

Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

Neil ten Kortenaar

Bharati Mukherjee's novel Jasmine works well in the multicultural North American classroom because it can inspire playful, mutually contradictory, inherently unstable readings. The novel must not be thought of as inviting one particular reading but as permitting student readers to find the potential for play in categories of identity that implicate them deeply.

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Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine*¹ is a novel despised by many critics but loved by students. It therefore requires special handling in the classroom. A teacher must challenge the way that students read it. The novel, however, provides for more than an opportunity to disabuse students of their reading habits (a pedagogical goal mixed in value); I have found it ideal for teaching students how they can use literature to think with and how to play with ideas.

I have taught *Jasmine* several times in an undergraduate course called the Immigrant Experience in Literature at a suburban campus in Toronto. The vast majority of the students in my classes are immigrants or the children of immigrants, and usually a plurality is from South Asia. Those students respond very warmly to Mukherjee's protagonist, called at different times Jyoti, Jasmine, and Jane, who successfully reinvents herself in America by casting off her ties to India. I have never had a student spontaneously make the critique common in literary criticism that Mukherjee's idealization of assimilation is thoroughly unrealistic in very problematic ways. My sense is that students recognize the novel is unrealistic but identify with its utopian impulse. I therefore begin teaching the novel by waking them up.

Jasmine arrives alone as an illegal immigrant, and within a brief time she has acquired the means to act on all her desires—including new ones acquired in America—and to remake herself into her own ideal. What makes it possible for Jasmine to become

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1 Bharati Mukherjee, *Jasmine* (Markham, Ontario: Penguin, 1990).

so thoroughly American? If I ask this repeatedly, eventually students will acknowledge that Jasmine's self-reinvention is possible only because of her light skin, described as "wheaten." Had she been darker, she would surely have met racism. Racism is not even a topic in the novel: there are no black characters in this America. Jasmine also has no trouble with accent, which would normally meet with xenophobic condescension or worse. Jasmine's assimilation is made easier because she is utterly without ties. Unlike most immigrants with nothing, she deliberately cuts herself off from any community with others with whom she shares a language, cultural habits, and experience as a stranger in a strange land. Most immigrants, of course, do not come as unattached individuals unless, like Mukherjee herself, they arrive as privileged students. Jasmine, my students now recognize, is the mouthpiece of an educated cosmopolitan writer who hides behind the mask of an uneducated, much victimized daughter of poverty.

Making clear how much the novel is a fantasy of assimilation wish fulfillment does not usually, in my experience, reduce its attractiveness among students who are themselves the children of immigrants, but at least it primes them to question the voice telling the tale. I next question not just how Jasmine achieves social mobility but social mobility's value as an ideal. My students attend the university because they want social mobility, so what's wrong with that? Moreover, this tale of the self-made individual appeals because it is explicitly feminist. At the beginning of the novel, Jasmine (still called Jyoti) rejects the fate of widowhood and exile spelled out for her by an astrologer and instead determines to make her own life. She achieves agency by rejecting the marriage foreseen by her parents, marrying for love, risking a journey across the world on her own, murdering the monster who rapes her, and leaving a marriage of duty once again for love. Her subsequent journey appears unidirectional and upward, from peasant status to citizen of the world (or of California, same thing), from tradition to modernity, from closed patriarchal world to open world where one can take responsibility for one's own self-definition. Students typically applaud.

But, I point out, if Jasmine's journey is imagined as linear, then India and America are opposed to each other as origin and destination, as what we fear and what we want. It's not difficult to get the class to generate a list of the stereotypes associated with India and America that the novel works with. The "India" that Jasmine must leave is ruled by fate, duty, family values, harmful notions of purity, and a devotion to tradition to the point of stasis; the novel's "America" is dedicated to freedom, individual self-fulfillment, notions of hybridity, and an openness to change associated with modernity. So far so stereotyped. Because it relies on defining "India" as backward and "America" as the future, Mukherjee's feminism is contemptuous of other women. Chandra Mohanty's essay "Under Western Eyes" is useful at this point.² Once students have been shown that what appears to be progressive may serve cultural imperialism, it becomes easier to make them question the arrival points of our discussions.

At this point I invite students to recognize that the novel explicitly echoes *Jane Eyre*, that classic bildungsroman of female social mobility: not only is the protagonist called Jane in Iowa, where she is as she tells her story, but like Charlotte Brontë's

2 Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, ed. Chandra Talpade Mohanty et al. (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), 51–80.

protagonist, she ends up caring for a lover who was her former boss but is now crippled as the result of a violent attack. Mukherjee's Jane, however, unlike Brontë's, has few qualms in stealing her employer from his first wife, and later, when he is physically disabled and rendered entirely dependent upon her, she throws duty to the winds, abandons him to his former wife, and heads west with another man! "Reader, I ditched him!" is what this Jane says in effect. This postcolonial rewriting of Brontë is *not* like Jean Rhys's in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which reveals the exploitation implicit in Brontë's original but accepts that there is no escape from the Victorian story. Instead Mukherjee's rewriting poses an explicitly feminist challenge to a classic of feminism: if Jane is right to bestow her heart where she will and only to enter a romantic partnership as an equal, then she should also be justified in resisting any call to duty in marriage. Those students in the class who have read *Jane Eyre* (a small number) enjoy discussing the rewriting: Is Brontë's Jane Eyre trapped by social definitions of women's duty? Is Mukherjee's Jasmine an immoral homewrecker whose love is insufficient to remain loyal to a man physically dependent on her?

Someone will point out that, as feminist fables go, Mukherjee's novel has problems of its own. Jasmine does not so much reinvent herself as she is reinvented by the men in her life. It is men who name her at each stage in her life. She goes from one lover to another, but always remains dependent for her identity on a man. (Her first husband, in India, is accurately described as a Professor Higgins [77], even if he is more of a self-made man than Eliza Doolittle's mentor was.)

I will add that, for a novel that appears to celebrate a woman's acting on her desires, *Jasmine* deplores sex. The novel's sex scenes (the rape by Half-Face and sex with Bud) both involve half-men and associate sex with the absence of desire. Sex is closely linked with death: a young farmer who loves Jasmine commits suicide! It is very possible that Jasmine has no sex at all with her first husband, Prakash, an ascetic idealist intent on building a better world who is afraid of embarrassing "her with any desire or demand" (79). When Jasmine dreams of Taylor, to whom she gives her heart, she dreams of tucking him already asleep safely into bed (198). When I point this out, the class will titter. *Jasmine* has actually far less desire than *Jane Eyre*, which cannot show sex, but which compensates by infusing sublimated desire into the setting and the dramatic scenes.

The ambivalence about sex in *Jasmine* is also an ambivalence toward procreation. *Jasmine* is an explicit celebration of reconstituted families over birth families: it features not one but two adopted children in separate families. My students have been primed by earlier books in the course to recognize that the novel therefore favors consent over descent (terms I borrow from Werner Sollors³), affiliation over filiation (borrowed from Edward Said⁴). In novels of immigration, consent (associated with romantic love) is related to assimilation while descent (associated with parents) is associated with roots. A fictional character typically feels the force of tradition as related to genealogy and joins America by falling in love with someone from outside her ethnicity. But in Jasmine's case, consent is imagined as adoption, in other words as invented genealogy and not just as romantic love. She rides off into the sunset at the

3 Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

4 Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

end, not just with Taylor but also with his adopted daughter, Duff, and they are headed in the same direction as Du, the Vietnamese teenager who had been adopted by Bud and Jasmine. The ideal family at the end represents a strange leveling of the generations: Jasmine feels like a sister to Duff and Du.

If the novel is not the celebration of desire it appeared to be, what is it about? The discussion of *Jane Eyre* draws attention to the literariness of Mukherjee's novel and especially its reliance on repetition. The class begins to enjoy the novel as a kind of game that plays with serious themes in unpredictable ways. I now move to discuss the novel's heavy use of internal repetition. I put on the board an outline of Jasmine's trajectory (which is narrated chronologically but with many leaps to and from the present, the time of narration in Iowa). Although by one measure her progress is indeed linear, headed ever westward, from India to New York to Iowa, and, at the end, to California, the emphatic repetition makes it circular. The protagonist goes from city (Lahore, left by her father at Partition) to countryside (Hasnapur) to city (Jullundhar) to countryside (Florida) to city (New York) to countryside (Iowa). The geographical cycles correspond to a narrative pattern: the sequence of flight—confinement—escape—stability—flight is repeated over and over. The repetition renders ironic any notion of progress: flight always ends in confinement, movement in stability. The pursuit of the new and the different is always already part of the same. Indeed Jane's pursuit of freedom ends up fulfilling the destiny proclaimed at the beginning of the novel by the astrologer that she had rejected. (His prophecy of her widowhood is realized twice over, as she loses two husbands to violence; Bud in Iowa is not killed, as Prakash in India was, but only because he and Jane were not legally married!)

The linear and the cyclical: there are always two forces at work, and they are in play in America as in India. Making this point requires charting on the board the contrasting values that we had already established are stereotypically associated with "India" and "America," and then showing that all values can be found in both places. Jasmine does nothing in America she had not already done in India. In India she had already changed her name (from Jyoti to Jasmine) in a process of self-reinvention, rejected arranged marriage, and rejected the roles of faithful duty expected of her. In America she ends up a victim of politicized terror. Family values identified with the land define Iowa as they did India. India is actually more culturally hybrid than America, and in both places hybridity is denied by those who want an impossible monolithic culture. The same two forces—we can call them tradition and modernity, but it would be more accurate to call them stasis and motion, rest and change, perhaps security and risk—can be found everywhere. And if the same forces are at work everywhere, then India and America are the same place!

The novel now shimmers and splinters. I write on the board a series of paradoxes, not simultaneously but one at a time, in order to destabilize the clichés we'd started working with:

1. Du, the Vietnamese refugee, is more "American" than Bud, who spent all his life in Iowa.
2. Tradition, in the sense of feminine duty to serve others, is as strong in the novel's America as it is in India.
3. Domestic terrorism is as likely in America as in Asia. The Aryan Brotherhood in Iowa looks like the Khalsa Lions in Punjab.

Because Mukherjee's novel narrates events wherever they are set in the same plain and direct English, it suggests the oneness of the world. The novel feels like a meditation on the news, that form of one-way communication which regularly juxtaposes distant and seemingly unrelated parts of the world on a single page or in five minutes of headlines: Sikh Terrorism Hits Punjab, Midwest Family Farms Face Collapse, Boat People Flee Vietnam. The novel argues that the news items are all linked and not just because they are narrated in the same space: "Objects in mirror are closer than they appear" (71). I point out that the novel explicitly thematizes connectivity, links both across great distances (the mail, the electric grid, telephone lines), and made with one's own hands (words in Scrabble, electric circuitry). Once I start generating a list of such links, students get in the spirit of recognizing examples. Because my students in the twenty-first century understand connectivity more viscerally than even Mukherjee's protagonist (Google Scholar reports that the use of the word *connectivity* has doubled since 1989), they also understand why the novel's images of connection ask us to think about the ways the world is interrelated.

What do we call it when everywhere we look we find the same space? One answer is globalization. In both India and the United States, a lamentable commodification is destroying people's organic ties to the land and the land's ties to food: someone called Vancouver Singh is buying up land in Punjab for agribusiness, golf courses are replacing farms in Iowa. The novel is filled with references to brand names, though these as yet differ in different parts of the world. We may say that "America" now contains India.

But the oneness of space in the novel is always doubled. Everything is connected, yes, but there are good and bad, true and false connections. Linking can be positive (the novel is a paean to cultural hybridity) or negative (the villains are motivated by paranoid conspiracy theories), just as there is positive delinking (Jasmine is grateful to learn she can return unwanted goods to sender) and negative (Partition, secession movements). We need a name for these paired forces. At this point I introduce Joseph Schumpeter's notion of creative destruction, which he identified as a defining principle of capitalism and a reason it was bound to collapse.⁵

For purposes of class discussion, the term *creative destruction* has the advantage that it names phenomena we feel very differently about. In terms of technology, creative destruction is likely to appear to us all as a good: railways replaced canals, computers replaced typewriters, cell phones replaced landlines, ATMs replaced bank tellers. Who now would want to return to the telegraph, the video rental store, Polaroid cameras, library card catalogues? Creative destruction has exploded the literary canon and a host of once unquestioned assumptions. Plenty of us, however, regret the loss of the independent bookstore, family farms, and print journalism. And we have good reason not just to regret but to fear other forms of creative destruction: ecological (the loss of species and ecosystems), economic (the loss of jobs overseas or to automation), or cultural (the loss of languages or of ways of being in the world).

Philip Fisher identifies creative destruction as a principle that rules American literature (and he celebrates the way of being in the world it implies).⁶ In Mukherjee's

5 Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York: Harper, 1947).

6 Philip Fisher, *Still the New World: American Literature in a Culture of Creative Destruction* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

novel, however, change disrupts established patterns everywhere, in India as in America. It is violent, full of risk, and indifferent to individuals. I then distinguish three responses to change among the novel's characters: a desire to keep things as they were, a desire to renew everything, and a desire to destroy everything. Some welcome change and want to ride it (notably the bricoleurs Prakash and Du); many resent it and try to preserve the old (Jyoti's father, the South Asian immigrants in Queens, the farmers in Iowa); some are destroyed (Vilma, Prakash, Darrel); and some lash out in violent resentment (the communal rioters at Partition, the Sikh terrorists, Harlan who tries to kill Bud). The three responses—pull down the blinds, flee to higher ground, identify and destroy the enemy—make it possible to categorize the characters, but all three are found in Jasmine herself at different moments.

The novel itself has two theoretical models with which to imagine creative destruction, one modern and scientific and the other explicitly Hindu. The first is chaos theory. An epigraph from James Gleick's *Chaos* (which appeared in 1987, just two years before *Jasmine!*⁷) introduces the theme. I put the principles of chaos theory on a PowerPoint slide so that we can discuss how they operate in the novel:

1. Categories always break down. The world is not rounded but rough. There is no formula, no pattern. The novel revels in incongruous juxtapositions: the Lutheran Hmong Church, the Sikh terrorist who becomes a hot dog vendor, the pet iguana in Manhattan.
2. There is therefore no prediction. Chance rules. Jasmine's father who lived in a bunker to avert danger is killed by a bull whose charge he did not see coming.
3. Yet the random and the unpredictable nevertheless adhere to surprising regularities called strange attractors. There is no predicting what any moment may look like, yet the whole creates distinct patterns, called fractals. As already mentioned, the novel relies on seemingly absurd repetitions: such as not one but two adopted children.
4. Everything is linked. A common image of chaos theory is that a butterfly waving its wings in China can cause a storm in Kansas. Jasmine, who flees a bomb in India, appears as a hurricane in Iowa (215).

The novel is filled with allusions to phenomena associated with chaos theory: cloud formations, weather, flows of water, smoke rising, and shorelines. The allusions to theory reinforce the novel's hipness and its evocation of meaningfulness.

The term *creative destruction*, however, invites parallels with another frame: the Hindu tripartite divine dispensation of the creator, the preserver, and the destroyer. Jasmine explicitly refers to Hindu principles such as karma and reincarnation and to gods such as Vishnu in order to understand and express her experience. Most significantly, she deliberately behaves as an avatar of Kali, the goddess of destruction, at the moment that she kills her rapist Half-Face. The Hindus in the class immediately understood the reference and are pleased to know something others do not. I insist, however, that the reference to Kali is an allusion not just to culture, part of what someone from India knows, but to a worldview. Hinduism has always known about creative destruction. We can now see that the narrator cycles through roles: destructive Jyoti who kills a rabid dog, creative Jasmine who goes into business with

7 James Gleick, *Chaos* (New York: Viking, 1987).

Prakash, destructive Kali who kills Half-Face, creative Jase, and so forth. Every act of creation requires destruction; every time the world is blown up something new is created. "India" always already contains America.

I use Venn diagrams to recap the different ways of reading the novel: India and America are absolutely different; they blend into each other; they are inherently the same; everywhere is "America"; "India" is always everywhere. To emphasize larger patterns of creative destruction is to downplay desire, which has eyes only for the movement forward. But desire's forward propulsion is necessary to the larger cycles.

I hope it's clear by now that I think the novel is valuable not for any message it carries about the world—to fix on any of its questionable messages would be wrong—but for how it allows readers to play with messages. The repetitions in the novel make fascinating fractals that invite readers to draw crazy connections between ideas. The making of connections is itself thematized, and every connection one can make can also be turned inside out. The novel invites readers to become bricoleurs themselves, recombining ideas in ways that surprise the makers.

The mask of the uneducated village girl adopted by Mukherjee the author is not just a disguise to hide behind in order to appropriate the authority of another's experience but rather a form of play. The novel is an invitation to play freely with big ideas about culture, identity, and totality that students often feel as burdens or risks in their own lives. This play allows new things to be thought.

I would not want every text in the course to be as postmodern and playful as Mukherjee's novel. A course like this also needs texts that are foreign and resist understanding, texts that present readers with the experience of others, texts in which students recognize themselves, and texts that challenge by their uncompromising presentation of uncomfortable truths. But I think our prime responsibility is to free students to think, and for that some play is indispensable.