"Subverting the taste buds" of America: Transnational Political Agency in Bharati Mukherjee's Novels *Wife* (1975) and *Jasmine* (1989)

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From Dimple‟s search for belonging in both India and America in *Wife* (1975) to Tara‟s cosmopolitan self-exploration in *Desirable Daughters* (2002), Bharati Mukherjee‟s characters seek versions of political agency that rely on, what the author argues is, the global extension of "the American Dream and the American Constitution to all its citizens" (Mukherjee 33). By transgressing various international borders as immigrants and refugees, her characters experience an almost enviable degree of freedom in their ability to find a place and thus feel at home in the world. However, despite her potential to disrupt conceptions of the nation as unified and sovereign, the figure of the migrant in Mukherjee‟s fiction is not *a priori* an embodiment of nomadic freedom, individualism, or global agency. Although mobility has gained importance in postcolonial theory, especially in Homi Bhabha‟s poststructuralist valorization of the mobile subject as "the nation‟s margin and the migrants‟ exile" (139), Mukherjee‟s transnational subjects are only ever as free as the domestic narratives they access and mobilize. For the protagonists of *Wife* and *Jasmine*, more specifically, social mobility is *agentic* only to the extent that Dimple and Jasmine can successfully deploy the myth of the American "nation as an extended family" (Rée 83). They only move freely in the world and at "home" (i.e. ultimately in America) if their actions confirm their author‟s faith in "the making of a new American culture . . . [and the] invent[ing of] a new vocabulary" (33). In other words, domestic narratives structure the conditions of possibility for imagining political agency in a transnational setting. It is only in the intersection of the local and global -- indeed in the domestically naturalized female subject‟s movement across international borders and ideological boundaries -- that political agency is even possible in *Wife* and *Jasmine*. By offering narratives of women‟s experiences that at once exceed and confirm different nation-states‟ narratives of "home" and family, Mukherjee‟s fiction therefore contributes to a reevaluation of the question of agency itself.

When considering agency and social mobility in relation to a U.S. minority writer of the South Asian diaspora, it is important to keep in mind the numerous modalities of Utopian abstraction that define women‟s subjectivity in the world today.[1] As geographically mobile subjects, Mukherjee‟s characters hold the potential to escape various forms of domination experienced in their homelands and, more importantly, to forge new identities abroad. However, their mobility comes with baggage: it occurs only within the confines of their embodied (i.e., material) and, at times, imagined (i.e., idealized) domesticity as female immigrants. In spite of

Mukherjee"s faith in the cosmopolitanism of the American Dream, therefore, both novels" protagonists fail to detach themselves from their private experiences in their negotiation with public abstractions. For them, the very meaning of "home" evokes both the private sphere, or the individual"s process of self-representation in language, and the larger public sphere, or the nation-state"s narrative of communal belonging both in India and America. "Home" is the site of private *and* public struggles to define the self in relation to contentious processes of subjection, of becoming abstract as both Asian American citizens and women in a transnational setting. Mukherjee"s novels situate Asian American identity formation and claims to Asian American political agency at a juncture between the private and the public, the local and the global, the psychic and the social, and the center and its periphery.

These emerging tropes of belonging in some ways force into crisis the Western myth of the nuclear family as the foundation for imagining both national and transnational bonds. The diasporic experiences Mukherjee represents in her novels disrupt the "foreign" versus "local" divide that, at the national level:

> proposes the state as the unified body in which all subjects are granted equal membership . . . [provided that] differences . . . be subordinated in order to qualify for membership in that democratic body (Lowe 361)

At the international level, she ensures that immigration for female "dependents" like Dimple – that is, for brides dependent on the temporary labor of their husbands – and refugee situations like Jasmine"s remain coded as domestic, privatized, or (inter)nationally invisible phenomena. If the process of assimilation or Americanization is possible only in the public sphere, a sphere that consolidates the immigrant"s identity on his/her ability to labor and earn in a capitalist culture, Dimple and Jasmine essentially remain unassimilable immigrants. Mukherjee"s novels thus offer narratives in which the "unbelonging citizen" [2] discovers a way of forging her sense of agency out of the domestic scripts she carries with her to America.

Dimple relies on Hindu nationalist scripts of womanhood that are products of her Bengali middle-class background, but these scripts hardly comfort her with familiar imaginings of home. More importantly, they prevent her from finding communal support from Asian Americans and feminists after she migrates to America. Instead of succeeding in a performance of the model immigrant, Dimple"s character undergoes a process of subjective dissolution whereby agency is now the success with which she is able to lay claim on the products she expels from her body (e.g., her vomit, her aborted fetus, etc.). Jasmine is seemingly much more independent in her pursuit of American citizenship after her husband"s death; however, her unique sense of American individualism relies heavily on her fantasy of "complet[ing] the mission of Prakash [her dead husband]" (97). The trajectory she follows from invisible refugee to landed immigrant and, finally, to abstract citizen (achieved by means of cross-cultural/racial love and marriage) and her inclination

to perform the stereotypical role of the model minority in America are products of her Hindu upbringing and sense of wifely duty to her deceased husband. These details from the lives of both protagonists convey the importance of reading global traffic and processes of assimilation in America as private, psychic, or domestic struggles. It is crucial, in other words, to imagine a new social contract that highlights "the paradoxical double meaning of *domestic* as both the public space of the masculine (nation-state) and the private realm of the feminine (home)" (Eng 35), indeed to consider the ways in which the private experiences of Mukherjee"s characters carry implications at the national and international levels.

Dimple sees herself as perpetually constructed by grand national narratives, both those that remind her she is marginalized in America and those she transports from India. Early in the novel and while she is still in India, Dimple finds the task of fulfilling her role as "wife" impossible even as she anticipates marriage. She believes that her suffering before marriage has no "precise, even dignified, name" (6) and is told by her mother to believe that her "mysterious pains, headaches, nervous tics were Nature"s ways of indicating a young woman"s readiness for marriage" (6-7). Interpreted under the despotic sign of the heterosexist contract, of the necessity to marry in order to reproduce the name of the Father both within the family and for the nation at large, Dimple"s bodily suffering is made intelligible to her in terms of her function as a dutiful daughter awaiting marriage: even "Nature" or the natural body is, in her mother"s reference above, constructed in terms of her unmarried status in India. Initially, Dimple"s desire to fulfill her duty as an upper-middle class woman -- to marry, have children, and to be loyal like "a short, voluptuous Sita hip-deep in pale orange flames" (53) -- is a longing to be mythologized, to be written into history via the nation"s invention of tradition, to "bec[ome] Sita, the ideal wife of Hindu legends, who had walked through fire at her husband"s request" (6).

Partha Chatterjee writes that, "The new politics of nationalism „glorified India"s past and tended to defend everything traditional"" (116). The ideal Bengali woman within this anti-colonial discourse of the national elite, Chatterjee suggests, became the marker of tradition and "was accorded a status of cultural superiority to the Westernized women of the wealthy *parvenu* families . . . the mark of woman"s newly acquired freedom" within the nation (127). Dimple"s identification with, or her desire to be like, the goddess-figure Sita indicates her complicity with this religiously-charged invention of tradition, in which "„[t]he essence of womanhood" remained Sita, the long-suffering wife of Rama who was a particular favorite model of Gandhi"s" (Mazumdar 261). In effect, Dimple"s idealization of Sita acts as her micropolitical translation of the anti-colonial struggle into domestic terms. Passive resistance, for example, is not a public act "of freedom fighters and fasting armies led by a balding, bespectacled old man," (9) but Dimple"s private act of assuming the role of "a good wife, a docile wife conquering the husband-enemy by withholding affection and other tactics of domestic passive resistance" (9). After reading historical accounts of "The Rebellion of 1857" (7) and of the national elite"s anti-colonial struggles in India, Dimple projects herself onto India"s masculinist scripts. She re-appropriates the

postcolonial nation‟s earliest hegemonizing myths in order to imagine her own politics of national and historical agency.

Nationalist narratives especially thrive in the Bombay film culture with which Dimple and her friend Pixie are enamored. The "Hindi movie" (Mukherjee 9) attracts Dimple‟s attention prior to marriage, suggesting the influence of various films on her own ideals of wifehood. Mehboob Khan‟s film *Mother India* (1957), for example, "celebrates woman in the linked roles of daughter of the soil ... and mother of her sons . . . [with] Radha [the main character as] the strong, stoic, sacrificing toiler, the equal and partner of her husband" (Rajan 109).[3] To conceive of herself as equal to men in these popular texts, a woman must be a sacrificing, dutiful, and stoic wife, a Sita-figure whose agency is expressed in marriage:

> Hindi films consistently link female characters to mythical models, most often as the perfect wife who, like Sita, acquiesces to the demands of an often undeserving husband. Since its inauguration in 1979, the feminist magazine Manushi has regularly reviewed Hindi films, lamenting that they constantly portray women as doormat Sitas. (Derné 198)

Interpellated by these different texts professing the ideals of the nation, Dimple‟s sense of agency can only be found within the confines of Hindu marriage. Marriage provides the only potentially political, although not public or institutionally documented, space to which Dimple has access. Expected to practice a version of patriotism by preserving domestic -- implying also the national versus foreign -- tradition, Dimple learns how to assert herself politically within the home.[4]

Dimple‟s burden of preserving Indian tradition is felt immediately after marriage to Amit Basu, especially after her mother-in-law gives her the sanskritized name "Nandini" (18). Her mother-in-law attempts to superimpose upon Dimple‟s already highly mediated identity an authenticating image of the ideal middle-class Bengali woman, "the new *bhadramahila* (respectable woman) . . . who acquire[d] the cultural refinements afforded by modern education without jeopardizing her place at home, that is, without becoming a memsaheb" (Chatterjee 128). As with all national idealizations of womanhood, Dimple‟s forced and nominal entrance into this image of the *bhadramahila* implies that she is now to "become the repository of . . . national spiritual essence; a „goddess‟ who must remain untainted by „westernization‟ and its implied pollution" (Mazumdar 257), including the pollution associated with an embodied sexuality. The asexuality of the wife-as-goddess that is imposed on Dimple after marriage contradicts her pre-marital fantasies about having the perfect body for her husband. Her desire to match the ideal bust size as represented in the "ads in women‟s magazines" (Mukherjee 4) which she reads in preparation for marriage is a futile pastime because of the irrelevance of her sexualized body after marriage. Dimple‟s body, instead, becomes the site upon which conflicting cultural abstractions of the ideal "wife" assemble. Looking at herself

in an oval mirror in her bedroom, Dimple confronts her bodily image in an attempt to address the frustration she experiences at losing her own sense of embodiment, of being dismembered from both the name representing her past, Dimple Dasgupta, and her memories of the past in the form of the "things she really liked, like the velvet monkey Pixie had made for her long ago . . . back in her own room . . . not with a name like Nandini" (31).

Having experienced the initial shock of dismemberment -- of not being allowed to remember, and of losing her body in marriage -- Dimple learns to separate her duties as a wife from her memories of life before marriage: "She let him [Amit] grab her and push her down among the pillows . . . Sometimes in bed she thought of the baby lizard she had found in her pillowcase" (23). During this moment of expected intimacy, Dimple dissociates herself from the immediate, physical experience of being violated by her husband and recalls, instead, a past event in which she once "found a dead baby lizard in her pillow-case" (7). The horror of a past event emerges like the repressed to haunt her in her present crisis. It is only after marriage that Dimple realizes that, unlike her own body which has been dismembered from her family and its name, her husband"s body is an assemblage of metonymically-related parts of a phantom whole. Even though "the sum of the parts did not add up to the whole" (23), the body of Dimple"s husband *implies* "wholeness" and "unity," a state of autonomy Dimple is denied during her pre-marital preparation for wifehood and in marriage.[5] This realization early in her marriage gives Dimple the impression later in the novel that "she was missing a mouth or tongue or lips, missing an element necessary to make intelligible noises" (190). She realizes that she "talked in silences" (191). Inhabiting this dismembered and silenced body, however, still allows Dimple to exist as a desiring subject. The body itself becomes the catachrestic limit of her subjectivation, a form of agency confirming that "all [subject] predications are exclusive and thus operative on the metonymic principle of a part standing for the putative whole" (Spivak 174), pointing ultimately to the fact that there exists in any self-representation in language a problem with sovereignty.

Dimple"s sense of betrayal after marriage is a result of her bourgeois alienation, her realization that there is no guarantee of happiness in the narratives she has inherited and must reproduce for success in her marriage to both husband and country. Dimple initially dreams that, "Marriage would bring her freedom, cocktail parties on carpeted lawns . . . [and] love" (Mukherjee 3) but this neo-liberal vision of freedom, a product of her conflation of capitalist ideals with Western notions of love, conflicts with her actual status as a "dependent" immigrant in America. She is warned by Ratna Das, a woman whom she meets before leaving for America, that one "may think of it as immigration, my dear . . . but what you are is a *resident alien*" (47). Dimple relies on her husband Amit"s status as a white collar worker in order to imagine possible articulations of her identity in the U.S. In a conversation between Meena Sen and Ina Mullick, members of her local South Asian community abroad, Dimple overhears a comment about the "dependent" status of South Asian wives who are considered unskilled labor in America: "Any Indian girl who comes over

alone is entitled to stay on any way she can. Could *you* have come over alone? Could any of us?" (94). Aihwa Ong writes that "globalization has made economic calculation a major element of diasporic subjects" choice of citizenship . . . [and that] nation-states are reworking immigration law to attract capital-bearing subjects while limiting the entry of unskilled labor" (136). Unlike their accompanying wives, Jyoti Sen and Amit Basu are globally marketable subjects whose mechanical expertise as engineers allows them to be recognized as contributing members of an American-centered global economy. Their technical knowledge of "load centers and substations and line outage and high voltage power transmissions systems" (91), a knowledge and language that eludes their wives, ensures their own participation in America"s civic rituals and, therefore also, their process of becoming citizens within a new (trans)national order of Global Capitalism.[6] In other words, an immigrant can only successfully assimilate or, in Mukherjee"s words, engage in the "exciting chance to share in the making of a new American culture" (32), if he can activate a narrative of Americanization that ironically exceeds the nation itself. This new global predicament is precisely what Mukherjee"s national formula of assimilation overlooks: that in order to be successful in the world today an immigrant must engage in a public sphere larger and more elusive than the nation itself, a sphere that consolidates the immigrant"s identity upon the basis of his ability to labor and earn under a new global order.

Instead of acknowledging this global transformation of national identity, Mukherjee subjects her protagonist to various challenges in America that she is expected to overcome; however, this U.S-national imperative is a rather unrealistic measure of success in defining agency in a transnational world. It is a measure of success, for example, against which Jasmine in Mukherjee"s 1989 novel of the same name fares well. As will be addressed in detail below, Jasmine"s success is a result of her heroic enactment of postmodern subjectivity, ever shifting and strategic in its deployment of love for both America and its capitalist ethos. Jasmine possesses all the right fairy-tale scripts to accomplish national, and therefore also *magically* international, assimilation. By being confined to the home while Amit engages in the process of becoming-citizen, however, *Wife*'s protagonist reacts with paranoia to the national imperative. She feels abandoned and imagines that her home is constantly being invaded by a particularly U.S. form of urban violence and terrorism, a feeling gleaned from televised images of street violence, from conversations between Jyoti and her husband Amit, and from the sound of sirens she hears outside her door. Surrounded by more technical appliances than she knows how to work, belonging in themselves to their own postwar history of the transformation of the middle-class American home, Dimple can only access a consumerist version of assimilation through her interaction with the television: "She thought how lucky she was to be alone among Marsha"s appliances, to explore the wonders of modern American living, unencumbered by philosophical questions about happiness" (136). She lives, in this hyper-privatized life, in constant fear of "a dangerous world" (120) of "Muggings, rape, murder" (85). While Amit expects his wife to "become . . .

American [and have] . . . dreams [that are] American" (113), Dimple is denied "the secret of happiness" (88) that fuels the American ethos in a global age. Unfamiliar with even the geography of America -- Dimple says to Jyoti, "I get so confused here . . . Nebraska, Nevada, Ohio, Iowa; they all sound the same to me" (100) -- Dimple is unable to imagine her place in the new country (let alone her place in a new global order) until she is able to forge a kind of identity as "producer" in relation to her own body, thus again enacting a kind of co-opting of national narratives to suit her very private understanding of her function in society.

By the end of the novel, the body and its products are the only signs that remind Dimple of her domestic function, the only function she knows. Consequently, when Dimple begins to vomit as an indication of her pregnancy, she becomes fixated on the regurgitated products that her body expels in the toilet bowl. She begins to lay claim of ownership on these products: "The vomit fascinated her. It was hers" (31). Rather than laying claim to the body *itself*, Dimple fetishizes the expelled *products* of her body, seeing in them her own role as a producer. Dimple constructs, in other words, her own abstraction by which to order her experience, by which to subjectivate herself: she forges for herself the role of producer or laborer, assigning value to the *products* of her body while at the same time allowing herself to *be the product* of her own process of subjection. Dimple, therefore, lays claim to the right of aborting the fetus within her, the right of expelling yet another product from her body because "vomiting was real to her, but pregnancy was not" (32). This psychic process represents, in effect, Dimple"s claim to agency and, although compelled by the partial drives of sado-masochism, it helps her to obliterate her fetus in an act of asserting ownership over the products of her body. In this way, Dimple"s relationship to her body mediates between her subjective formation and the national discourses -- in the case of the aborted fetus, the discourse of patrilineage -- that vie to control her subjection in the socius. Dimple begins to vomit compulsively, falls desperately ill, and tries to document her own bodily products as a performative act of self-assertion, as though she were writing a history of her corporeal transformation toward dissolution: "vomiting could be pleasurable; thinking of all the bathrooms she had vomited in she felt nostalgic" (150). She, in effect, induces nostalgia where it fails to exist as an ordering principle in her life. It is this claiming and subsequent historicizing of her body"s products that provides Dimple with the necessary *lines of flight* [7] from the traditional, patriarchal, and singular encodings of her subjectivity or identity. Unable to find this same sense of freedom in the discourse of Ina and Leni"s women"s movement, a movement that advocates a kind of pseudo-feminist belief in, for example, sartorial transformation (i.e., the changing from a sari into slacks) as a sign of individual "progress" and agency, Dimple is alienated further in the process of becoming-citizen. For a woman like Dimple whose very body becomes a "shell she inhabit[s]" (186), indicating the complete deterritorializing of her body (i.e., Deleuze and Guattari"s Body without Organs), even the process of cross-cultural dressing is no guarantor of successful assimilation. Ina"s women"s group, therefore, fails to

address the material problems that immigrants like Dimple face when they come to America without proper narratives to survive the inscriptions of the *socius*.

Instead of succeeding in a performance of the model immigrant, Dimple consciously becomes a figure of excess because she realizes that "some monster had overtaken her body" (157). Her body represents, in other words, a potential site for agency because of its tendency toward the postcolonial moment of catechresis which Spivak defines as "a generality inaccessible to intended description" (29). The body becomes the limit of describing agency and yet, for Dimple, is the site of her psychic encounter with social transformation.[8] In some ways, this paradox points to a central contradiction in Mukherjee"s writing. The author"s portrayal of Dimple"s excessive embodiment cannot be evaluated against the nation-state"s abstract codes of belonging that the author"s neo-nationalist beliefs espouse. The private or psychic struggle of the dependent female immigrant always accompanies her assimilation and exists as a parallel narrative of becoming-global via national scripts.

In *Jasmine,* signs of the First World (i.e., Western influence) in India are points of celebration, not contestation, allowing the protagonist to assume more easily an *agentic* position in the Enlightenment tradition of U.S. nationalism and assimilation. *Jasmine* sets up a dichotomy between what the protagonist"s husband Prakash calls an India that is "backward, corrupt, mediocre" (81) and an America that represents "the perfect freedom" (83). At a very basic level Jasmine is like Dimple only in that she is a woman who begins her life in India as highly interpellated by certain cultural myths, ideals, and values, some of which are attributable to the two protagonists" sharing of a religious upbringing as Hindu women; however, *Jasmine*"s initial setting of rural Punjab points to an entirely different set of ideological underpinnings because Mukherjee"s setting immediately aligns Jasmine"s experience of India with an ahistorical understanding of India"s traditions. This difference between the settings of the two novels underscores the deliberation with which Mukherjee deals with what she constructs as an insurmountable gap between "tradition" and "modernity." Unlike the province of Bengal which has a long history of British colonialism and whose natives were the first in India to develop an anti-colonialist stance, *Jasmine's* rural Punjab lacks any connection to anti-colonial nationalist struggle, evident especially in the novel"s depiction of Jasmine"s early life in India. *Jasmine*"s initial accounts of Jyoti"s, later Jasmine"s, experience presage the novel"s association with the *bildungsroman* genre, a genre within which Mukherjee"s novel also promises to plot the development of an autonomous, (politically) disembodied, bourgeois, Western capitalist subject. Jasmine"s childhood experiences as Jyoti, moreover, connects her to certain ahistorical and decontextualized versions of Indian "tradition" which serve as markers of India"s "Third World-ness."

One such tradition is the dowry system which, we are told in Jasmine-Jane"s retrospective account, "marked . . . daughters [as] . . . curses . . . [because] dowries beggared families for generations" (39). Unlike the portrayal in *Wife*,[9] it is clear in

Jasmine"s retrospective account of dowry that the narrator excuses her mother"s attempt at infanticide as a product of the unchanging nature of India"s traditions. Such sensationalistic and ahistorical accounts of tradition can be called "death by culture" explanations that are usually cross-cultural representations of a death-related event or phenomenon that women are subjected to in the Third World, phenomena like *sati* or dowry murders (Narayan 84-87). These explanations usually tap into the popular imagination of the developed world"s mainstream public and utilize stereotypes about the Third World"s practices against women, thereby further exoticizing the Third-World as either a backward or "barbaric" culture. In *Jasmine*, tradition is defined as the antithesis of Jasmine"s own belief in necessary progress, so a description of an attempted infanticide is simply linked to "dogged dowryless wives, rebellious wives, barren wives . . . [who] fell into wells, . . . got run over by trains, . . . [and] burned to death heating milk on kerosene stoves" (41). These sensationalist details about Indian wives" supposedly accidental deaths are immediately juxtaposed against details representing the West"s modernity as liberating, details like "Masterji"s hoard of English-language books" (41) which Jasmine reads in order to improve herself: Jasmine admits later in the novel that "To want English was to want more than you had been given at birth, it was to want the world" (68). Interrupted by an account of Wylie"s shock at the protagonist"s "foremothers" (40), shock that intercedes in the narrative as a point of identification for mainstream audiences of the novel, Jasmine"s retrospective account of female infanticide requires Wylie"s point of cultural interlocution in order to ease the mainstream reader.

Unlike Dimple who willingly accepts her roles within the nation"s anti-colonialist narratives -- although one could say that her bodily reactions indicate an unconscious *unwillingness* to enter these roles -- Jasmine is not as easily interpellated by those traditions which Mukherjee represents, in the words of Jasmine"s husband Prakash, as "feudal." In the opening scene of the novel, Jasmine-as-Jyoti vociferously challenges the village astrologer"s forecast of her future as a widow in exile. She asserts her agency by refusing to believe, as perhaps the rest of the village and her family might, the premonitions of the astrologer whose traditional authority is suggested by the violence with which he strikes Jyoti. Although Mukherjee represents the religious traditions of India as mysterious in this first chapter, making reference to holy sages with third eyes which allow them to "peer into invisible worlds" (5), it is clear that Jasmine wishes to transcend what comes across as the "backwardness" of India. Jasmine, for example, uncritically explains the "Partition Riots . . . [and] Muslim[-Hindu]" (41) tension in fatalistic terms, "God is cruel" (41), without providing any sense of the ways in which the British colonial practice of "divide and rule" left its legacy in the internecine warfare between groups in India. Without any access to medical or scientific literature, she instinctively boils river water "three and four times, when everyone else just let the mud settle before drinking" (45). She writes "the best English compositions" (46) and knows that she "couldn"t marry a man who didn"t

speak English" (68). Unlike Dimple, Jasmine is aware of her very American sense of individuality in India, perhaps a result of her incomplete readings of Western novels like "*Shane* . . . *Alice in Wonderland* . . . *Great Expectations* and *Jane Eyre*" (41), read even before her marriage to Prakash. Her sense of agency develops as an assertion of her will and her desire to excel or progress in the world, an agency closely tied to the bourgeois individualist‟s. Within the tradition of the American capitalist‟s dream (i.e., the rags-to-riches mythos), more importantly, Jasmine‟s humble beginnings are marked by her exceptionality, qualities that will allow her to flourish later in America. It is, moreover, these "American" qualities that help Jasmine to survive in a changing world of geographic disruption and transnational movements.

Because of her poverty, lack of education, and rural dwelling, Jasmine does not have Dimple‟s access to India‟s official national narratives. Jasmine relies instead on stories of the deities passed down to her from her mother (e.g., *Kali*), on the films whose songs she hums (e.g., "„I Love You,‟ my favorite song from *Mr. India*"[69]), and on Indian traditions she witnesses as a child but later rejects. One such tradition is the practice of *sati* which, perhaps, influences Jasmine‟s own desire to perform *sati* after Prakash dies: "When Pitaji died, my mother tried to throw herself on his funeral pyre. When we wouldn‟t let her, she shaved her head with a razor, wrapped her body in course cloth, and sat all day in a corner" (61). Mukherjee‟s focus on *sati* is strange given the fact, first, that it is no longer a common Hindu practice and, second, that it is never enacted privately but, instead, performed as a grand public spectacle: "sati as a spectacle is an important consideration" (Rajan 21) because the ultimate purpose of the widow‟s performance of *sati* is to achieve "deification" before an audience of participating Hindus. Performed mostly in rural Rajastan, *sati* does not suit the sensibility of a character like Jasmine. Although the reader can speculate that Jasmine‟s desire to commit *sati* in America at the Florida Institute of Technology is based on her indoctrination as a Hindu woman, her mission seems much more personal than a blind following of what is culturally expected of her. Jasmine desires not so much an engagement with the public, which would be denied her anyway once she performed this act in America, than an act of suicide independent of the traditional and religious connotations of *sati*. Part of what makes Jasmine less inclined to fulfill the "duty" of *sati* is her sense of independence from the traditions that she views, because of her prior inclination toward a sense of Western modernity and Prakash‟s influence on her." As "a modern man, a city man . . . [who] trash[es] some traditions, right from the beginning" (76), Prakash attempts in his marriage with Jasmine to modernize his wife, playing a role as father-figure and mentor like *"Pygmalion*[‟s] . . . Professor Higgins" (77), further preparing Jasmine to become an adaptable immigrant once she moves to America.

What forces Jasmine to flee India is not the simple "desire not to be poor, or simply not to die" (Malcomson 240), but rather a sense of the urgency she feels in wanting to "complete the mission of Prakash" (Mukherjee 97) and in wanting to escape the doom of the widow‟s "traditional" fate in rural India. In addressing

Jasmine‟s transformation after arriving in the U.S., especially considering her arrival as an illegal, it is important to remember Mukherjee‟s polemic against dividing the "Third World and the First World, margin and the center, or minority and mainstream" (Chen and Boudie 11). Mukherjee‟s belief in the accessibility of the American Dream to all who seek belonging in America deeply informs how the novel *Jasmine* engages in questions concerning the South Asian-born woman‟s experience of migration to America. As her problematic collapsing of the categories "First World," "center" and "mainstream" indicates, the author is not so much concerned with the Third World and its relation to the First, but with the national question *in America (i.e., in the First World)*. Engaging in her own hegemonizing practice as a cultural producer, Mukherjee is interested in defining those cosmopolitan relations that explain the push and pull of discontented and desperate immigrants to America.

Similarly, Jasmine-Jane adopts a fragmented subjectivity as a model for the immigrant‟s postmodern survival under Global Capitalism. Jasmine-Jane asks herself after observing her adopted son Du, "How many more shapes are in me, how many more selves, how many more husbands?" (Mukherjee 215). Realizing that the American Dream in a world of increasing transnational flows can only be achieved by those who "arrive so eager to learn, to adjust, to participate, only to find th[at] . . . .Nothing is forever, nothing is so terrible, or so wonderful, that it won‟t disintegrate" (181), Jasmine embodies what could be called an ideal subjectivity in a postmodern world: fragmented, split, and ever-shifting or nomadic in her global cultural positionings. Jean-François Lyotard writes that "A *self* . . . exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before . . . : one is always located at a post through which various kinds of messages pass . . . (language games, of course, are what this is all about)" (15). Jasmine, who states that "We‟ve [Du and I have] been many selves . . . I envy Bud the straight lines and smooth planes of his history" (214), embodies the postmodern *self* that Lyotard describes. In suggesting that "We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams" (29), Jasmine indicates her awareness of the shifting myths and national tropes by which subjectivity is defined and points to the importance of imagining or forging an identity in order to adapt to the different, shifting situations one is forced to travel as a nomadic survivalist. It is this postmodern sense of mobility combined with the shifting qualities of the mythic deities to which Jasmine appeals that allows her to survive her violent rape by Half-Face. Becoming empowered by her appropriation of the violence with which she is attacked and transforming this violence into a scene of transmogrification -- of becoming both Sati and Kali after she is raped -- in a ritualistic act of burning all of her belongings and splitting her tongue, Jasmine forges her own death and rebirth as soon as she sets foot on American soil. Survival depends, therefore, on one‟s ability to invent random identities, whether one is forging immigration documents in order to become a participating citizen in a nation, culturally passing as white in order to find stability in a small town like Elsa County in Iowa, or playing the role of a "maharani" in order to find personal stability in a partner. All of these means of survival are, according to

Jasmine, ways of "subverting the taste buds of" (19) America and, in the process, transforming America"s national consciousness.

Mukherjee clearly believes in the importance of immigrant survival in America. Her belief, moreover, takes into account the various obstacles that an immigrant must overcome by appropriating national codes in order to construct her own identity, but Mukherjee"s understanding of global mobility in *Jasmine* fails to contend with the delicate interplay between the local and the global in a transnational world. In other words, Mukherjee"s loyalty to the question of an emerging *American* sensibility privileges the local transformation of the Third World immigrant without taking into account her global status. Pheng Cheah writes that:

> although globalization creates a greater sense of belonging-to-a-world insofar as it makes individual lives globally interdependent, it has not, thus far, resulted in a significant sense of political allegiance . . . to the world. (315)

This sense of belonging-to-a-world becomes most apparent in the metaphor of food to which Jasmine-Jane refers in her account of "subverting the taste buds of Elsa County" (Mukherjee 19). The metaphor of fusion that Mukherjee develops through Jasmine"s reference to her practice of taking "gobi aloo to the Lutheran Relief Fund"(19) runs the risk of replicating the very forms of cross-cultural contact in America that Mukherjee criticizes in her essays. Why is it that Mukherjee is willing to exalt the virtues of Indian cooking as a cultural symbol of the immigrant"s old traditions, but advocates that immigrants must become American and shed their cultural hyphenation as individuals? It seems that food provides a much safer ground of crossing cultural boundaries because it is a marketable commodity that can easily be appropriated by mainstream culture. Whereas food provides a pleasurable form of consuming the Other in a cosmopolitan metropolis, other cultural icons and symbols -- take, for example, Jasmine"s disgust with a "certain kind of Punjab alive [in Queens]" (162) that she criticizes as an "artificially maintained Indianness" (145) -- are dismissed as "backward" or retrogressive in a new world requiring the immigrant to be fluid in her ability to shift between identities. What is it, exactly, about "gobi aloo" that makes *it of all things* an authentic and legitimate way of engaging in a transformation of America? Where, exactly, do the "ghetto walls" (145) and the "fortress[es] of Punjabiness" (148) begin and where do they end? If Spivak"s statement is true, that "all explanations . . . claim their centrality in terms of an excluded margin" (106), the ghettos and other underworlds of "black . . . American beggar[s] . . . clawing . . . , grabbing and . . . yell[ing], „You fucking bitch. Suck my fucking asshole, you fucking foreign bitch!"" (*Mukherjee* 139), the infernos of Half-Faces acting as the disfigured anomalies in America provide the margins against which Jasmine can claim class membership and, hence, citizenship in America.

Transnational networks create more than immigrant flows to the U.S.; they can also create terrorist organizations. The Khalsa terrorist movement that kills

Jasmine"s husband Prakash is, despite Mukherjee"s treatment of it as a Third World problem, connected to the First World because of the funding it receives from the diaspora, as indicated in Mukherjee"s reference to Vancouver Singh (62-63). The Khalsa movement, an example of the radical religious nationalism sweeping the world in response to the disruption of totalizing narratives of the self under various globalizing tendencies, is not so much India"s internal problem but a global one that involves *both* the First and Third worlds. Even Professor Vadhera, whom Jasmine sees as a ghettoized figure, and his labor in the First World depends on the capital produced by Third World women, possibly even of the underclass. His dependence on flexible forms of labor and offshore capital indicates how the First World is inextricably tied to the Third. It suggests that an immigrant in America, more importantly, is neither autonomous in his identity formation nor completely free to use America"s old codes of Manifest Destiny and the last frontier. As Spivak suggests, "changes in the international division of labor question notions of national sovereignty. All investigations into culture must be complicated by this ideological shift" (223).

In an essay simultaneously published in the popular magazine *Mother Jones* under the title "American Dreamer" and in the more literary *Journal of Modern Literature* under the title "Beyond Multiculturalism: Surviving the Nineties" -- both titles providing a clear indication of the ways in which ideas about America"s changing demographics are marketed to different audiences -- Mukherjee suggests the need in America for a "pioneering" way of imagining the American nation:

> What we have going for us in the 1990s is the exciting chance to share in the making of a new American culture rather than the coerced acceptance of either the failed nineteenth-century model of „melting pot" or the Canadian model of „the multicultural mosaic." (*Mother Jones,* pg. 6, and *Journal,* pg. 32)

From these comments, it is evident why Mukherjee and her writing could so easily be allied with neo-nationalist and assimilationist ideology.[10] Mukherjee wants to "invent a new vocabulary" (33) for communal relations in America, and thus rejects hyphenated identity (e.g., Asian- or Indo-American) for its denial to nonwhite Americans, in their assuming of these divided and partial identities, any access to full recognition as citizens. Mukherjee believes that a consequence of hyphenation is a "categorizing [of] the cultural landscape into a „center" and its „peripheries" [. . .which denies the „peripheries"] the promises of the American Dream and the American Constitution to all its citizens" (33). Given the interplay between the local and global in Mukherjee"s two novels, however, national ideals professing a universalist notion of "agency" – like the American Dream – can no longer act as an alibi for "freedom." If, as Spivak suggests, "„Agent" and „subject" are different codings of something we call „being"" (231), the implications of the word "agent" are as numerous and diverse as they are for a term like "multiple subjectivities" in our contemporary world of shifting, contesting, and proliferating identities. What is implied in Spivak"s statement

is the opposition between a subject who is in active pursuit of knowledge and an object that passively accepts its discursive construction,[11] but this is an opposition that Spivak herself tries to deconstruct. Although it is difficult to provide a universal definition of "agency" -- one that avoids privileging the white, heterosexual, bourgeois subject who resists hegemony by becoming an active transgressor of various forms of domination -- theorizations of political agency must not remain suspended in the antinomian logic that postmodernist relativism often demands.[12]

Globalism, or the increased flow of people, ideas, and capital across international borders, has resulted in mobility becoming the new cultural dominant. Mukherjee‟s novels represent mobility in terms of the cross-cultural contact that inevitably confronts both the First and Third Worlds under Global Capitalism, therefore disrupting the distinction between what Frederic Jameson calls "the American public . . . [and] other national situations" (77), between an "us" in a postmodern, First-World America and all of "them" in a nation-obsessed (i.e., modernizing), Third-World. Choosing to assume the position of the mobile subject by becoming a member of the diaspora, however, cannot be viewed as intrinsically *agentic* or as symbolic of some essentializing ideal of freedom. In a transnational context, agency is increasingly aligned with the deterritorialized subject‟s ability to deploy domestic narratives in her negotiation with global circumstances, indeed her ability to engage in a process of reterritorialization. Agency, instead of signifying mobility itself, is therefore the power of the embodied (versus abstracted) individual to mobilize various narratives and discourses for the purposes of survival. At the same time, however, such privately forged narratives engaging in public discourses run the risk of remaining limited in the implications they carry at the national and international levels, especially because the ability to reterritorialize the "self" is a function of class. Mukherjee‟s narratives of bourgeois empowerment, perhaps, remain too invested in their protagonists‟ private struggles to contend with the material consequences of globalism, but her novels at least help to raise questions about transnational agency that are often ignored in postcolonial and postmodern theorizations of the global.

End Notes

1. Feminists like Inderpal Grewal et al. have coined the term "scattered hegemonies" in reference to the many forms of violent naturalization that affect women under the sign of Global Capital, a condition that accompanies the increasing global traffic and transnational movement of peoples, ideas, and capital. Other feminists like Ruth Lister provide specific terms to evaluate a new kind of hegemony in the form of citizenship; She suggests that "Citizenship as participation represents an expression of human agency in the political arena, broadly defined; citizenship as rights enables people to act as agents" (36).
2. Sarah Lawson Welsh uses this term to discuss the conditions of "invisibility" that black British immigrants face in the "policing of state boundaries . . .[that define] citizen/alien, British immigrant, us/other . . ." (43-65).
3. Dimple is highly dependent on the image-producing machines of the nation, on the apparatuses with which her bodily inhabitation -- unconsciously in both Dimple‟s characterization and in the narrative structure of the novel itself -- contends. Althusser, in his essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," writes that "individuals are always-already interpellated by ideology as subjects, which necessarily leads us to one last proposition: individuals are „abstract‟ with respect to the subjects which

they always-already are" (266).
4. Parama Roy"s rigorous examination of the culturally symbolic role of the actress Nargis, the lead figure in the film *Mother India*, allows one to read the parallels between India"s collective fascination with of Bombay film "stars" playing goddess-type roles and the ongoing political construction of the nation: "the fact remains that these stars accumulate a kind of cultural capital in the cinema which seems eminently amenable to that other form of public life that is elective politics" (153).
5. One could read the difference between Dimple and her husband"s bodily image in terms of the phallocentrism of the Lacanian model of desire: whereas the male subject seeks his coherence in the mirror of (self-) representation, the female is not a subject but is the Other of Lacan"s libidinal economy.
6. In his book *The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism,* Arif Dirlik discusses " new pathways for the development of capital [that] cut across national boundaries and intrude on national economic sovereignty, which renders irrelevant the notion of a national market or... economic unit" (93). These are precisely the forces at play in America"s importation of foreign temporary workers.
7. Mukherjee"s novels, as narratives about female immigrants in a postmodern world, easily lend themselves to Deleuze and Guattari"s idea of the deterritorializing and reterritorializing processes by which selves emerge as subjects and, in a parallel way, immigrants emerge as citizens. This conception of emergence is developed in terms of the "capitalist machine" in *Anti-Oedipus*: "The prime function incumbent upon the socius has always been to codify the flows of desire, to inscribe them, to record them to see to it that no flow exists that is not properly dammed up, channeled, regulated" (33). In Deleuze and Guattari"s theorization of subject-formation is the way in which an abstraction regulated by the nation-state, like the concepts of "citizen" and "woman," "translates contents of ... kind into a single substance of expression" (179-80). I read this process of subjection as the deterritorialized "self" becoming-abstract within the codes of the nation-state . In their words, *"Very specific assemblages of power impose significance and subjectification* as their determinate form of expression....[while] A concerted effort is made to do away with the body and corporeal coordinates through which the multidimensional or polyvocal semiotics operated" (180-81, authors" emphasis). This "body" to which the theorists refer is called the deterritorilized "body without organs" (Bw0), an open-ended and free-floating signifier, which becomes reterritorialized under various despotic signs of the family, the law, and the state.
8. This obliteration of the self is similar to Frantz Fanon"s description of the racialized other"s experience of repulsion in facing his Self in, what could be called, Lacan"s mirror of representation: "the emotional sensitivity of the native is kept on the surface of the skin like an open sore...and the psyche shrinks back, obliterates itself" (56). The native"s psyche fails to exist – it "obliterates itself" – and is, therefore, a *body-without-organs (BwO)* in the act of making contact with his own image as a prescribed Other of the white, male self.
9. *Wife's* representations of dowry are much less stereotypical: "Mr. Dasgupta had the horoscope checked, made preliminary inquiries about dowry requirements (he said he was prepared to give the usual gold ornaments, saris, watch and fountain pen, some furniture, perhaps, but absolutely not a scooter or a refrigerator)" (15). Dowry, as Uma Narayan suggests "has become „commercialized," [and] traditional norms have significantly eroded" (110). Dowry is no longer simply a "traditional" practice, but carries overtones of a very "modern" economic system in which technological appliances are often demanded.
10. Anne Brewster argues that "Mukherjee"s discourse on migrants in the U.S. positions them not on the margin of contemporary American culture but, rather, as exemplars of a hegemonic nationalism...Mukherjee explicitly endorses the notion of „assimilation"" (1).
11. In her critique of rationalist or scientific discourse Donna Haraway suggests that "an object of knowledge is finally itself only matter for the seminal power, the act, of the knower...[and] any status as agent in the productions of knowledge must be denied the object" (197-198).
12. The word "agency" can assume very different meanings within the confines set up by different discourses for example, within the materialist realm of cultural production an agent is one who possesses the means of production; within an existentialist subjectivity, an agent possesses the will to understand, the will to know; within certain psychoanalytic models, the agent *looks* and, therefore, desires a sense of visual coherence as a Self; within theories of the "nation," an agent is a member of the labor-force and is, consequently, valued as a citizen; and within certain historical frameworks, the historigrapher finds agency - her own and the text"s - in the recuperated subaltern voice.

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