself by offering to Asian immigrants the possibility of remaking themselves, not as Indo-Americans who have to fit into a "native" culture, but as individuals who make themselves over as Americans in their own image. Jasmine constructs her own image of what America signifies to her.

Equipped with the availability of this kind of self-constructing fluidity in the U.S., Jasmine does not seem to mind that it is the men who name her Jase or Jane, for with each new naming comes her opportunity to measure the old name against the new, to mark both the gaps and the continuities between the discourses that claim to contain her. She eventually leaves Bud precisely because "her genuine foreignness frightens him", and he tries to "Americanize", to domesticize her by calling her Jane:

Me Bud, you Jane. I didn't get it at first.
He kids. Calamity Jane. Jane as in Jane
Russell, not Jane as in Plain Jane.

Whereas Dimple does not subvert the Sita role so much as she becomes a victim of it, Jasmine does explode the Savitri role. While Dimple is a victim of the nation-making, Sita-recreating process, Jasmine does, for our purposes, suggest a substantial threat to the Indian nationalism which discursively constructed the Sita-Savitri role model as a dominant representation of national culture. For without losing her otherness in the U.S., Jasmine is still not simply "non-Western". She inhabits new discourses with ease, without forgetting the way in which earlier ones constituted her identity. She seems to recognize that identity is inseparable from the discursive function that it performs. Identity is a textual construct in *Jasmine*; as such, it can be made and remade, even become a set of many identities, since discursive functions vary from one national culture to another. To Prakash, Jasmine is a modern Indian woman; to Taylor, Jase is a foreigner to be respected for her otherness; to Bud, Jane is the American whose foreignness has been neutralized. The value of Jasmine's fluidity is that it focuses our attention on the discursive functions of national identity, even as it refuses to be appropriated by dominant and monolithic nationalist discourses.

Another dominant nationalist discourse is American. In the case of the U.S., Mukherjee's questioning of dominant representations of national culture is clear. At least one of these representations is concerned with the mainstream American ideology of "the melting pot". This ideology conveys the idea that people of different cultures blend in the U.S. into a pleasing blur of white, red, brown, black and yellow hues. Having accounted for minorities in this genial, uncritical way of non-problematic domestication, the ideology is at liberty to dispense with them. In fact, however, even the mainstream American concept of "the melting pot" has traditionally been based on a white immigrant experience in the U.S. "Who", asks Mukherjee "speaks for us, the new Americans, from non-traditional immigrant countries?" (*Immigrant Writing: Give Us Your Maximalists*, 1).

This question is appropriate at a time when minority immigrants in the U.S. are predominantly Asians and Chicanos, not Europeans. Speaking of her experience of formal naturalization at the Federal District Court House in New York, Mukherjee says:

The old pieties of immigration no longer hold. A Norman Rockwell would have been hard-pressed to find the immigrant-icons of an earlier era—the hollow-eyed and sunken-cheeked were not in evidence. There was a notable lack of old ladies in black babushkas, with wrinkled, glistening cheeks. (Their closest ethnic embodiment, a beautiful Russian woman sitting in front of me, was reading Nabokov's "Speak, Memory" during the long waiting period.) A Dominican man next to me joked as we sat down after pledging allegiance, "Hey, now we can make a citizens' arrest!" Behind me, Chinese teen-agers passed copies of *The New Yorker*.

(*Immigrant Writing: Give Us Your Maximalists*, 1)

In the same essay, speaking of these non-traditional naturalized citizens of what Mukherjee calls a "new America", she repeats her urgent question: "Such energy, such comedy, such sophistication and struggle and hunger to belong—yet who tells their stories?" (*Immigrant Writing: Give Us Your Maximalists*, 28).

To a large extent, Jasmine speaks from the immigrant perspective of the Other in white mid-Western America:

In Baden, the farmers are afraid to suggest I'm different. They've seen the aerograms

I receive the strange lettering I can decipher.
To them, alien knowledge means intelligence.
They want to make me familiar. In a pinch,
they'll admit that I might look a little different,
that I'm a "dark-haired girl" in a naturally
blonde county...I'm from a generic place,
"over there"...I'm not a Lutheran, which
isn't to say I might not be Presbyterian.

(*Jasmine*, 33)

What Jasmine is describing in a tongue-in-cheek manner here is the process by which difference, otherness or foreignness are comprehended by the farmers of Baden, "a basic German community" (11). Their tendency is to ignore otherness by domesticating it ("They want to make me familiar") non-problematically in their own recognizable terms. She looks only "a little different" in "a naturally blonde county"; she might have come from anywhere "over there"; she might or might not be Presbyterian.

An even more dangerous appropriation of otherness takes place in encounters between Jasmine's adopted Vietnamese son, Du, and his high school history teacher, Mr. Skola. Mr. Skola recounts one of these to Jasmine at a PTA meeting:

"I tried a little Vietnamese on him", Mr. Skola
went on, "and he just froze up".
I suppressed my shock, my disgust. This
country has so many ways of humiliating,
of disappointing. How *dare* you? What must
he have thought? His history teacher in Baden,
Iowa, just happens to know a little street
Vietnamese? Now where would he have
picked it up? There are no harmless,
compassionate ways to remake oneself.

(*Jasmine*, 29)

Mr. Skola's insensitivity to Du's attempts at remaking himself as an American and his callousness in trying out on Du his white American knowledge of Vietnamese acquired during the war typify the attitude of a dominant culture towards immigrant minorities.

The process by which a mainstream dominant culture dispenses with Jasmine and Du is not limited to a sketchy social study of the imaginary Baden county. Instead, this process is spread across the country, but it concentrates its practice in the mid-West and especially along the border with Latin America. Jasmine and Du watch a cable channel's news program showing an INS raid on a lawn factory in Texas. The INS agents capture two illegal aliens from Mexico who are working at cane furniture for "some insane wage" (27). One Mexican throws up, but the "INS fellow wouldn't uncuff him long enough to wipe the muck off his face" (27):

A woman in a flowered dress said, "I
don't think they're bad people, you
know. It's just that there's too many of
them. Yesterday I opened the front door
to get the morning papers and there were
three of them using my yard as their
personal toilet."

The reporter, a thin, tense man with razor
burns, stopped a woman in an Olds. "To
tell the truth", she said, "I don't know
what to feel anymore". The reporter got
ready to move off to someone else, but
she stopped him. "Steve, my husband,
lost his job. That was last November.
We were doing so good, now we can't
make the house and car payments. Are
you listening, Mr. President?"

(*Jasmine*, 27)

This news report sets up the ideological relations between immigrant and dominant groups, and in doing so brings in the third factor of the repressive apparatus of state control in the form of the INS (the Immigration and Naturalization Service). The first woman makes clear her moral stance ("I don't think they're bad people"), speaking as one decent white woman to one decent white reporter. Categorizing Mexican illegal aliens as "they" and "them" allows her the distance between her own clear-cut identity and an amorphous mass of brown bodies which dirty her front-yard like animals. The second woman insinuates a connection between her husband's unemployment and the presence of Mexicans in the state. Jasmine responds to her by shouting to herself:

What kind of crazy connection are
you trying to make between Mexicans
and car payments? Who's the victim
here? And what about Du? Mr. President,
what about Du?

(*Jasmine*, 27)

Supposedly impersonal, the news report is heavily biased, since only the mainstream white populace gets to represent itself; Jasmine goes unheard in her representation of Du. The INS exerts its authority in a similarly biased manner, with its ruthless treatment of the Mexican workers as animals. The problem is that the "border's like Swiss cheese and all the mice are squirming through the holes". (*Jasmine*, 28).

Mukherjee's attack on American nationalism in *Jasmine* demonstrates that one of its dominant representations is of a white North America in which coloured immigrants are just barely accommodated on the margins. It is these coloured immigrants, specifically, but not limited to, female immigrants, whom she wishes to speak for when she maps out the creative project of an "ex-colonial, once-third-world author" in the essay *Immigrant Writing: Give Us Your*

Maximalists! Colonial history had, she maintains, forced her to see herself in the dual terms of “self” and “other”. The perspective of the “other”, when the “other” shifts from the colonized Indian “native” under Britain’s imperialist campaign to the Asian immigrant in white America, unleashes in her “a fluid set of identities denied to most of [her] mainstream American counterparts” (*Immigrant Writing: Give Us Your Maximalists*, 29). In her memoirs, *Days and Nights in Calcutta*, Mukherjee discusses the particular moment at which she discovers this shift in perspective. She finds herself helplessly irate at a socially upper-class man’s rough treatment of a poor laborer on a Calcutta street because

the rickshaw puller near Nizam’s was
suddenly not just a Muslim resident of
Calcutta slum, but he was also me, a
timid, brown naturalized citizen in a
white man’s country that was growing
increasingly hostile to ‘colored’ immigrants.

(Days and Nights in Calcutta, 250).

However, in a manner that is problematic and that would be discussed later, Mukherjee’s concerns with the marginalization of immigrants in dominant culture seem, during certain moments, to override, even obfuscate, her concerns with gender and class.

What Mukherjee’s re-examination of the American nationalist discourse of “the melting pot” finally leads her to is the outline of a new literary project that will revise the contours of mainstream American fiction:

The problem appears to be that both inside
and outside America, “American fiction”
has become synonymous with the mainstream,
big advance, well-promoted novel or story
collection, and that American fiction—clever,
mannered, brittle—has lost the power to

transform the world's imagination.

(*Days and Nights in Calcutta*, 28)

Caught up in the mechanisms of big-time capitalist publishing, American writing has failed to notice that "an epic was washing up on its shore" (*Days and Nights in Calcutta*, 28), in the form of the hundreds of untold stories of non-traditional immigrants. It is, Mukherjee rightly insists, this new scene "which was never been in greater need of new perspectives." (*Days and Nights in Calcutta*, 29).

A serious qualification to her project enters when Mukherjee claims immense ease in representing any non-traditional minority from any social class in her fiction:

Chameleon-skinned, I discover my material
over and across the country, and up and down
the social ladder.

(*Days and Nights in Calcutta*, 29)

While it would be a mistake to make her own privileged background, both in India and the U.S., the sole determinant for a politically correct reading which eventually denounces her, the "we" that Mukherjee refers to when she talks about a generation of "ex-colonial" people is a highly specific group of socially upper-class Bengali individuals. She refers to her "Brahminical elegance" as constituted of "top family, top school, top caste, top city" (28); *Days and Nights in Calcutta* quite adequately reveals that the social "set" she acquaints herself with is evenly upper class in social structure. Mukherjee does not address how this specific privilege allows her to jump to the generalized "we" of India or of an entire Third World spectrum. Further, the "we" of this beleaguered spectrum is finally and strangely gender- and class-free. For one may ask, in what sense exactly does a rickshaw puller in a Calcutta slum speak to her of her own situation as "other", university professor of English, in America? How and why does the connection between the two "others" override any consideration of gender and social class?

It can be suggested that to read Mukherjee's immigrant writing in relation to the larger issue of her representation of gender and social class need not necessarily be seen as limiting or as negating the entire effort of her challenge to hegemonic nationalist discourses. Instead, the point can be made that this relation between writer and text opens up the most irreducibly contradictory space that the Westernized woman of privilege who is an "ex-colonial, once-third-world author" operates within: namely, the space within which a not-quite-not-Western female representation of "real" Third World minorities takes place. In terms of Mukherjee's contribution to and expansion of contemporary American literature, this representation is valuable because it may lead to a picture of the U.S. which contests and consistently revises the "truths" generated by mainstream First World fiction. In the history of knowledge, and for our purposes, in the history of literary studies, significant advance is only possible when interruption and revision of prior "truths" render them not absolute and inviolable but contestatory.