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# Translating Postcolonial Pasts: Immigration and Identity in the Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee, Elizabeth Nunez, and Jhumpa Lahiri

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TRANSLATING POSTCOLONIAL PASTS:  
IMMIGRATION AND IDENTITY IN THE FICTION OF  
BHARATI MUKHERJEE, ELIZABETH NUNEZ, AND JHUMPA LAHIRI

By

Ann Marie Alfonso-Forero

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty  
of the University of Miami  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Coral Gables, Florida

May 2011

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Translating Postcolonial Pasts:

(May 2011)

Immigration and Identity in the Fiction of

Bharati Mukherjee, Elizabeth Nunez, and Jhumpa Lahiri.

Abstract of a dissertation at the University of Miami.

Dissertation supervised by Professors Lindsey Tucker and Timothy Watson.

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This dissertation examines how postcoloniality affects identity formation in contemporary women's immigrant literature. In order to do so, it must interrogate the critical fields that are most interested in issues of national and cultural identities, migration, and the appropriation of women by both Western and postcolonial projects. By examining the fiction of Bharati Mukherjee, Elizabeth Nunez, and Jhumpa Lahiri through the triple lens of ethnic American studies, postcolonial theory, and transnational feminism, I will argue that theorizing postcolonial women's writing in the United States involves sustained analysis of how particular socio-political experiences are translated into the context of American identity.

I am particularly interested in the manner in which female subjects in these texts navigate between the various and often contradictory demands placed on them by their respective homeland cultures and their new immigrant positions in the United States. Although each of these writers depict immigrant women protagonists who adapt to these demands in their own particular ways, a study of these characters' gendered and cultural identities reveals a powerful relationship between the manner in which women are figured into the preservation of the postcolonial nation-state and the ways in which these women utilize immigration as an occasion to appropriate and subvert this role in the establishment of a new, negotiated identity.

This project draws on three important and current fields of interest to both cultural and literary studies. Postcolonial studies, which has been central to the study of literature by minority writers, provides a useful foundation for understanding hybrid identities, dislocation, and the ways in which empire gave rise to nationalisms that utilized women in the formation and preservation of the nation-state. Transnational feminist theories are critical to understanding the implications of nationalism's appropriation of women and their bodies in its projects, and are especially useful in establishing feminisms that are not limited by American or European definitions and that defy homogenizing the experiences of postcolonial women. They affirm that there are many strategies for employing female agency, and that we must consider the particular circumstances (economic, cultural, racial, national, gender) that allow women of color to favor one strategy over another. Finally, U.S. Ethnic studies will inform my readings of texts that are, at their core, narratives of immigration to the United States and the seeking out of the American Dream. However, this dissertation suggests, the precarious position of immigrants in a nation whose ideals and dominating mythology are marred by a dark history of racism and exclusionary practices plays an important role in the establishment of an ethnic American identity in the United States.

For Eddie and Coraline Moon,  
with all my love and gratitude.

And in memory of  
my abuela, Urania De Guevara (1930-2005).

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## **Introduction**

“Translating Postcolonial Pasts: Immigration and Identity in the fiction of Bharati Mukherjee, Elizabeth Nunez, and Jhumpa Lahiri” examines how postcoloniality affects identity formation in contemporary women’s immigrant literature. In order to do so, it must interrogate the critical fields that are most interested in issues of national and cultural identities, migration, and the appropriation of women by both Western and postcolonial projects. By examining three examples of immigrant women’s writing through the triple lens of ethnic American studies, postcolonial theory, and transnational feminism, I will argue that theorizing postcolonial women’s writing in the United States involves sustained analysis of how particular socio-political experiences are translated into the context of American identity.

The surge of interest in postcolonial studies in the 1990s complicated and enriched the field of U.S. ethnic studies in ways that continue to provide opportunities for further discussion. The cultural identity of the United States has historically been wrought by the contradictions inherent in its being both former colony and empire, a transition that was made possible by virtue of the race and religion of its “settlers,” as well as its reputation of being a nation of immigrants. As such, both U.S. ethnic studies and postcolonial studies have moved towards transnational models in order to account for the interconnectedness of the experiences of colonialism, postcolonialism, neocolonialism, and migration. Immigrant literature is increasingly interested in the transnational experiences of its protagonists; in other words, immigrant narratives are not simply about migrating to and making it in America, but engage with the literal and metaphorical crossing and re-crossing of borders. The narratives examined in this

dissertation sometimes revisit their protagonists' postcolonial pasts through memories and flashbacks, and sometimes more explicitly through the narrator's interjection of historical details about the country left behind in the process of immigration. But what these moments reveal is the ubiquitous presence of postcoloniality in their narratives of migration. These novels are written within American borders, published by American publishing houses, for mostly American audiences, and deal with some unmistakably American tropes. However, they are inextricably connected to the global effects of colonization and independence in the former British empire. While the protagonists in these texts all strive for a level of negotiated inclusion in their new American lives, the balance between negotiation and inclusion depends on the extent to which each sees herself translated from postcolonial to immigrant to American.

In 1965, President Johnson signed the Hart-Cellar Immigration Act, which removed national origins quotas as a factor in welcoming immigrants, making it easier for immigrants from the postcolonial world to come to the United States. This change, along with the instability that independence movements caused in postcolonial nations after World War II, fueled immigration from those countries, effectively transforming ethnic America and inspiring a new wave of postcolonial immigrant writing. Scholarly interest in "new immigrant" literature increased steadily as the field of postcolonial studies surged, resulting in several texts and many articles that deal with the overlap of these two fields. Much of this work addresses the extent to which the United States is itself postcolonial, a question I will address in more detail later in this introduction. Because of the many ways in which the condition of "third world" women has been imbricated with issues of colonization and nationalist independence movements, an

extensive scholarly overlap exists between postcolonial studies and transnational feminism. Moreover, the pioneering work of Gloria Anzaldúa has served to link U.S. ethnic studies with transnational feminism, and others like Cherrie Moraga and Lisa Lowe continue her interrogation of borders, migration, and women's issues among immigrant and ethnic American women. This project finds itself in the lonely triple overlap of these fields.<sup>1</sup> Like transnational feminist scholars who argue that no single blanket form of feminism can nor should be applied to all "third world" women because of the myriad national, cultural, religious, and class differences among them, I am arguing that immigrant women's writing reflects a similar variety in the identity negotiation strategies employed by writers and their protagonists. This variety must be addressed through an examination of the different postcolonial histories that produced varying relationships between women and their nation-states, and the implications of these relationships on their development of immigrant identities in the United States.

### **Immigration, Ethnicity, and Postcolonialism in the United States**

The idea that America is a nation of immigrants is arguably the most ubiquitous aspect of its national mythology. It is not surprising, then, that the tropes of immigration and acculturation constitute such an important part of the American literary imagination. Some of the earliest examples of what is now considered our national literature document the experiences of newly arrived settlers, and the few hundred years of American

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<sup>1</sup> Inderpal Grewal's 2005 book *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms*, which I will discuss later in more detail, takes a multidisciplinary approach to the overlap of American imperialism, postcoloniality, and transnational feminisms. Her text, however, is more interested in the creation of South Asian American subjects (in the U.S. and abroad) rather than the implications of the intersection of these three fields more specifically on ethnic American literature, although she does take examples from ethnic American literature – such as *Jasmine* – to make her point.

literature that have followed are full of narratives that, in one way or another, engage with the arrival of people from other countries and the many ways in which they attempt to make themselves at home in the United States. However, as John Higham notes in *Send These to Me: Jews and Other Immigrants in Urban America* (1975), the earliest writing on what immigration means for American identity reflects a tension between homogeneity and diversity. Even in the late eighteenth century, when all immigrants in question were white Western Europeans, historians of the new American nation did not agree on whether this society was “a mixture of many European peoples, a nation of immigrants” or “one united people – a people descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the same religion, attached to the same principles of government very similar in their manners and customs” (Higham 3).<sup>2</sup> That this tension remains at the heart of some of our most vitriolic political debates and central to both academic and popular reflections of American identity shows not only the unresolvability of this question, but more importantly that the relationship between immigrants and the definition of “American” is always in flux.<sup>3</sup> This relationship has become only more vexed as immigration has come to be represented in the political arena as the arrival of

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<sup>2</sup> This description of Americans as a “united people” is not Higham’s, but the words of John Jay, author of the second *Federalist* papers. Higham quotes these lines from Winthrop D. Jordan’s *White Over Black: American Attitudes Towards the Negro 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill, 1968).

<sup>3</sup> In fact, I am writing this introduction in the shadow of three examples of this debate. In Arizona, the state legislature passed a law in 2010 that allows police officers to check immigration statuses while enforcing other laws (and political speculation about exporting that law to other states continues). In Congress, conservative politicians are indulging the concerns of right-wing activists questioning the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment’s granting of citizenship to the natural-born children of illegal immigrants by scheduling debates on the matter. Finally, outrage in New York about the plan to build a Muslim community center near the site of the 2001 World Trade Center attacks has incited a new wave of anti-Muslim sentiment, including the bold statement of a popular conservative blogger for the American Family Association arguing that no more mosques should be built in America because “each Islamic mosque is dedicated to the overthrow of the American government” (Fischer). All three of these examples demonstrate the ongoing nature of debates surrounding immigrants and their contributions to American culture and identity. These debates utilize fear – of illegal immigrants as criminals, of their children benefiting from American resources, of terrorism and the threat to the American way of life – as their fallback position.

non-white, non-European peoples – those who more explicitly threaten the ethnic, cultural, and religious makeup of the United States.

Higham goes on to argue that neither diversity nor homogeneity alone sufficiently defines the American experience. Both are “legends,” each “an amalgam of partial truths and potent myths” (4). But each of these discourses depends on the other to survive: the persistent presence of those perceived as foreign creates a stronger need to define the American character; the “American” ideals of freedom and opportunity are best represented by the influx of impoverished and persecuted peoples who seek them out on our shores. Higham suggests that the immigrant is enlarged “to the dimensions of myth” by a discourse that imagines immigration as “the starting point of the great American success story” (4). He continues:

In the absence of a truly rooted national tradition, Americans have been united – it might be argued – by their commitment to the future. And the future-looking orientation of the American people has shaped the most notable American traits: idealism, flexibility, and adaptability to change; a dependence on the self and the immediate family more than the wider community; a high respect for personal achievement; a tendency to conform to the values of peers and neighbors instead of holding stubbornly to ancestral ways. (4-5)

This view of immigration does not preclude the nativist, anti-immigrant sentiment that has accompanied every great wave of immigration in American history, as Higham’s text goes on to show.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, it takes for granted that assimilation into a preconceived notion of an “American” way of life is the immigrant’s ultimate goal; that “Americanness” equals progress. While immigration “has also been a major

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<sup>4</sup> Higham devotes a chapter of his text outlining the history of immigration restriction in America, another chapter to nativism, and three chapters to various forms of anti-Jewish sentiment. Anti-semitism and nativism are as important to his argument regarding the role of immigrants in defining urban America as the presence of the immigrants themselves. His 1955 book, *Strangers in the Land*, is still considered one of the foremost texts on American nativism and anti-immigrant movements in the United States.



differentiating force...separat[ing] those who bear the marks of foreign origin or inheritance from others who do not,” the success of the immigrant in this discourse depends on his ability to mitigate these differences by embracing these ideals (5).

For decades, this “melting pot” metaphor prevailed as the model for how immigrants in America should be understood.<sup>5</sup> This paradigm ostensibly satisfies both those who believe in a unitary definition of what it means to be American and those who see America as a nation of immigrants: differences “melt” away as immigrants conform to American values, customs, and ideals; meanwhile the contents of the “pot” are enriched –but not too drastically changed – by the inclusion of diverse peoples. In exploring the problems with pluralism, Higham notes that assimilation is historically significant to American nation-building:

The building of a national republic gave central importance to the process of convergence, to the making of a homogenous future from a heterogeneous past. The dominant American legend – what was later symbolized in the image of the melting pot – said that a continuous fusion of originally disparate elements was forming a single American people. In the attainment of oneness, rather than the persistence of separate identities, lay the promise of American life. (199)

Although this statement is clearly problematic when we consider the violent ways in which certain minorities – particularly African Americans, Native Americans, and Mexicans – were simultaneously appropriated by the United States and excluded from

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<sup>5</sup> In *Beyond Ethnicity* (1986), Werner Sollors credits *The Melting Pot*, a 1905 play by English Jewish immigrant Israel Zangwill, with “more than any social or political theory...shap[ing] American discourse on immigration and ethnicity” (66). Throughout the rest of this chapter, which he also calls “Melting Pots,” Sollors traces an American cultural history that supports how this metaphor became the de facto model of belonging for immigrants in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although Sollors cites opposition to the melting pot model from both the right and left, he concludes that very little could detract from its dominance in the discourse of American ethnicity.

American culture and denied basic American rights, it represents a persistent and widespread perception of immigrants in America.<sup>6</sup>

Higham suggests that assimilation or integration depends on the privileging of the individual while its opposite, pluralism, privileges the idea of the group. The assimilationist “must be free to secede from his ancestors” while pluralists “can realize themselves, and become whole, only through the group that nourishes their being” (233). By taking this position, Higham does not consider that in giving up her ancestral heritage to conform to mainstream American culture, the modern immigrant is not asserting her individuality but merely swapping one group identity for another. Moreover, the ancestral group in this model is perceived as almost herd-like, not allowing for individual differences among its members. He assumes Americanization as progress and native cultures as backwards. However, based on these assumptions, Higham ultimately concludes that neither of these positions is viable in modern American life and sketches out a middle ground of “pluralistic integration,” which “will not eliminate ethnic boundaries” nor “maintain them intact;” instead, “it will uphold the validity of a common culture to which all individuals have access, while sustaining the efforts of minorities to preserve and enhance their own integrity” (242). He sketches out the possibility of a society in which

[n]o ethnic community under these terms may have the support of the general community in strengthening its boundaries. All boundaries are understood to be permeable. Ethnic nuclei, on the other hand, are respected as enduring centers of social action...Both integration and

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<sup>6</sup> I do not mean to suggest that the melting pot is the only model for understanding ethnicity in twentieth century America – a body of writing in support of ethnic pluralism by thinkers such as Horace Kallen and W.E.B. Du Bois can attest that it is not. However, the melting pot persisted as the dominant paradigm in the American imagination thanks to its prevalence in political rhetoric and literary and other cultural works by and about immigrants. I am arguing that this model, along with the multiculturalist and postethnic models that follow, represent an evolution of ethnic American identity that has made possible the current transnational moment.

ethnic cohesion are recognized as worthy goals, which different individuals will accept in different degrees. (242)

In this model, which evolves into the multiculturalism that gained traction towards the end of the twentieth century, the good of the common culture is still privileged over any ethnic group. Moreover, the preservation of ethnic groups is the responsibility of individuals within the group; the majority community need not go beyond recognizing the right of such ethnic groups to exist.

In his 1986 book *Beyond Ethnicity*, Werner Sollors similarly suggests that ethnicity in America is defined by the compromise between pluralism and assimilation. He frames his argument using the terms “consent” and “descent”:

Descent relations are those defined by anthropologists as relations of “substance” (by blood or nature); consent relations describe those of “law” or “marriage.” Descent language emphasizes our position as heirs, or hereditary qualities, liabilities, and entitlements; consent language stresses our abilities as mature free agents and “architects of our fates” to choose our spouses, our destinies, and our political systems. (6)

Like Higham, Sollors recognizes the tension the “ethnic” or immigrant experiences between his ancestral background (the ethnic group) and a self-chosen, self-made American identity. Descent represents the ethnic group one is born into and therefore implies a lack of cultural agency, while Americanization is understood to be a choice, the ultimate assertion of individuality.<sup>7</sup> This view puts an overly optimistic spin on the process of Americanization while obscuring that immigrants often assimilate under great

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<sup>7</sup> As I will later discuss, Inderpal Grewal makes a very compelling case for how freedom of choice is touted as a uniquely American virtue. She links the idea of choice in American consumer culture to the transnational American subject’s belief that he is free. Although her argument deals specifically with the 1990s, by which time technology and travel allowed the promise of American goods and pop culture to proliferate around the world as symbols of freedom and democracy, both Higham and Sollors are suggesting that the idea of choice has persisted from a much earlier period of Americanization as it pertains to immigrants.

external pressure. Moreover, it ignores the coercion that has unfortunately played a significant role in America's relationship with its ethnic minority communities.

Although it often makes sense to discuss immigrant and ethnic American identities together, and although the categories of "immigrant" and "ethnic American" (as they pertain to literature) are sometimes used interchangeably in this dissertation and in other critical studies because of the obvious overlap between them, I do not mean to suggest an easy interchangeability. As Louis Mendoza and S. Shankar note in the introduction to their 2003 edited collection of "new immigrant" writing, a historical reason exists for why "'immigrant literature' gave way to 'ethnic literature'" (xxi). They assert that

Immigration began to be restricted in the 1920s and in the decades following the effects of the previous flow of immigrants gradually dissipated. Accordingly the tradition of writing so dependent on the particular experience of immigration also declined... "Ethnicity," it would seem, now did some of the work of "immigration" in representing an evolving America to itself. (xxi)

Moreover, ethnic American literature includes African-American, Native American, and Mexican American literature. Although as a subset of ethnic American literature immigrant literatures share some of its tropes and concerns, because of the history of forced migration, dislocation, and oppression associated with these groups and their literatures, there should be (and already are) significant differences in how critical examinations of these literatures are addressed when compared to immigrant literature. Indeed, ethnic American literature in the first half of the twentieth century is marked by immigrant success stories in which said success is concomitant with assimilation. It provides a model in which immigrants can be perceived as enterprising and flexible

contributors and America can be perceived as the Promised Land that provides those who seek it the opportunity to succeed. Sollors notes,

But whenever it was that America was born or came of age, in all the instances mentioned we might also look at the writings of and about people who were descended from diverse backgrounds but were, or consented to become, Americans. This way we may learn something about how Americanness is achieved, at the point of its emergence and how it is established again and again as newcomers and outsiders are socialized into the culture – a process which inevitably seems to revitalize the culture at the same time. Works of ethnic literature – written by, about, or for persons who perceived themselves, or were perceived by others, as members of ethnic groups – may thus be read not only as expressions of mediation between cultures but also handbooks of socialization into the codes of Americanness. (7)

He is suggesting, however, that the value of immigrant literature lies not only in its representation of the immigrant's Americanizing journey, although he does not deny the centrality of this aspect, but also in how it represents American values, customs, and way of life. This type of immigrant literature, however, does not address the coerced – and in some cases denied – Americanization of non-immigrant ethnic groups such as African Americans, Native Americans, and displaced Mexican Americans.

While both Higham and Sollors take for granted that assimilation is the desired end for the immigrant, what I find most interesting about their arguments is the suggestion made by both that group membership and American identity are mutually exclusive. Higham imagines the immigrant that can move successfully between his group and the larger (American) community; the former is a self-contained subset of the latter. For Sollors, the tension between consent and descent implies that Americanization and ethnic affiliation exist on a spectrum so that the more one participates in one, the less he can participate in the other. What these formulations suggest is a static, unitary understanding of what constitutes "Americanness" as well as an essentializing perception

of the ethnic group from which the immigrant descends. Moreover, while immigrants are able to move back and forth between their “ethnic” and “American” identities, Higham’s and Sollors’s constructions of integrated multicultures preclude the immigrant from simultaneously being both ethnic and American. As more recent critics like Lisa Lowe have noted, the pluralistic multiculturalism that became popular towards the end of the twentieth century had a similar effect, reinforcing ethnic groups as peripheral to mainstream American culture while suggesting that ethnic groups are homogenous within themselves.<sup>8</sup> Noting very different concerns, Walter Benn Michaels has long argued that America’s preoccupation with ethnic and cultural identity provides an easy distraction from more universal concerns such as poverty and class disparities.<sup>9</sup> In both political and academic circles, the dangers of a politics of identity have come to be associated with the unconditional acceptance of multiculturalism in America.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In *Immigrant Acts* (1995), Lowe argues that Asian American culture should not be limited as fixed, something passed on vertically from generation to generation. Instead, this culture is horizontally determined among generations, and totally dynamic. That is, it is constantly changing in response to the material conditions surrounding it. Cultural identity is constantly transforming and cannot be essentialized. As such, Asian Americans are not a homogenous group with a uniform ethnic cultural or racial formation. Instead they are determined by heterogeneity (differences in nation, class, gender, sexual identity, etc. among them), hybridity (varying and sometimes contesting forces that make one up, in response to uneven, synthetic power relations), and multiplicity (subjects are determined by several axes of power).

<sup>9</sup> In *The Trouble with Diversity* (2006), Michaels argues that “our commitment to diversity has redefined the opposition to discrimination as the appreciation (rather than the elimination) of difference. So with respect to race, the idea is not just that racism is a bad thing (which of course it is) but that race itself is a good thing” (5). This fetishizing of racial identity overshadows scientific doubt over whether or not race even exists. Moreover, “We love thinking that the differences that divide us are not the differences between those of us who have money and those who don’t but are instead the differences between those of us who are black and those who are white or Asian or Latino or whatever” (6). His argument is compelling: in contemporary America, class divides the population in more relevant ways – rates of education, overall health and life expectancy, teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted disease, etc. – than does racial identity. However, it is remarkably difficult to address class without acknowledging that certain ethnic minority populations have historically faced brutal and institutionalized racism that has made it difficult, if not nearly impossible, to overcome generations of poverty.

<sup>10</sup> Criticism of multiculturalism comes from both the left and the right. Academics like Lowe argue that it does not do enough to empower minority groups. Jenny Sharpe suggests that “liberal multiculturalism effaces the different histories of native and immigrant populations and the specific histories of the different groups that constitute the nation” (111). On the other hand, historians like Arthur Schlesinger have argued that although racism “has been the great national tragedy” in America and acknowledges multiethnicity as the historical basis of the nation, modern “ethnic militants” threaten “the historic idea of a transcendent and

The evolution of attitudes towards ethnicity in the United States and how these attitudes are represented in ethnic American literature reflect the profound changes that have taken place in the U.S. and globally since World War II, most notably the 1965 Immigration Act. Mendoza and Shankar argue that new immigrant literature “reveals new concerns,” one of which is “the preoccupation with race and the limitations imposed by it in America” (xxi). They note,

The writers of the old literature of immigration were for the most part from Europe or of European descent. American history no doubt shows that the racial category of ‘white’ is contingent and evolving, so that at various points in American history the whiteness of the Irish or the Jew was a matter of some contestation; nevertheless, it is safe to say that race is altogether more complicated and important an issues in the new literature of immigration which overwhelmingly deals with the experiences of people who are not from Europe or not of European descent. (xxi)

Because of the elimination of the national origins quotas in the 1965 immigration legislation, the United States has experienced mass immigration from non-European countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean over the last four decades. The resulting increase in more visible racial minorities, less able to “melt” into the American fabric, has complicated the discourse of assimilation. Moreover, the significance of the civil rights movement cannot be overstated in any discussion of post-1960s attitudes towards race and ethnicity in the United States. This volatile period in American history not only deeply affected official policy towards immigrants but also made the nation far more self-conscious about its potential to integrate its various minority populations. Ethnic American literature written in the last few decades of the

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unifying American identity” (24, 22). He wonders, “Do not the ethnic militants see any dangers in a society divided into distinct and immutable ethnic and racial groups, each taught to cherish its own apartness from the rest... Will the center hold? Or will the melting pot give way to the Tower of Babel?” (22).

twentieth century reflects this loss of innocence and idealism regarding the ethnic immigrant's ability to become an American. Elizabeth Nunez's 1998 novel, *Beyond the Limbo Silence*, is one example of a text that presents the complicated relationship between a dark-skinned Caribbean immigrant and the civil rights movement. While the protagonist ostensibly lives out the American Dream in Wisconsin, she learns that Americans who look like her are being beaten and lynched in the South, causing her to question her African-descended identity and her ability to accept the opportunity to fulfill America's promise.

Although, as Mendoza and Shankar point out, "assimilation remains an option – even a recommendation" in some new immigrant writing (they cite Richard Rodriguez's work as an example), many contemporary immigrant and ethnic American texts present a suspicious, if not oppositional, attitude towards Americanization. They often challenge the myth of the American Dream, exposing the racism that immigrants face and the challenges that even the hardest working face in their quest to "make it." Even a text like Bharati Mukherjee's 1989 novel, *Jasmine*, which has been read for over two decades as a text that celebrates assimilation and the Americanized liberation of its title character at the expense of her native culture, is full of harsh criticism of U.S. policy and attitudes towards immigrants and its neocolonial presence in Asia. As I discuss in Chapter One, what many critics have read as Mukherjee's unconditional embrace of an American identity is in fact a challenge to her new homeland to remain flexible, allowing for diversity to define that very identity.



In *New Strangers in Paradise* (1999), Gilbert H. Muller suggests that this change in attitude reflected in new immigrant literature represents a change in the national narrative. He argues that

Immigration in postwar American fiction reflects a national myth or narrative undergoing transformation as the margin modifies the mainstream and cultural Others alter the ways in which both their identities and American identity are defined, for their odysseys of dislocation are also odysseys of evolving national consciousness. Postcolonial and Third World immigrants remold the New World and the narrative of America, forcing a dialectic on what was once a common, largely Eurocentric cultural ethos. (2-3)

He goes on to describe a “postmodernist immigrant style – self-reflexive, indeterminate, emergent, ultimately unassimilable” (19). These immigrants inhabit a “liminal or marginal landscape;” moreover, “[challenging] the notion of both a common heritage and fixed boundaries so central to the grand narrative of the American state...they wander or float contrapuntally across cultures, nomads who reject established frontiers and boundaries and embrace instead the intermediate space between cultures” (20). This ethos frees the contemporary immigrant from models of belonging that depended on his assimilation or the expectation that he represent the traits and political identity of a specific ethnic group. Unlike the multiculturalist model, in which immigrant subjects move between uniformly composed realms of “American” and “ethnic,” Muller’s suggestion reflects an *in-betweenness* that has gained traction in recent discourses of borders and transnationality and that informs my readings of novelists like Mukherjee, Nunez, and Lahiri.

Discussions of transnationality in America emerge most frequently out of a set of questions surrounding the relationship among postcolonialism, neocolonialism, and the United States. Indeed, it is nearly impossible to read Muller’s description without

hearing echoes of Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* (1987) or Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994), both of which are essential to any discussion of postcoloniality in the United States in their respective discussions of borders and the interstices between cultures. Muller links this shift in style and strategy among ethnic American writers to the increased presence of "third world" and postcolonial immigrants in the United States after World War II. They "are the colonized counterparts to the earlier European explorers" on "missions of discovery to the New World," whose texts "engag[e] in a critique of dominant culture" (14, 15). Muller notes, "In their new imperial habitats in the United States, those immigrants who were formerly colonized challenge the myths and symbols of the nation. Their heterogeneous otherness and racial difference force an interrogation of American identity and accepted national norms" (15). His suggestion that "the tensions between the 'colonists' and the 'colonized,' between 'us' and 'others' have shifted from the Third World settings to the borders and barrios of the American landscape itself" speaks directly to a question central to my argument about the novelists examined in this project: to what extent is the United States postcolonial? (18). The manner in which immigrant writers have adopted identification strategies determined by the relationship between colonizer and colonized helps to explain the transnational shift in their literature.

Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin's *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), one of the earlier theoretical discussions of postcolonial literature, makes a frequently cited claim regarding the extent to which the United States can be considered postcolonial. They argue that the United States is postcolonial to the extent that its culture, specifically its literature, was the first independent national literature to emerge

in response to a liberation struggle with an imperial power. Despite there being at least some validity to this assertion, what this important text does not acknowledge has provided many scholars since the opportunity to respond regarding the postcoloniality of the United States. This discussion has become more relevant as postcolonial discourse has led to academic discussions about globalization, American neocolonialism, and transnationalism. One such response comes from Jenny Sharpe in her essay, "Is the United States Postcolonial? Transnationalism, Immigration, and Race" (2000). Sharpe argues that because preoccupation with multiculturalism in the U.S academy began around the same time that the academy began to acknowledge the relevance of postcolonialism as a discursive field, the two have come together in what she calls a "minority discourse" (104). Although she finds that there is some use in this development when discussing the condition of "internally colonized" groups in the U.S. (African Americans, Native Americans, and Mexicans), such a discussion does not truly characterize her understanding of the United States as postcolonial (105). For Sharpe, the U.S. should be considered postcolonial at the moment in which its "internal relations intersect with global capitalism and the international division of labor...the neocolonial relations into which the United States entered with decolonized nations" (106). Via its immigration policies, which favor skilled "third world" workers, and its role in maintaining a global consumerism which has created "indigenous elites" that "constitute a transnational capitalist class whose members act in the interest in the global system," the United States represents a shift in how the term "postcolonial" should be understood (118). It is not the presence of "third world" immigrants that makes the U.S.

postcolonial, but the policies that the nation-state implements at home and abroad that make postcoloniality a viable paradigm by which to consider its national project.

Inderpal Grewal takes a similar approach to postcolonialism and the United States in *Transnational America* (2006). Grewal addresses the question of whether the U.S. is postcolonial by examining how it asserts itself transnationally as an imperial power through its cultural, socio-political, and economic ubiquity around the world. She is interested in how through its nationalist discourse and edification of consumer choice, the U.S. creates “neoliberal” subjects worldwide, so that not only immigrants within U.S. borders are co-opted by these ideals. She argues that colonialism paved the way for this shift, noting that

America remained an undiminished source of both decentralized and centralized power through neoliberal regimes, technologies, and rationalities...and many of the inequalities generated by an earlier era of colonization were important to understanding the trajectories along which new centers emerged. The United States remained a hegemon, and its source of power was its ability to generate forms of regulation across particular connectivities that emerged as independent as well as to recuperate the historicized inequalities generated by earlier phases of imperialism. (21)

The United States is able to become a neoliberal imperialist power precisely because of the colonialism that preceded it in countries such as India, with which Grewal’s study is most concerned, and other former colonies in the Caribbean and elsewhere. Taking advantage of the uneven distribution of wealth and power left behind after the departure of the British, the U.S. spread “the promise of democratic citizenship and belonging through consumer practices as well as disciplinary technologies” and created diverse, transnational subjects “so that becoming American did not always or necessarily connote full participation or belonging to a nation-state” (2, 8). Moreover, she associates the

creation of these subjects with capitalist consumer culture, suggesting that “consumption practices, which constitute an important part of the imaginary community formed by ‘American’ nationalism through discourses of the ‘American way of life,’ were conveyed through transnational media advertising as a dominant white lifestyle of power and plenty” (9). Grewal takes Benedict Anderson’s ‘imagined community’ paradigm of nationalism into the transnational age, arguing that an imagined “Americanness” spreads over the world through migration, the media, and material consumption.<sup>11</sup> Some of these neoliberal subjects come to America, like the immigrant protagonists in the novels I am discussing, but many of them do not. In other words, geography does not limit the potency of American nationalism but reinforces it transnationally.

Although I find Sharpe’s and Grewal’s arguments compelling, I also find that they are somewhat limiting in their failure to fully explore the implications of mass migration from the “third world” on “American” identity. Although Sharpe recognizes that Britain is postcolonial because its national identity has been fractured by the presence of postcolonial immigrants “returning” to the metropolitan center, neither she nor Grewal fully explore how American culture has been affected by its reinscription as a new metropolitan center (104). Grewal, while making useful observations about the transnational power of American culture, does not acknowledge the influence of postcolonial cultures as they move over borders. Each assumes a lack of agency or resistance among neoliberal American subjects. These arguments similarly fail to afford immigrants any power in destabilizing the hegemonic power of American culture. I find

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<sup>11</sup> Consider Anderson’s “definition of the nation” as “an imagined political community...imagined as both inherently limited [because of its finite boundaries] and sovereign [because it came into being as divinely-ordained hierarchies were in decline]” (6). This definition aptly describes the imagined participation of Grewal’s neoliberal subjects in American nationalism.

it more useful to think of postcoloniality in the United States as Muller suggests, acknowledging that “the immigrants’ rival histories of colonial subjugation and racial discrimination confront the verities underlying the American national experience,” which “force[s] both immigrants and mainstream Americans to reassess their identities” (15, 18). While it is critical to recognize the material implications of American policies as a nation-state, in regard to cultural and literary studies it is also important to recognize the discursive potential made available by discussions of postcoloniality in American culture.

Bhabha has written extensively on postcoloniality and culture, and his approach is useful to my interpretation of postcoloniality in the United States. In *The Location of Culture*, he argues that although postcoloniality is a “salutary reminder” of persistent neocolonial relations in the “new world order” and international division of labor, the true power of postcoloniality is its ability to “bear witness” to communities that exist “otherwise than modernity” (6). It is certainly worth noting that many of the examples Bhabha uses in his introduction are drawn from ethnic American literature and culture: African-American, Chicano, and Nuyorican. What postcoloniality bears witness to is the emergence of identifications that do not belong to any unitary categorizations such as race, nation, gender, or class. Instead, these “contra-modern” communities that Bhabha privileges are ones that emerge in the interstices, in-between and beyond these categories, so that the articulations of difference create new solidarities (6). He recognizes in his use of examples from Toni Morrison and other ethnic American writers that postcolonial migration facilitates these new borderline and hybrid identifications, thereby giving postcoloniality a place in the United States. In addition to resonating with Anzaldúa’s use of “borderlands” as a strategic space in discussions of identity and culture, which I

will come back to, his argument shares a few important points with Walter Dignolo's formulation of "border gnoseology" as one of the benefits of postcolonial globalization. Dignolo – while acknowledging that uneven economic development recreates colonial-like power structures between developed and developing nations – privileges the potential that exists in the movement of peoples, languages, and cultures around the globe. He argues that this movement, along with the uncoupling of the ostensibly natural link between culture and language, creates a discursive space from which the "third world" can speak to the West in ways that it never has before. This argument reaffirms the privilege Bhabha extends to the voices that emerge from the in-between spaces of articulated differences.

Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* is primarily concerned with the destruction of binaries that limit one's identification strategies, particularly among the Mexican American population in the United States. She offers the metaphor of "borderlands" as a psychic and theoretical space from which to negotiate the various categories that have the power to claim most people. She argues that identity, like culture, is dynamic, a "work in progress" of sorts; it is an often uncomfortable condition that involves a fluid and changing definition of "home." This paradigm is useful to any current discussion of ethnic American and immigrant culture because it is better suited than either the melting pot or pluralist models to describe the particular transnational multiculturalism that exists in the United States today. Borderlands offer a multidimensional strategy for defining oneself in a nation with a history of unevenness of social, economic, racial, and gender relations like the U.S. Like Lowe, Anzaldúa believes culture is always in flux, and although she acknowledges that inherited culture and ethnicity have a place in

determining one's identity, she argues that an individual must take stock of what has been handed down and discard what is not useful to her. This formulation resonates with Sollors's emphasis on consent over descent, but without obfuscating the material realities that limit participation in mainstream American culture. Anzaldúa's work is read as both primary text and theoretical model, and her ability to straddle genres (and languages) speaks for the content of her text and its place in the discussion of contemporary ethnicity and identity. I find that her work is particularly interesting in its relationship to postcolonialism and the way it overlaps with the discussions of identity that have emerged out of that discourse. Anzaldúa often refers to the colonial and neocolonial position of the United States in regard to Mexico, allowing her text to make interesting connections between internally colonized Mexican Americans and the position of postcolonial immigrants in the United States.

In the introduction to their edited anthology, *Postcolonial Theory and the United States* (2000), Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt argue that the borders paradigm offers the most workable approach to the intersection of ethnic American and postcolonial studies. They also confirm Sharpe's argument that postcolonialism has come to be understood as a 'minority discourse' in the United States; however, they describe the discursive value of this conflation in reading contemporary ethnic American and immigrant literatures. According to Singh and Schmidt, U.S. ethnic studies has much to gain from analysis of its intersection with postcolonialism, but they acknowledge that the field is currently split by advocates of postethnicity. This division emerges at the moment in which the U.S. can be considered a colony that became an empire because much American self-imagining is based on this feat, ignoring the internal stratification



and racism that contributed to the success of American democracy. They note, “While the U.S. defined itself as the world’s first independent and anti-colonial nation state it simultaneously incorporated many of the defining features of European colonial networks – including the color line – into its economic and cultural life” (5). The postethnicity school, however, takes a more optimistic approach to current ethnic relations in the United States, positing that “American culture was continually self-correcting towards inclusiveness” (Singh and Schmidt 6). Based on Sollors’s belief that identity is a function of consent, this model of voluntarily negotiated inclusion suggests that America serves as a model for the rest of the world in this regard, but fails to fully acknowledge and explore the many instances in which the U.S. has failed to provide the cultural and political conditions for its realization.<sup>12</sup>

Singh and Schmidt suggest that the borders paradigm shares with postethnicity an interest in “hybridity and the paradoxes and contradictions of ‘American’ identity,” but that borders scholars are acutely aware that “some groups may be ‘included’ in American culture primarily in coercive ways that keep them marked and subordinated as separate ‘minorities’” (7). They note that

the borders school suggests that such a third cultural space is not a recent emergence in U.S. history. Rather, it argues that this space has been present within the history of U.S. settlement from the beginning – that it is in fact constitutive of U.S. identity, central rather than marginal...And unlike the postethnicity school it does not posit such a state as the ultimate “consent” narrative, when past conflicts are left behind (made “post-”) for a radically remade identity transcending the past. (13)

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<sup>12</sup> In *Postethnic America* (2000), David A. Hollinger argues that “postethnicity is the critical renewal of cosmopolitanism in the context of today’s greater sensitivity to roots,” and introduces the term “rooted cosmopolitanism” to combat critics who would argue that postethnicity requires the erasure of ethnic struggle (5). Although his text often reads as an overly optimistic call for a “common future” in which differences do not preclude participation in a “larger American public” (157, 156), he does suggest that American culture “constantly [be] contested and critically revised,” albeit without challenging the tenability of American identity itself (161).

In fact, I would argue that the disconnect between the widely accepted perception that America's transition from colony to hegemonic superpower represents its exceptionalism and the reality of violence and oppression that made this shift possible has informed all discussions surrounding ethnic American identity. The borders paradigm offers an approach that acknowledges the split and attempts to reconcile it. As described by Singh and Schmidt, "By 'borders' in U.S. ethnic and cultural history we mean both examples of internal stratification within an ethnicity or a nation and the ways in which cultural differences may be used to define transnational connections and tensions" (7). Moreover, borders afford "networks and associations that are transplanted and yet continually mobile extending outside the U.S. but also branching in multiple ways within its cities and countryside" (13).

Two more recent texts, Gayatri Spivak's *Death of a Discipline* (2003) and Paul Gilroy's *Postcolonial Melancholia* (2005), also present more transnational approaches to understanding postcoloniality as it applies to the United States. Both Spivak and Gilroy use the term "planetary" or "planetarity" as an alternative to the more commonly used "global," which has emerged out of postcolonial theory. Each recognizes the global as a reinscription of the colonial world order, now dominated by capital and labor needs, as well as the role of the United States as neocolonial hegemon. Gilroy argues that because contemporary culture tends to underestimate the role of racism in colonial and postcolonial endeavors, often failing to address the racialized and violent history of European empire, it runs the risk of repeating similar mistakes.<sup>13</sup> Although Spivak's text

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<sup>13</sup> He addresses America's "War on Terror" as reemergence of colonial attitudes and an example of a type of solidarity "imposed from above," a transnational effort led by the United States under the guise of security that exploits fear and racializes entire populations deemed the enemies of democracy. While not an area explored in this dissertation, it is worth noting that the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and the

is a disciplinary manifesto in response to the state of comparative literary study while Gilroy is reflecting on the state of racial relations in Britain, both demonstrate anxiety regarding America's neocolonial power and their vision for planetarity seems to offer a defensive move against it. A more transnational understanding of culture can help neutralize the power of the modern nation-state, including United States.

Gilroy and Spivak both offer suggestions that move discussions of the United States as postcolonial into the current transnational moment. This moment requires that America's neocolonial role – as it is presented by Sharpe, Grewal, and others – be acknowledged as the reinscription of previous colonial relationships between Western European nations and the “third world.” Indeed, both Mukherjee's *Jasmine* and Nunez's *Beyond the Limbo Silence* acknowledge this shift. In *Jasmine*, the immigrant protagonist makes several pointed observations regarding America's military operations in Asia, noting how depictions of these distant lands influence the way Americans perceive and treat Asians in the United States. In Nunez's novel, the U.S. effectively replaces the British in Trinidad, buying land and military bases from them after World War II. Even in independent Trinidad, the presence of the U.S. military undermines the autonomy the new nation seeks to develop. Both texts acknowledge the disconnection between the perception in the postcolonial world of America as the ultimate symbol of freedom and democracy and the reality of its growing hegemonic power. This contradiction plays itself out in the experiences of the immigrant protagonists who must negotiate a place for themselves in the U.S. as they reconcile the dueling versions of America they have encountered. Meanwhile, postcolonialism serves as a useful “minority discourse” in

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subsequent military operations in the Middle East mark an interesting moment in the trajectory of ethnic American studies and postcolonialism, inspiring novels such as Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Arundhati Roy's essay, “The Algebra of Infinite Justice.”

postcolonial immigrant literature – despite Sharpe’s objections – in two important ways. Most obviously, it provides an instructive model for examining the manner in which mainstream American culture, in addition to certain nation-state policies, allows the U.S. to take on a colonizing role in regard to its immigrants. This form of internal colonization involves pressuring immigrants to become more “American,” speak English only, and aspire to the type of economic success that can be difficult for first-generation immigrants to achieve in an increasingly corporate capitalist economy. In addition, immigrants from postcolonial nations often reproduce class and gender relations that emerged in response to colonial and postcolonial conditions in their countries of origins in their new American environments. This reproduction is presented by immigrant writers as both a challenge to participation in American culture, as when Jasmine lives with an Indian family in New York soon after arriving in America and is limited by her widowhood from working or socializing. Ashima of Lahiri’s *The Namesake*, on the other hand, utilizes what some might understand as traditional gender roles to challenge the idea that she must consider herself either Indian or American and adopts a culturally mobile transnational identity. In other words, these examples of postcolonial immigrant literature demonstrate that these subjects have internalized relationships (to both their native and adopted homelands) that persist in the way they attempt to fashion an ethnic American identity.

In each of the novels I will discuss in this dissertation, the protagonists’ postcolonial pasts are translated in the United States to demonstrate the limitations of national identity and offer a transnational approach to belonging in the U.S. that more adequately reflects the reality of contemporary American life. These texts demonstrate

that the “American” in “ethnic American” is unstable. The different colonial histories of these contemporary immigrant writers and the protagonists they create result in varied ways of adapting to immigrant life in America and particular types of American identity, a process that calls into question the viability of national identity itself.<sup>14</sup> Mukherjee, despite the controversy that *Jasmine* has provoked among its critics, explores the flexibility of “American” identity, suggesting that immigrants play an important role in changing who that category represents. Nunez accounts for the vitality of diasporic communities and the manner in which the shared African roots of her West Indian protagonist and the African American community complicate her identity in the U.S. In *The Namesake*, the most recent novel that I examine, Lahiri creates an immigrant wife and mother who transcends the metaphorical and physical boundaries associated with national identity. Each of these writers moves further away from previous generations’ narratives of assimilation or representations of ghettoized ethnic existences, even as the current nationalist dialogue fervently defends “American” values against “illegals” and “terrorists.” And as I will demonstrate below, because postcolonial women have historically engaged in particularly vexed relationships to nationalisms, it is not surprising that women’s texts are so critical to this transnational shift in immigrant U.S. literature.

### **Theorizing Postcolonial Immigrant Women’s Writing**

While quite a bit has been written about gender identity and women’s issues in postcolonial studies – providing a useful foundation for understanding hybrid identities,

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<sup>14</sup> While a theorist like Anderson would argue that literature contributes to the creation of the nation as “imagined community,” I am suggesting that the literature addressed by this project departs from that function.

dislocation, and the ways in which empire gave rise to nationalisms that utilized women in the formation and preservation of the nation-state – little attention has been paid to theorizing the postcolonial female immigrant in the United States. Transnational feminisms, which arose out of postcolonialism’s need to engage with issues of gender politics, are critical to understanding the implications of the appropriation of women and their bodies in nationalist projects, and are especially useful in establishing feminisms that are not limited by American or European definitions and that do not equate the varied experiences of postcolonial women. As Geraldine Heng notes in “‘A Great Way to Fly’: Nationalism, the State, and the Varieties of Third-World Feminism” (1997), “Third-World feminisms do not have the luxury of predictability; and a feminist theory that would be global in its compass, as in its intentions, must expect to be surprised by the strategies, appearance, and forms of feminism that emerge and are effective in Third-World contexts” (30). Indeed, all transnational feminists seem to agree that there are many strategies for employing female agency, and that we must consider the particular circumstances (economic, cultural, racial, national, sexual) that allow women of color to favor one strategy over another.

In one of the seminal texts of the transnational feminist movement, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” (1984), Chandra Talpade Mohanty notes the manner in which Western feminisms attempt to homogenize the experiences of postcolonial women.<sup>15</sup> She analyzes a series of texts that “discursively

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<sup>15</sup> It is worth noting that although the core elements of her argument – particularly as they pertain to this dissertation – remain the same, Mohanty “revisits” this groundbreaking essay in a 2003 reassessment of its assertions and response to its varied critical reception. She notes that while “[f]eminist theory and feminist movements across national borders have matured substantially since the early 1980s, and there is now a greater visibility of transnational women’s struggles and movements,” profound changes such as “political shifts to the right, accompanied by global capitalist hegemony, privatization, and increased religious, ethnic, and racial hatreds, pose very concrete challenges for feminists,” against which she proposes a more refined

colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing/re-presenting a composite, singular “Third World Woman” – an image which appears arbitrarily constructed, but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing discourse of Western humanist discourse” (335). This discursive mode defines postcolonial women “primarily in terms of their *object status* (the way in which they are affected or not affected by certain institutions and systems),” allowing little if any space for them to assert their own agency, and eliding the differences of race, class, ethnicity, religion, etc., between them (338). Mohanty argues that

[T]hird world women as a group or category are automatically and necessarily defined as: religious (read “not progressive”), family-oriented (read “traditional”), legal minors (read “they-are-still-not-conscious-of-their-rights”), illiterate (read “ignorant”), domestic (read “backward”), and sometimes revolutionary (read “their-country-is-in-a-state-of-war-they-must-fight!”). This is how “third world difference” is produced. (352)

When the “first world” is set up in opposition to the “third world,” logic dictates that the West is progressive, modern, enlightened, educated, innovative, and civilized. This presumed superiority not only “reinforc[es] Western cultural imperialism” (without questioning the power dynamic between the “first” and “third” worlds), but also compels the liberal impulse of the West to assume the moral obligation to liberate these women from their “shared oppression” (352, 337).

In the texts that I am focusing on in this dissertation, ethnic and class disparities are extremely important to my analysis. These differences result in uneven relationships between the protagonists and their postcolonial nation-states as well as uneven access to mainstream American culture, and in the case of Nunez’s Sara Edgehill, to her diasporic

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focus on “anticapitalist transnational feminist practice”(508, 509). This modification aligns her current position more closely with the positions of scholars such as Sharpe and Grewal in its increased material rather than cultural concerns.

African identity. However, as Mohanty suggests, feminist discourse is based upon the assumption that “what binds women together is a sociological notion of the ‘sameness’ of their oppression” (337). This perception remains particularly persistent in regard to postcolonial women, who are presumed to have no recourse against the ostensibly oppressive patriarchal cultures from which they emerge. Mohanty is justifiably troubled by the way this characterization

assumes an ahistorical, universal unity between women based on a generalized notion of their subordination. Instead of analytically demonstrating the production of women as socio-economic political groups *within* particular local contexts, this move limits the definition of the female subject to gender identity, completely bypassing social class and ethnic identity. (344)

Moreover, “Western feminists alone become the true ‘subjects’ of this counter-history. Third World women, on the other hand, never rise above their generality and their ‘object’ status” (351).<sup>16</sup> When Western feminist scholars make sweeping generalizations about the conditions of oppressed “third world” women without considering the intricacies of their contexts, ignoring the local in favor of a Western humanist global, they participate in the discursive recolonization of postcolonial cultures.

In addition to working against this form of recolonization, transnational or “third world” feminisms are also faced with the challenge of reconciling issues of women and the nation that arose out of anticolonial nationalist movements. Nationalisms, as Anne McClintock points out, are inherently male. In her 1997 essay “‘No Longer in a Future Heaven’: Gender, Race and Nationalism,” McClintock seeks to establish a feminist theory of nationalism, arguing that

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<sup>16</sup> This argument resonates closely with Gayatri Spivak’s assertions in “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” (1985), an essay that I cite throughout this dissertation. Spivak suggests that the subjectivity of the Western individualist woman is gained at the expense of the continued recolonizing and “othering” of the non-Western woman.



Nations are contested systems of cultural representation that limit and legitimize people's access to the resources of the nation-state, but despite many nationalists' ideological investment in the idea of popular *unity*, nations have historically amounted to the sanctioned institutionalization of gender *difference*. No nation in the world grants women and men the same access to the rights and resources of the nation-state. (89)

The rhetoric of nationalism is masculine; it depends on the symbolic difference between men and women to assert its power against an emasculating colonial history. Note the sexually charged language McClintock uses when she suggests that men “represent the progressive agent of national modernity (forward-thrusting, potent, and historic), embodying nationalism's progressive, or revolutionary principle of discontinuity” (92). Furthermore, she suggests that “women are subsumed symbolically into the national body politic as its boundary and metaphoric limit... Women are typically constructed as the symbolic bearers of the nation but are denied any direct relation to national agency” (90). By referring to the national “body” and women as “bearers,” McClintock reminds her readers of the biological as well as cultural roles that nationalisms confer upon women, a construction that renders women valuable as national resources. In fact, three of the five “major ways in which women have been implicated in nationalism” that McClintock cites have to do with women engaging in state-sanctioned sexual relations (with their husbands), having children (with their husbands), and transmitting national culture to these children” (90). It is important to note that most transnational feminist scholarship understands nationalism as both masculinist and heteronormative. For example, M. Jacqui Alexander's 1994 essay “Not Just (Any) Body Can Be a Citizen: The Politics of Law, Sexuality and Postcoloniality in Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas” explores the manner in which legislation against “non-productive” sex is linked to the national project in these Caribbean nations. She writes, “Having refused the heterosexual

imperative of citizenship, *these* [non-procreative] bodies, according to the state, pose a profound threat to the very survival of the nation” (6). She makes a compelling and provocative case against the manner in which the postcolonial state not only polices sexuality but also reinforces prescribed perceptions of feminine and masculine for economic gain (specifically the tourism industry). Although none of the texts that I address deal with homosexuality, this reproductive aspect of postcolonial nationalisms as they pertain to women is particularly relevant to my project because each of the authors explores it differently through their representations of pregnancy, abortion, pregnancy loss, and realized motherhood.

The seemingly inherent conflict between nationalisms and feminisms developed as postcolonial nationalist movements found themselves perceived in opposition to the West, contrasted against modernity due to the conflation of “Western” and “modern.” As Heng notes, a certain anxiety arises from this relationship to modernization:

Even where a systemic transformation to modernity, in economic and social organization, is sought and implemented by nations and nationalisms in the Third World as a desideratum of development, a resistance to the totalizing implications of modernization is invariably sedimented at some juncture of the modernization process. Acceptance of modernity’s incursions, then, comes to operate selectively: a division in the rhetoric of nationalist discourse appears, distinguishing between the technological and economic machinery of modernization (which can continue to be deemed useful, indeed, essential to the nation), and the cultural apparatus of modernization – the alarming detritus of modernity’s social effects – which may be guarded against as contaminating, dangerous, and undesirable. (33)

In *The Nation and Its Fragments* (1993), Partha Chatterjee makes a similar observation of non-European peoples who understand that “science, technology, rational forms of economic organization, modern methods of statecraft – these had given the European countries the strength to subjugate...and to impose their dominance over the whole

world” (120). They feel they must adopt these “modern” strategies in order to compete with the Western world, but acknowledge that much stands to be lost culturally if they simply appropriate Western ways. McClintock calls this “the temporal anomaly within nationalism – veering between nostalgia and the impatient, progressive sloughing off of the past” and notes that it usually results in representing time in terms of gender,” whereby “[w]omen are represented as the atavistic and authentic body of national tradition (inert, backward-looking, and natural), embodying nationalism’s conservative principle of continuity” (92). In response to this perception of the relationship between Western habits and the potential of the modern nation, nationalist movements were forced to compromise certain aspects of their non-Western cultures, which yielded a complicated role for women in postcolonial national projects.<sup>17</sup>

Nationalist projects tend to evoke discussions of rights, and the inclusion of and differences among oppressed and minority groups that might challenge national unity. Heng points out that feminisms in the “third world” have almost always emerged alongside nationalist movements, “whether in the form of anticolonial/anti-imperialist struggles, national modernization and reform movements, or religious-nationalist/cultural-nationalist revivalisms...in a complicated relationship of sympathy and support, mutual use and mutual cooperation, and unacknowledged contestatory tension” (31). She

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<sup>17</sup> As Leela Gandhi notes in *Postcolonial Theory*, “the encounter with feminism urges postcolonialism to produce a more critical and self-reflexive account of cultural nationalism” (102). In fact, although the independent nation is often considered to be the end of the successful anticolonial struggle, the idea of the nation has become grounds for much debate among postcolonial theorists. Although I am arguing that the novels of Mukherjee, Nunez, and Lahiri offer alternative modes of ethnic-American identification, reflecting a transnational moment that exposes the limitations of national identity in regards to postcolonial immigrants in the U.S., there are too many theoretical challenges to the nation among contemporary theorists to address here. Some useful texts to consider are Bhabha’s *Nation and Narration*, Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism*, Ernst Renan’s “What is a Nation,” Eric Hobsbawm’s *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, and Ali Behdad’s *A Forgetful Nation*.

links the strained relationship between nationalisms and feminisms to the postcolonial nation's vexed relationship to the West:

Given feminism's uneasy status in the Third World, its problematic relations with nationalism, and (like nationalism) its relatively brief genealogy, Third World feminism has been especially liable to manipulation by nationalists for its symbolizing potential, as a capsule instance of the encroachment of modernity and/or Westernization. Just as women's issues, female emancipation, and feminism lend themselves to nationalist self-figuration at a given historical moment of nationalist formation, so do they lend themselves to the symptomatic figuration of nationalism's ambivalence to both modernity and the West (33-4).

Because of the perceived interchangeability of that which is "Western" and that which is "modern," and the nationalist project's desire to assert itself against the West, feminisms in these contexts have had to avoid aligning themselves with Western influences or else be subject to "delegitimization" (33). As a result, "the strategic response of a Third World feminism under threat must be, and has sometimes been, to assume the nationalist mantle itself," so that "through the glass of first-world feminisms, Third-World feminisms may appear to be willfully naïve, nativist, or essentialist in their ideological stakes" (34). These statements echo Mohanty's suggestion that Western feminisms cannot account for the differences among women's movements in the postcolonial world, because each national, cultural, religious, and socio-economic context requires careful considerations of the local needs of individual women.

Indeed, the narratives with which this project engages do not offer unambiguous examples of postcolonial women who appropriate a particular form of feminism in a quest for subjectivity, nor do they collectively celebrate any particular solution for how these women should forge a space for themselves in the United States. The celebrated spirit of the hard-working American immigrant, whose efforts destine her for upward

mobility and personal success by which to identify herself, is not singularly present in these immigrant fictions. On the contrary, the characters in these novels are often haunted by the past and uncertain about the future, and must rely on whatever tenuous agency is available to them. What each of these novels does show is that women who migrate to the United States from previously colonized nations are forced to engage with various systems of subjection and subjectivity in an attempt to define themselves in their new homeland, all the while struggling to feel at home in an alien and sometimes hostile environment. My readings of Mukherjee, Nunez, and Lahiri's fiction are informed by the arguments of various transnational feminists whose recent scholarship is transforming the way literature by women of color is read in the West. They demonstrate how the United States can function as both hegemonic neocolonizer, cultural internal colonizer of its minorities, and the symbolic postcolonial nation-state where old colonial and anticolonial attitudes and divisions are reproduced by its immigrants.

### **Translating Postcolonial Pasts: Mukherjee, Nunez, and Lahiri**

Bharati Mukherjee has (in)famously proclaimed that she is an American, not an Asian-American, and even though she has explained in multiple ways that her injunction is a challenge to her new homeland's perception of American identity (as opposed to a shunning of her background), she remains a widely taught and read author that transnational feminist scholars love to hate. Such critics of Mukherjee's *Jasmine* often argue that the novel reproduces a hegemonic discourse of American nationalism. Moreover, they cite the positive reception of the book by mainstream American readers as proof of its pandering to a particular perception of the victimized "third world" woman

who is liberated by her adoption of an American identity. In Chapter One of this dissertation, “Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* and What it Means to be American,” I argue for the recuperation of the novel’s critical value, suggesting that a careful analysis of the text through the lens of the impressive body of Mukherjee’s non-fiction prose on issues of gendered, cultural, national, and artistic identities reveals its complicated representation of the postcolonial immigrant experience.

Inderpal Grewal, who represents a movement of criticism leveled at Mukherjee’s work, takes issue with what she argues is Mukherjee’s reinscription of non-Western difference – especially in the way she represents non-Western women – and valorization of Americanization and American values. Although there are a few admittedly uncomfortable moments for a non-Western feminist scattered throughout the novel, criticism like Grewal’s assumes that a non-Western writer like Mukherjee has a singular responsibility to refute stereotypes of women in the “third world” in order to avoid what they perceive is a cultural recolonization of these women. These critics fail to acknowledge not only that Mukherjee wrote *Jasmine* before transnational feminisms began making their mark on literary studies, but that even if *Jasmine* fails to represent a transnational feminist position, it still participates in a discourse of ethnic American identity – facilitated by the text’s “third world” context – that is quite provocative for its time. On the other hand, critics who read the text as an immigrant success story gloss over Mukherjee’s problematic relationship with the “third world” and similarly ignore her sustained critique of certain aspects of American culture and politics. My reading attempts to mediate between these extremes by analyzing the way Mukherjee’s

representation of Jasmine's homeland functions as part of a larger project that questions the nature of fixed identities, both in India and in the United States.

While Mukherjee's representation of India in *Jasmine* might be troubling at times – focusing on practices that seem to Western readers as oppressive to women such as sati, forced marriage, and domestic violence – the post-Partition historical setting allows her to explore the complicated realities of postcolonial independence. Although Mukherjee links issues of gender, class, and national unrest so that she sometimes seems to be suggesting that her homeland is a violent and oppressive place for women to live, untangling these issues reveals an overarching distrust of the idea of any pure and fixed cultural or national identity. When Mukherjee's protagonist leaves India and enters America illegally, this distrust is translated into a challenge that America be flexible. Written in the midst of a politically conservative climate in the U.S., *Jasmine* does not, as critics habitually point out, uncritically celebrate America as the land of freedom and choice. In fact, Mukherjee harshly criticizes everything from wasteful consumerism to racism and cultural ignorance to the inhumane treatment of illegal immigrants. That amid this criticism her protagonist remains committed to becoming an American shows her commitment to changing what it means to be "American." Moreover, Jasmine's pregnancy throughout the novel reminds readers that she is literally embodying this quest to re-make America.

Elizabeth Nunez's *Beyond the Limbo Silence* reflects a different moment in ethnic American literature, concerned less with what it means to become an American than with the potential of a diasporic transnational identity. In Chapter Two, "Diasporic Development in Elizabeth Nunez's *Beyond the Limbo Silence*," I show that Nunez's

novel is more self-conscious than Mukherjee's about its engagement with postcolonial histories and what they mean to dark-skinned immigrants who find themselves invited to a country with a violent history of institutionalized racism. Moreover, I argue that the novel addresses issues of class and gender more explicitly, showing how both complicate ethnic identity and effectively limit the protagonist's participation in both the independence movement in her native Trinidad and the civil rights movement in the United States. Sara Edgehill uses the occasion of immigration to narrate the development of a diasporic identity that transcends identification with either the nation she leaves behind or the one that she adopts. By choosing to identify herself as part of the African diaspora, she better understands her postcolonial history and its implications for herself and her family, and enters into a complicated relationship with black America.

Throughout this chapter, I argue that *Beyond the Limbo Silence* represents a postcolonial variation of the coming-of-age novel. Contrary to the form of the bildungsroman, the novel subverts linear narration – and thereby notions of chronological time equaling progress – by having its protagonist continually revisit her upbringing in Trinidad in order to make sense of her American surroundings. In addition, while the traditional coming-of-age novel generally involves the development of its main character's individualism, *Beyond the Limbo Silence* suggests the opposite: Sara must let go of the markers she believes define her and participate in an un-knowing of herself in order to develop a diasporic identity in the United States. This process goes against the American value of individual successes, and Sara often feels torn between a desire to conform to what is expected of her in her Midwestern American surroundings and her developing consciousness of the ways she has been implicated by colonial mindsets and



white America as the ideal subject. The novel frequently engages with the trope of “Mad Bertha,” Jane’s Creole other in Charlotte Brönte’s *Jane Eyre*, and her postcolonial refiguring in Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso’s Sea*. In doing so, Nunez exemplifies Spivak’s argument in “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” that individualist quests for identity among Western heroines (like Jane Eyre) depend on the imperial othering of the “third world” woman. Sara’s development relies on her resisting white America’s insistence that she distance herself from African Americans in order to be comfortable and successful in her new home.

Chapter Three, “Immigrant Motherhood and Transnationality in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Fiction,” deals primarily with Ashima Ganguli, the protagonist’s mother in Lahiri’s 2003 novel *The Namesake*. While Lahiri has been categorized by popular and academic critics alike as an immigrant writer – so much of her work deals with the lives and experiences of Indian immigrants living in the United States – it is important to note that she was born in London and came to the U.S. at a very young age. However, her Western upbringing was deeply influenced by frequent contact with other Indian immigrant families and habitual trips back to India. Although clearly her representation of Indian immigrant life in the U.S. is influenced by a class status that made possible the luxury of frequent travel and an obviously comfortable upper-middle class sensibility, Lahiri’s fiction engages with the lived reality of transnational Americans in characters like Ashima.

Partha Chatterjee’s account of the “new” Indian woman provides an instructive lens through which to understand Ashima and the manner in which her postcolonial past translates into a transnational American identity. Chatterjee theorizes that in response to Western imperialism, middle class Indians are compelled to separate their private and

public lives so that they can participate in the economic, commercial, and technological advances that will allow them to compete with Western nations while preserving their culture against imperial encroachments. Women, in particular, are given the sacred responsibility of protecting their family's cultural identities. While Western feminism might interpret this division of labor to be an unjust burden, transnational feminisms remind us that reading it in this manner effectively recolonizes non-Western women. This chapter argues that Ashima utilizes this nationalist Indian attitude towards women to adopt an identity in the U.S. that transcends national boundaries.

In previous texts, Lahiri explores complicated ties between traditional gender roles and cultural identity. In four different short stories from *Interpreter of Maladies*, Indian immigrant women attempt to navigate cultures – with varying degrees of success – through home-making and motherhood. For these protagonists, losses such as divorce, the stillbirth of an infant, infidelity, and the loss of a parent mark a failure to successfully negotiate what each interprets as American or Indian imperatives. In *The Namesake*, however, Ashima, despite similar losses, figures out that cultural fluidity and both literal and metaphoric mobility are central to her immigrant identity.

Despite the resurgence of nationalist rhetoric in the United States in recent years, as we move deeper into the twenty-first century it is clear that technology and travel are making geography less relevant. Increasingly, texts produced by immigrant Americans deal less with Americanization and the upward mobility suggested in the American Dream and are less concerned with representing and preserving ethnic group identity. Instead, contemporary immigrant texts increasingly engage with transnational concerns and the interconnectedness of histories and cultures. While the novels discussed in this

dissertation represent America's cultural transnational shift, I hope my project contributes towards the transnational reshaping of ethnic American literary studies.

## Chapter One: Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* and What it Means to be American

As a writer, my literary agenda begins by acknowledging that America has transformed me. It does not end until I show that I (and the hundreds of thousands like me) have transformed America.

--Bharati Mukherjee, "A Four-Hundred-Year-Old Woman"

In a 1997 article published in the progressive American magazine *Mother Jones*, Bharati Mukherjee says the following regarding her particular identity politics: "I am an American, not an Asian-American. My rejection of hyphenation has been called race treachery, but it is really a demand that America deliver the promises of its dream to all its citizens, equally."<sup>18</sup> Yet notwithstanding her personal disavowal of that category, she is one of the best-known voices of the South Asian diaspora, whose novels and short stories are found on Asian-American literature course syllabi across the country.

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<sup>18</sup> In a 1996 *Journal of Modern Literature* article, "Beyond Multiculturalism: Surviving the Nineties," this statement appears in a less abbreviated form. In its entirety, it more accurately represents Mukherjee's agenda as a writer: to consider herself an American in order to make that designation more inclusive. Moreover, she addresses some of the scholars whose criticism I will argue against in my reading of *Jasmine*. Mukherjee writes:

I choose to describe myself on my own terms, that is, as an American without hyphens. It is to sabotage the politics of hate and the campaigns of revenge spawned by Eurocentric patriots on the one hand and the professional multiculturalists on the other, that I describe myself as "American" rather than as "Asian-American." Why is it that hyphenization is imposed only on non-white Americans? And why is it that only non-white citizens are "problematized" if they choose to describe themselves on their own terms? My outspoken rejection of hyphenization is my lonely campaign to obliterate categorizing the cultural landscape into a "center" and its "peripheries." To reject hyphenization is to demand that the nation deliver the promises of the American Dream and the American constitution to *all* its citizens. I want nothing less than to invent a new vocabulary that demands, and obtains, an equitable power-sharing for all members of the American community.

But my self-empowering refusal to be "otherized" and "objectified" has come at tremendous cost. My rejection of hyphenization has been deliberately misrepresented as "race treachery" by some India-born, urban, upper-middle-class Marxist "green card holders" with lucrative chairs on U.S. campuses. These academics strategically position themselves as self-appointed spokespersons for their ethnic communities, and as guardians of the "purity" of ethnic cultures. At the same time, though they reside permanently in the United States and participate in the capitalist economy of this nation, they publicly denounce American ideals and institutions. (460)

This chapter argues that in *Jasmine*, her most popular novel, Mukherjee explores the sociopolitical issues that determine this position on American identity through the migration narrative of its title character. Several well-known scholars find what they interpret as Mukherjee's celebration of assimilation and adoption of Western feminist values problematic, arguing that she idealizes the United States at the expense of her homeland. Moreover, these critics contend that Jasmine's development relies on American and European models of personal success, thereby reinforcing notions of the ever-victimized "third world" woman rescued by liberal Western values. In her article "Reading and Writing the South Asian Diaspora: Feminism and Nationalism in North America," Inderpal Grewal argues that "the only 'freedom' that *Jasmine* reveals is that of being part of and valorizing the dominant power structure" (231). Further, she is particularly suspicious of Mukherjee's rejection of a hyphenated identity: "For Mukherjee, as she has said recently, insisting on being called 'American' is political inventory, rather than seeing herself as Asian-American or even Indo-American. Instead of dismantling the hegemony of the term 'American,' she wants to be included within it" (231). Along with Susan Koshy and Anu Aneja, Grewal contributes to a body of scholarship on *Jasmine* that focuses on its treatment of Asia, Asian women, and America, and that is sometimes accusatory in tone.

My argument responds to the claim that Mukherjee is not interested in dismantling the term "American" by engaging specifically with the demands *Jasmine* makes on mainstream perceptions of immigrant and American identities. While Mukherjee perhaps does not dismantle the term by stripping American identity of its power and privilege, she does challenge its exclusivity and abuses. Rather than reading

Jasmine's character solely as representative of a "third world" woman in the West, I argue that she is a protagonist whose narrative involves translating a postcolonial Indian female subject-position into the context of immigrant America. As such, she exhibits the potential to change what it means to be "American," and the identity she negotiates is as much a political stance towards ethnic American identification as it is a commentary on the world both Jasmine and her author left behind. Moreover, I contend that this novel cannot be interpreted without making use of the many examples of personal prose written by Mukherjee in which she explores issues of history, identity, culture, gender, and immigration, particularly in regard to her work as a writer. Mukherjee's nonfiction reveals many of the attitudes towards Indian and North American cultures that shape Jasmine's development as a postcolonial, immigrant heroine.

### **"God's cruel to waste brains on a girl": Gender Expectations and Cultural Identity**

Jasmine's narrative is set against the violent historical backdrop of post-independence, post-partition India: her family comes to settle in their village after the events of 1947 make them outsiders in their ancestral city of Lahore.<sup>19</sup> Although Mukherjee herself is from Bengal, one of the two Indian states actually partitioned, she does not address the split of Bengal in *Jasmine*. Instead, she displaces this trauma onto Jasmine's Punjabi family.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, recent scholarship about Partition highlights 1947 as

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<sup>19</sup> In fact, Mukherjee writes that Jasmine "was born eighteen years after the Partition Riots. Interestingly, while these details situate Jasmine's biography relative to Indian history, they also point to a year in U.S. history that is very relevant to her narrative, the Immigration Act of 1965. This reform abolished the national origins limitations that for decades institutionalized discrimination against immigrants from non-Western (particularly newly independent and postcolonial) nations. The resulting increase in "new immigrants" from Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Caribbean has come to characterize contemporary discussions of immigration demographics (Takaki 401, Mendoza and Shankar xvii).

<sup>20</sup> As I later discuss, in Mukherjee's nonfiction accounts of her childhood in 1940s Bengal, she reflects on this volatile period, including the violent riots she witnessed and her own confused reaction to Independence.

a traumatic moment in India's history. In the opening pages of *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, Urvashi Butalia notes that an estimated one million people died from violence, malnutrition, and disease; twelve million people were displaced; acts of "sexual savagery" were committed against approximately 75,000 women thought to have been kidnapped and raped; and thousands of families were divided, losing their loved ones as well as all of their land and possessions (3). In her collection of interviews with survivors of Partition, Butalia records the human tragedy of an experience widely perceived as a mostly geo-political event. In a more recent study of Partition's effects on Indian cinema, Bhaskar Sarkar also utilizes theories of memory and trauma to construct "a *hermeneutic of mourning*" that is particularly relevant in regard to the postcolonial experience (31).

For Jasmine's family, an acute sense of loss and displacement defines the post-partition, postcolonial condition. They were forced violently from their comfortable, upper-middle class lifestyle in Lahore – where they had previously owned land and shops, lived in a sprawling home, and were respected for their family name – and forced into "a village of flaky mud huts" (Mukherjee *Jasmine* 41). Jasmine narrates how this loss of home, homeland, and status plagues her family:

Mataji, my mother, couldn't forget the Partition Riots. Muslims sacked our house. Neighbors' servants tugged off earrings and bangles, defiled grottoes, sabered my grandfather's horse. Life shouldn't have turned out that way! I've never been to Lahore, but the loss survives in the instant replay of my family story: forever Lahore smokes, forever my parents flee. (41)

The trauma of this departure forces Jasmine's parents into an exile that makes her mother distrustful and pessimistic, and that her father in particular never comes to accept.

Jasmine describes his perpetual attachment to Lahore in the kurtas he continued to wear,

the Pakistani radio broadcasts he listened to, and his disgust for anything not related to Lahore – including the mangoes, women, music, and Punjabi dialect of the Indian side of the partition (42). In the next generation, this trauma replays itself – more and more violently each time– throughout Jasmine’s life in India.

In defense of this argument for exile-as-trauma, consider what Mukherjee herself writes regarding exiled writers in an article for the *New York Times Book Review*: “By refusing to play the game of immigration, they certify to the world, and especially to their hosts, the purity of their pain and their moral superiority to the world around them. In some obscure way, they earn the right to be permanent scolds” (“Immigrant Writing” 29). However, she continues, “Lacking a country, avoiding all the messiness of rebirth as an immigrant, eventually harms even the finest sensibility” (29). Although her words – given their context in a review aimed at a new direction for minority American literatures – lack the empathy we might expect in a discussion of trauma, they resound in interesting ways with Cathy Caruth’s work in this area. She writes that “the [traumatic] event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (4). Furthermore, she writes that the traumatized “become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess” (5). Haunted by his imagined, suspended in time Lahore, Jasmine’s father clearly exhibits the symptoms of exile-as-trauma. On the other hand, Mukherjee argues that by embracing “duality” we might “learn how to be two things simultaneously; to be the dispossessed as well as the dispossessor,” thereby working through this exile-as-trauma (29). Jasmine’s words at the end of the description of her father illustrate this attitude towards such dispossession: “He’ll never see Lahore



again and I never have. Only a fool would let it rule his life” (43). In her willingness to sever any imaginative attachment to her father’s homeland, Jasmine avoids what Mukherjee describes as the “mordant bite” of exile and instead embraces the messy potential for rebirth as an immigrant when she arrives in the U.S.

The novel begins in the village of Jasmine’s birth, Hasnapur, after her parents’ exile and before her own departure. This chapter is only a few pages long, but contains a few very revealing details about the title character and protagonist. When she is only seven years old, Jasmine hears about her future of “widowhood and exile” from a local fortune-teller, but the already subversive little girl screams, “You’re a crazy old man. You don’t know what my future holds!” (3). She refuses to believe the astrologer’s argument that one is helpless against fate. Jasmine, who at that time is still known as Jyoti, trips and falls as she runs away, cutting her forehead when it hits the floor, and her sisters shriek when they see her: “Now your face is scarred for life! How will the family ever find you a husband?” (4-5). To Jasmine, however, this scar is a “third eye”; rather than submit to the will of fate, she prefers to define her own life. She interprets and resists the implications of the astrologer’s pronouncement, refusing to believe that she “was nothing, a speck in the solar system...helpless, doomed” (3-4). Instead, this first-person narrator states, “I always felt the she-ghosts were guarding me. I didn’t feel I was nothing” (4). Interestingly, she inserts gender into this discussion of will over fate. For Jasmine, being a woman facilitates the type of resolve it takes to create her own life despite the social (and political) barriers she might face.<sup>21</sup> Her later invocations of Hindu

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<sup>21</sup> I choose the words “create” and “life” carefully here, to invoke maternity and its implications, because throughout Jasmine’s narration of her present-day life, she is pregnant. Pregnancy and motherhood are important to my argument throughout this dissertation, and particularly – as I will discuss later in this chapter – in regard to *Jasmine*.

rituals and goddesses reflect her belief that women in particular are blessed with the intuition and fortitude to transcend what is expected of and for them.<sup>22</sup> Although Mukherjee does not return to this narrative thread for another five chapters – she foregrounds Jasmine’s new life in Iowa as the novel’s central plot, weaving in the stories of her upbringing, brief marriage, and migration to America – the flashbacks determine how we come to understand “Jane,” Iowa’s version of the girl from Hasnapur.

In narrating her birth, Jasmine continues to reveal the burden associated with daughters in her community:

If I had been a boy, my birth in a bountiful year would have marked me as lucky, a child with a special destiny to fulfill. But daughters were curses. A daughter had to be married off before she could enter heaven, and dowries beggared families for generations. Gods with infinite memories visited girl children on women who needed to be punished for sins committed in other incarnations.

My mother’s past must have been heavy with wrongs. I was the fifth daughter, the seventh of nine children.

When the midwife carried me out, my sisters tell me, I had a ruby-red choker of a bruise around my throat and sapphire fingerprints on my collarbone. (39-40)

A daughter’s birth is never celebrated or related to the luck of bounty; instead, from the moment she enters the world, the question of her dowry preoccupies her parents.

Mothers who have daughters are doubly cursed: not only were they once unwelcome daughters themselves, but they are also paying for sins from previous lives with each girl

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<sup>22</sup> Mukherjee’s inclusion of *sati*, the Hindu practice of self-immolation by a widow on her husband’s funeral pyre, however, is more problematic insofar as it represents failure. Although Mukherjee attempts to recuperate it symbolically when Jasmine burns all of her possessions after murdering her rapist when she first arrives in the U.S., *sati* is too loaded for this moment to work. For more on the complications surrounding the interpretation and cultural representation of *sati*, see Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” and “The Rani of Sirmur,” Lata Mani’s “Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India,” and Rahul Gairola’s “Burning with Shame: Desire and South Asian Patriarchy, from Gayatri Spivak’s ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ to Deepa Mehta’s ‘Fire.’”

child.<sup>23</sup> These attitudes characterize the society into which Jasmine is born, and these beliefs determine how she comes to see herself. From the moment she is born, Jasmine is marked by a will to survive that challenges expectations – and possibly fate – and foreshadows the events that drive her narrative. While Mukherjee’s representation of Jasmine’s early life might seem to suggest that Jasmine’s India is stunted by its blind commitment to tradition, which justifiably bothers critics, I propose reading these moments within the critical context of the massive trauma of Partition. Mukherjee is not criticizing her homeland, but exploring the social and cultural impact of this moment on families like Jasmine’s, particularly as it pertains to attitudes towards women.

In *Jasmine*, Mukherjee authors a character defined by her exceptionalism and defiance of expectations. While she performs domestic (female) tasks like boiling milk and haggling prices down at the market with notable skill, she also excels at school. She displays enough promise to be allowed six years of schooling – “three years longer than [her] sisters,” who were married off by a cousin who taught them that men prefer village girls with “no minds of [their] own” (45-46). Her mother complains that God is “cruel...to waste brains on a girl,” but Jasmine’s intellectual potential earns admiration from the village teacher, who lobbies for her to be allowed to continue her education and pursue a career (40). As her father so eloquently puts it, “That masterji fellow thinks you are a lotus blooming in cow dung” (46). However, Jasmine’s paternal grandmother disagrees, arguing with her son that he won’t find a husband for an educated daughter,

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<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, this notion of daughter-as-curse contradicts Partha Chatterjee’s account of middle class Indian women during British rule. These women are characterized by quite the opposite belief system: a sense of their goddess-like spirituality, which kept them in the home as the protectors of traditional values and away from the corruption of the outside, Westernizing forces. This contrast might be explained by a pre-Independence concern with preserving culture that is replaced by more immediate material concerns in destabilized, post-Independence India in addition to the class difference between Jasmine’s family and the ones Chatterjee describes.

stating matter of factly that “Some women think they own the world because their husbands are too lazy to beat them” (47). These exchanges not only demonstrate that Jasmine stands apart from other girls and women in her village, but also that the skills and talents that allow her to do so elicit resentment and the threat of violence. They represent a level of concern with individualistic success that in a woman is unseemly at best and dangerously subversive at worst, especially given the direct correlation between a daughter’s opportunity to marry well and her family’s economic interests.

It is worth noting that Inderpal Grewal takes issue with Jasmine’s exceptionalism, arguing that “Jasmine’s claim to the reader’s interest and attention seems based on the notion that she is unlike other Indian women – that she is active, a risk-taker and adventurous.” Mukherjee has called this quality being “American,” claiming that many “Americans” live in other parts of the world, but in *Transnational America*, Grewal refers to these “Americans” as neoliberal subjects of U.S. imperialism (“Reading and Writing” 233). She reads this difference as suggestive that Jasmine is better than other Indian women because she is more American-like. The basis of my argument in this chapter, however, necessitates an alternative reading of Jasmine’s qualities and Mukherjee’s comment about Americans living all over the world. I contend that these things help strip the U.S. of its exceptionalism, its claim to these qualities as uniquely American. As I argue throughout this chapter, Mukherjee is invested in the project of destabilizing American identity in order to make it inclusive of its “third world” immigrants.

Despite her family’s attitudes, the adolescent Jasmine continues her education until her grandmother attempts to marry her off to a widower with three children. Jasmine is rescued from this arrangement by Masterji and her mother. The teacher

appeals to Jasmine's father's sense of modernity, explaining that women are no longer "shackling themselves to wifedom and maternity first chance" (50). In doing so, Masterji reminds Jasmine's father that their country continues to change, a subject with which Paterji is painfully familiar. This scene contradicts critics who read Mukherjee's representation of India as backwards in regard to its treatment of women; furthermore, it once again links Jasmine's situation to the historical moment so that it is not simply a natural result of unchanging tradition and patriarchy. But although Paterji begins to accept the idea of Jasmine's becoming a secretary, he becomes outraged when she tells him she wants to be a doctor. Ultimately Jasmine's mother endures a beating to make the case for her daughter's education (52). Jasmine recalls how mataji "smiled so wide that the fresh split in her upper lip opened up and started bleeding again" and reflects, "my mother loved me so much she tried to kill me, or she would have killed herself" (52). Mataji's courage in the face of violence decisively refutes Jasmine's grandmother's belief that "individual effort counts for nothing" and contradicts readings that contend that Mukherjee represents Indian women as powerless (57). Jasmine's willingness and ability to go against her grandmother's wishes complicate perceptions of culture and gender roles in *Jasmine* as stable or fixed.

In these scenes, Mukherjee deals with what she more explicitly addresses in several of her non-fiction works. Although her upbringing was quite different from her protagonist's – Mukherjee was born into a wealthy, upper-caste, Hindu family in India's Bengal province – she consistently grapples with similar issues of flexibility, both cultural and political, in determining her own identity. In "Beyond Multiculturalism: Surviving the Nineties," Mukherjee writes:

When I was growing up in Calcutta in the fifties, I heard no talk of “identity crisis” – communal or individual. The concept itself – of a person not knowing who she or he was – was unimaginable in a hierarchical, classification-obsessed society. One’s identity was absolutely fixed, derived from religion, caste, patrimony, and mother tongue. An Indian’s last name was designed to announce his or her forefather’s caste and place of origin. (455)

In other essays, she links this lack of cultural agency more directly to gender, stating, “I was born into a religion that placed me, a Brahmin, at the top of its hierarchy while condemning me, as a woman, to a role of subservience (“A Four Hundred...” 33) and “In traditional Hindu families like ours, men provided and women were provided for. My father was a patriarch and I a pliant daughter. The neighborhood I’d grown up in was homogenously Hindu, Bengali-speaking, and middle class. I didn’t expect myself to ever disobey or disappoint my father” (“American Dreamer” 1). These statements reveal Mukherjee’s frustration – despite her many material privileges – that her culture, religion, and gender render her identity inflexible in post-Independence Calcutta, despite movements among left-leaning politicians and intellectuals against this type of stasis and conservatism. For Mukherjee, each set of limitations functioned to prevent her from making any decision that would defy these carefully constructed and historically prescribed expectations for a woman of her caste. Although, unlike Jasmine, Mukherjee herself was afforded many more opportunities in terms of education, ease of travel, and American citizenship as a result of her socioeconomic status, this attitude towards inflexible identities and lack of agency is relevant to the way she constructs Jasmine’s development. As Mukherjee observes in *Days and Nights in Calcutta*, “To be a woman... was to be a powerless victim whose only escape was through self-inflicted wounds” (228). For both Jasmine and her author, these wounds are inflicted when each

severs herself from her homeland and experiences the resulting metaphorical death and painful rebirth as an American.

It is important to note that Mukherjee's depiction represents one of many experiences of 1950s and 1960s Calcutta. Even in *Days and Nights*, she notes the presence of a more progressive political movement challenging caste and protesting on behalf of the poor and for women's rights. Therefore, I do not mean to suggest that Mukherjee's is the only possible version of post-Independence India; however, her account of upper-caste Hinduism is relevant to how she represents issues of identity. Later in this chapter I will discuss how this distrust of fixed, pure culture helps to determine the sort of American identity Mukherjee celebrates in *Jasmine's* protagonist. This attitude reflects the position established by the quotation that opens this chapter: what Mukherjee finds most valuable about American identity – and particularly about what immigrants contribute to American identity – is that it is in flux. Being an unhyphenated immigrant affords the opportunity to mold and change a nation's cultural identity, a project in which Mukherjee is personally invested.

### **“Centuries coalesced as we picnicked”: Instability and Change in Postcolonial India**

Although Mukherjee's upbringing and experiences contrast with Jasmine's in many ways, it is worth noting how her attitude towards Independence makes its way into the novel. Mukherjee, having been born into a comfortably colonized socioeconomic situation, is expected (and ultimately unable) to adapt to a previous, imagined, and idealized pre-colonial India. Jasmine, who is born into a socioeconomic position rendered quite uncomfortable by Independence (and particularly by the consequences of

Partition), is raised in the shadow of this undivided and colonial India. Although this is not to say or imply in any way that Mukherjee advocates colonial rule, she clearly takes issue with the socioeconomic effects of Independence and Partition and means to illustrate the often-violent growing pains experienced by the new nation. She admits having witnessed “bloody religious riots between Muslims and Hindus, and violent language riots between Bengalis and Biharis” as a child in an argument she makes against fixed, ostensibly pure cultural identities (“Beyond Multiculturalism” 456).<sup>24</sup> Moreover, in the memoir she co-authored with husband Clark Blaise after a yearlong stay in India in 1973 – just before the 1975 Indian state of Emergency (and around the time young Jasmine has her future foretold in the novel) – Mukherjee reveals the learned ambiguity of her feelings towards Independence. She reflects that “in those days [of Independence] we thought of them as freedom fighters but called them ‘anarchists’ and ‘terrorists,’ for we had accepted the terminology of the British without ever understanding or sharing their emotions” (174). Later she recalls the “sick headaches” she developed around the time of Independence, which kept her from participating in the festivities on and around August 15, 1947:

Were the headaches the earliest sign that I would escape and marry a foreigner? But fate sent confusing signals to some of us who were born in the decade in which Britain relinquished her hold on India. We were born both 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. (223)

This ambiguity colors how Mukherjee perceives the “mischievous acts” – a euphemism for the erupting unrest between classes – she witnesses in 1973 Calcutta (186). She

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<sup>24</sup> Born in India and 1940, Mukherjee witnessed the events both leading up to and directly resulting from Independence and Partition.



sympathizes with both the masses rallying for equality and her family's and former classmates' desire to maintain the stability that keeps their class comfortable.<sup>25</sup>

National instability and communal violence play an important role in Jasmine's narrative, particularly in her decision to leave India. After her father dies and her brothers come back home to care for Jasmine and her mother, Jasmine begins paying attention to the political turmoil inching closer to her own village, noting, "Even in Hasnapur things started to happen. A transistor radio blew up in the bazaar. A busload of Hindus on their way to a shrine to Lord Ganpati was hijacked and all males shot at point-blank range" (64). Masterji, who had lobbied so vigorously on behalf of Jasmine's schooling and the modernization of women, is killed violently (85-86). Soon after, a family friend introduces his radical views into Jasmine's home, and for the first time she hears political instability linked explicitly to gender. Sukkhi's support of the Sikh political cause conflates tradition with religion and culture, and Hindu women in particular are perceived to be threats to the purity he espouses. He says, "Renounce all filth and idolatry. Do not eat meat, smoke tobacco, or drink alcohol or cut your hair" and "Keep your whorish women off the street" (65). Incidentally, the list of items that constitute "filth and idolatry" – meat, tobacco, and a short (read: Western) haircut – includes women who are labeled as "whorish" simply for being let out of the house. Jasmine recalls, "he called all Hindu women whores, all Hindu men rapists. 'The sari is the sign of the prostitute,' he said" (65-66). Sukkhi dangerously scapegoats women, representing the purity of culture against which Mukherjee has positioned herself in much of her prose. This attitude is

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<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, critics mostly ignore *Days and Nights in Calcutta*, which, published in 1977, addresses Partition critically ahead of the wave of scholarship about it that erupted in the decades that followed. Mukherjee takes a risk discussing this volatile period by dealing with traumatic memories that, at the time *Days and Nights* was published, had not yet been dealt with.

consistent with recent scholarship on women and nation that points to the ways women are appropriated for nationalist and communal causes such as Sukkhi's.<sup>26</sup> If before Independence women played an essential role in preserving native culture against the influence of the West, after Independence they become fodder in the violent conflicts between internal groups fighting to claim the new nation as their own. Jasmine's narrative encourages readers to interpret these conflicts outside the paradigm of East versus West (or the "third world" as victim of Western modernization) and consider them endemic to a nation that was never culturally or religiously pure.

Although Jasmine finds herself straddling two worlds even before she leaves India, in her marriage to Prakash she comes to associate India with a fated existence, with being bound to the way things *have* to be. Jasmine marries young, but for love, and her husband represents the very attitude that Sukkhi rallies so vociferously against in his anti-Hindu, anti-women political rants. Prakash explains to Jasmine that "only in feudal societies is the woman still a vassal," pleading with her to further her education rather than get pregnant right away and arguing that "[her] kind of feudal compliance was what still kept India an unhealthy and backward nation" (77-78). She is torn between what she feels are her wifely obligations and Prakash's desire that she come to understand the value of women differently. Ultimately, Mukherjee ties Prakash's death specifically to these attitudes about women: Jasmine hears Sukkhi shouting "Prostitutes! Whores!" after the explosion that kills her husband, and in her narration reflects, "I failed you. I didn't get there soon enough. The bomb was meant for me, prostitute, whore" (93). Jasmine's grandmother justifies the tragedy as God's punishment for her marrying a man she loved

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<sup>26</sup> See Partha Chatterjee's "The Nation and its Women" in *The Nation and its Fragments*, Geraldine Heng's "'A Great Way to Fly': Nationalism, the State, and the Varieties of Third-World Feminism," and Anne McClintock's "'No Longer in a Future Heaven': Gender, Race, and Nationalism."

rather than one chosen by an astrologer, for calling her husband by his first name, and for the couple's modern ways (98). Thus, Jasmine is scapegoated by those in her community who believe that rigid gender roles and expectations achieve the preservation of a singular (albeit imaginary) culture.

On the other hand, critics of the novel take issue with what they argue is an appropriation of the third-world-woman-as-victim by the West to justify modernization. Susan Koshy argues that "In a strange alliance of liberal feminism, capitalism, and neocolonialism, Mukherjee's critique of the patriarchal practices of indigenous and diasporic Indian culture gets narrativized, in *Jasmine*, as the emancipatory journey from Third to First World, a journey into the possibility of a 'developed' subjectivity characterized by individualism, autonomy, and upward mobility" (140). Moreover, she suggests that Mukherjee pits ethnicity against womanhood; she writes, "Mukherjee is caught in the position of equating feminism and westernization. Her narrative becomes deeply compromised and merely reproduces Eurocentric assumptions about the subjection of Third-World women" (146). Even the novel's flashback narrative style, according to Koshy, serves to privilege the West's perception of India as oppressive (146). In "'Jasmine': The Sweet Scent of Exile," Anu Aneja makes a similar claim:

The issue is not that such stereotypical Jyotis are nowhere to be found, but that the exaggerated stereotyping begins by constructing but not holding on to a farcical image of oppressed Indian womanhood – an image which might have a special appeal for western liberal feminism, which looks for exactly such token images of oppressed sisters in need of rescue. (76)

But there is a difference between translating India as oppressive, as Koshy and Aneja believe Mukherjee does in *Jasmine*, and expressing ambivalence towards the political and social instability that remains after Independence. It is worth noting that I also take issue

with Aneja's reading that Jasmine represents "the monolithic face of an Indian woman – a woman who spends her adolescent years waiting to get married [and] sacrifices her education and career in order to support her husband" (76). On the contrary, as I have shown in my analysis of *Jasmine's* opening scene, Jasmine struggles against fate and expectations from a very young age. She spends her childhood becoming more educated than the average girl in her family, and thinks of marriage only after she has fallen in love. Even then, she gets married in a nontraditional manner, to a man who encourages her to keep learning even though she had burned her books years before when her father died. Similarly, I strongly disagree with her reading of the third world as "the locus of an innocent, unexamined goodness where people must live rather dull and compliant lives" (78). Quite the opposite: the world Jasmine leaves behind is necessarily portrayed as complicated, affected by diverse historical and political experiences. It seems unfair to suggest that by acknowledging legitimate concerns regarding female oppression in the postcolonial world Mukherjee somehow substantiates Western stereotypes regarding the victimization of women in Asia.<sup>27</sup> I am arguing that Mukherjee's argument lies somewhere in between: women's lives and bodies do become the space on which post-independence political upheavals are mapped, by all sides involved, and Jasmine's choice to flee and make her life in the United States is just one of many justifiable options. Her

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<sup>27</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, whose body of work is primarily concerned with the dangers of essentializing the victimization of third-world women and the uncritical assumption of Western feminist values by postcolonial studies scholars, addresses the violence caused by fundamentalism in India as well as the "gender and religious (racial) discrimination" that are "urgent, life-threatening issues for women in India" (356-357). Interestingly, these accounts have not been attacked the way Mukherjee's novel has been, perhaps because of Mohanty's solid footing in the academic world, which might protect her from the types of charges leveled at best-selling fiction authors. It also might be that because Mohanty's article, "Defining Genealogies: Feminist Reflections on Being South Asian in North America," appears as a scholarly essay in an academic publication and is therefore directed at an audience less likely to use her observations to justify a limited, stereotyped perception of South Asia.

appropriation of American culture is as much about survival as it is about the politics of history, gender, and ultimately identity.

Anupama Jain's argument is useful here as she, too, refutes these critiques of the novel as both limited and limiting. Her reading resists the responsibility critics place on Mukherjee as a "third world" writer to represent the postcolonial immigrant experience in a particular way. On the premise that "despite Mukherjee's assertion that she is an American, not an Asian-American...her readers often do not read farther than the 'difference' from white America they locate in her texts," she argues that "her highly popular novel *Jasmine* is always marked as a novel written by a woman of color who will necessarily describe a Third World sensibility" (117). As a result, "critics overemphasiz[e] certain issues in her work at the expense of other important analyses, most notably the author's resistance to multicultural theories of immigrant solidarity and diasporic bonding as intrinsic components of the post-colonial experience" (117). Jain highlights an aspect of the negative criticism of Mukherjee's novel that I, too, find particularly misplaced: the imperative that it participate in the service of a very specific understanding of transnational feminism. Jain continues:

When we look to *Jasmine* for a celebration of "native" culture or for a politics of coalition building, we are disappointed. When we read the text with expectations created by our needs for Third World texts to perform subversion of dominant hegemony, we find that our configurations are inadequate to describe Mukherjee's sometimes complex and often provocative constructions...As I have struggled to understand it and my own troubled responses to it, I have noticed that the novel actively disrupts the notion of a Third World subjectivity with a de-centered, fluid, and uncontainable politics of non-identification. (125)

Although I do not agree that Mukherjee is necessarily involved in a politics of non-identification, for that undermines my argument that she is involved in the project of

redefining American identity, Jain's assertion is compelling in the way it indirectly supports my central reading of the novel. Mukherjee uses *Jasmine* to reject the very notion of pure culture or pure identification, whether it be "third world" or "American;" the de-centered fluidity read as a betrayal by some and as instructive by others, like Jain, is integral to the way the novel participates in the reconsideration of American identity.

### **"Everything was in motion": Immigration and the making of a new American**

In her essay "Imagining Homelands," Mukherjee differentiates between four types of people moving across borders. First she describes expatriates, whose "self-removal from [their] native culture [is balanced] by a conscious resistance to total inclusion in the new host society" (72). Then she describes the exile who is forced to leave her country but still tied to it (often by language), and who rarely tries to accommodate to her host society; and immigrants, who "contribute to 'mongrelizing' both the adopted and abandoned cultures" (73-74, 77-80). Finally she mentions the repatriate, who returns to repopulate and reclaim a formerly colonized homeland (83). Although she argues that we have entered a "supra-national age, in which traditional citizenship is likely to be a murky identification," in several of her nonfiction essays she identifies herself as an immigrant and an American. These labels – particularly the privileged "immigrant" – empower her with the ability to choose her identification as well as transform the cultural landscape of her adopted country.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Gabrielle Collu, in her article "South Asian Women Writers in North America: The Politics of Transformation" argues that "it is very important to look at...writings by South Asian women in Canada and the United States within their own particular historical, social, cultural, and literary context and to theorize about these texts from within the texts and their contexts" (57). In other words, we must consider these texts as the products of women who have crossed borders. Like Mukherjee, she believes that scholars should avoid terms that "neutralize the differences between immigration, exile, tourism, and flight," but privileges the term "transculturation" in describing what Mukherjee calls "mongrelization." Collu wants

Despite her contention that the hyphen is a negative marker “imposed only on nonwhite Americans,” Mukherjee believes that the United States offers immigrants a unique opportunity to participate in and transform culture should they choose to refuse the construction of center and periphery inherent in hyphenization (“American Dreamer” 6). She contrasts this opportunity with the multiculturalist model of minority citizenship she experienced throughout the years she spent living in Canada, which like hyphenated American identity establishes “one culture as the norm and the rest as aberrations” and emphasizes the differences *between* races and ethnicities at the expense of “individual differences within each group” (5). The multiculturalist paradigm not only essentializes difference and forecloses the possibility of diversity within groups, but also makes it difficult for minority groups to establish solidarity with one another and consolidate their political power.<sup>29</sup> Mukherjee argues that since its founding America has been defined by diversity, as “America’s pioneering European ancestors gave up the easy homogeneity of their native countries for a new version of utopia,” and that “now...we have the exciting chance to follow that tradition and assist in the making of a new American culture that differs from both the enforced assimilation of a ‘melting pot’ and the Canadian model of a multicultural ‘mosaic’” (5). Although this Eurocentric and pioneering framing of American history is clearly problematic, Mukherjee appropriates it here in an argument

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critics to avoid terms that sound pejorative and instead borrows this word from Mary Louise Pratt that emphasizes the potential of “contact zones” (60).

<sup>29</sup> Lisa Lowe’s argument in *Immigrant Acts* is instructive here. Although she would disagree with Mukherjee’s position on hyphenated identity – she argues for Asian-American culture as a site for political agency and forms of expression not dependent on American forms or citizenship – parts of her argument intersect with Mukherjee’s prose in important ways. For instance, she argues against the notion of a pure, fixed culture but instead believes culture is constantly changing in response to the material conditions surrounding it. Further, she contends that Asian Americans (and presumably other minority groups) are not homogenous but defined by heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity. Complicating homogenizing minority discourse allows for a richer discussion of culture in general and also for strategic political alliances with other racialized immigrants in opposition to the dominant, majority culture.

against nativism and homogeneity. Indeed, at other moments in her nonfiction prose she points out that America was founded by white, slaveholding men, acknowledging that American history is far messier than the “pioneer” version suggests because of racism and the destruction of Native Americans. However, in *Jasmine*, Mukherjee develops this argument that “we must think of American culture and nationhood as a constantly re-forming, transmogrifying ‘we’” as the immigration narrative unfolds and Jasmine participates in a transformation of self that demonstrates her potential to “mongrelize” both her native and adopted cultures.

In her discussion of *Jasmine*, Aneja asserts the contrary, arguing that the post-colonial immigrant is limited to two choices: she can assimilate and reject her past, therefore recognizing the hierarchy positioning the West as superior; or, she can “make her difference known” and “stand apart, so that she may be recognized as other” (74). In other words, the immigrant is doomed to constantly struggle against what Aneja describes as “a ‘re-colonization’ of third world people living in the first world” (74). I find this argument troubling for two reasons. First, it assumes that the immigrant has the privilege of choosing between these two models, although in reality the position of the immigrant is dictated by a need to survive and thrive in her new surroundings rather than by cultural politics. Second, it suggests that immigrants are politically and culturally impotent, unable to change what it means to be American as Mukherjee argues is the true value and responsibility of immigration.

Indeed, Jasmine’s transformations drive the narrative and translate the ideals of the American Dream, such as renewal and possibility, into the language of her Hindu beliefs. She observes that “in America, nothing lasts...the monuments are plastic,



agreements annulled. Nothing is forever, nothing is so terrible, or so wonderful, that it won't disintegrate" (Mukherjee 181). Although this statement could be read as a somewhat depressing indictment of American culture, it also points to some of the more celebrated perceptions of life in the United States, the more hopeful interpretation that this impermanence allows for continual improvement. While she adopts renewal as a means to becoming an American, Jasmine – sometimes violently – couches her experiences as death and rebirth, or reincarnation: "we murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the image of dreams" (29). Although she does not literally carry out her mission to commit the self-sacrificial act of *sati* to honor Prakash, Jasmine does symbolically murder who she was after her rape by Half-Face by burning everything she brought with her from India. At this point in the narrative, having suffered this ultimate violation, living with the memory of what happened to her seems like more of a sacrifice than death. To complicate matters, Jasmine refers to herself as Kali, so that Half-Face's death also becomes an important turning point in Jasmine's first transformation, from sacrificed to sacrificer. Because her rapist in essence came to possess her, by murdering him she punishes both him and herself; having lost her purity, Jasmine attempts to subvert the meaning of *sati*.

Throughout the text, Jasmine refers to the various identities she has possessed and admits, "I do believe that extraordinary events can jar the needle arm, jump tracks, rip across incarnations, and deposit life into a groove that was not prepared to receive it" (127). Although reincarnation belongs to her Indian culture, she integrates each new life into her American identity, effectively transforming both.<sup>30</sup> Like the references to *sati*

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<sup>30</sup> In "American Dreamer," Mukherjee comments, "What excites me is that as a nation we have not only the chance to retain those values we treasure from our original cultures but also the chance to acknowledge that

and the goddess Kali, Mukherjee uses reincarnation to show that Jasmine does not abandon her culture, but translates particular aspects of it into her new American context.

### Mukherjee and America: A complicated relationship

Inderpal Grewal argues that *Jasmine* “foreclos[es] the problematization of U.S. nationalist ideology” and “supports and maintains [a] discourse of ‘Americanness’ and ‘freedom’ as connected and synonymous even while it can be consumed as a ‘multicultural’ text” (“Reading and Writing” 231, 226). Moreover, she suggests that the novel validates its American audience’s (mis)conceptions about Asia. Koshy makes a similar point, arguing that *Jasmine* highlights the “liberatory potential of America” against “the oppressiveness of India” and quoting fellow Mukherjee critic Jonathan Raban’s claim that Mukherjee’s narrative is “a romance with America itself” (147, 141). Furthermore, according to Koshy, “the contrastive juxtaposition of an Indian past against an American present, Old World against New World, creates a continual slippage through which America comes to represent the spaces of modernity” (150). All of these scholars read *Jasmine* as uncritical of its protagonist’s adopted homeland and believe Mukherjee presents the United States and American culture as an unproblematic foil to her unfairly treated native homeland.

Yet contrary to what these critics suggest, *Jasmine* does not idealize American culture or celebrate the assimilation and liberation of a victimized third world woman. In fact, Mukherjee sets this narrative in a politically, economically, and culturally volatile

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the outer forms of those values are likely to change” (6). For that reason, I use the terms “integrate” and “translate” to describe the process as neither abandonment nor assimilation as critics suggest.

time in America and makes an effort to paint a realistic portrait of this troubled American landscape. Consider what Mukherjee says about her adopted homeland:

America exists as image or idea, as dream or nightmare, as romance or plague, constructed by discrete individual fantasies and shaded by collective paranoias and mythologies. (“Beyond Multiculturalism...” 454)

In this passage, Mukherjee acknowledges the conflicting constructions of “America” that have emerged from its population’s disparate needs and desires. She effectively dismantles the belief in a nation of shared ideals, pointing to the lack of a shared material reality to support them. In “An Invisible Woman,” she says:

Yes, it’s America: violent, mindlessly macho, conformist, lawless. And certainly no dark-skinned person has the right to feel comfortable inside American history. (38)

Here Mukherjee takes on the masculinist and racist “wild west” narrative of American settlement that provides the subtext for Jasmine’s alternative version of this trope.

Moreover, as in the following example, she acknowledges how problematic mainstream renderings of American History can be. In “American Dreamer,” Mukherjee notes,

I don’t forget that the architects of the Constitution and the American Bill of Rights were white males, and slaveholders. But throughout their declaration, they provided us with the enthusiasm for human rights, and the initial framework from which other empowerments could be conceived and enfranchised communities expanded...

...The debate about American culture and American identity has to date been monopolized largely by Eurocentrists and Ethnocentrists whose rhetoric has been flamboyantly divisive, pitting a phantom “us” against a demonized “them.” (4-5)

It seems that in order to make a more informed argument about *Jasmine*, these comments about America are not only useful and relevant but also necessary. Mukherjee clearly understands that liberatory American mythology is ambiguous at best, and she does not deny the history of racism that plagues it. Moreover, she takes issue with the manner in

which American culture has been defined – as white and European, from a white and European perspective – and it is that very argument that she writes against in a narrative like *Jasmine*, which defines “American” as necessarily diverse. And perhaps most importantly, in what she says about the Bill of Rights Mukherjee implies that it is up to Americans – whether new or natural-born – to put the framework for empowerment and enfranchisement to work.

In the novel, Jasmine’s first glimpse of America also contradicts the suggestion that Mukherjee uncritically represents the new homeland. She observes,

The first thing I saw were the two cones of a nuclear plant, and smoke spreading from them in complicated but seemingly purposeful patterns, edges lit by the rising sun, like a gray, intricate map of an unexplored island continent, against the pale unscratched blue of the sky. I waded through Eden’s waste: plastic bottles, oranges, boards, sodden boxes, white and green plastic sacks tied shut but picked open by birds and pulled apart by crabs. (107)

Jasmine observes the destructive nature of American over-consumption in the energy plant pollution, garbage, and uneaten food floating in the bay where she first arrives. By confronting American readers with their wastefulness, this scene refutes Grewal’s claim that writers like Mukherjee participate in a neoliberal celebration of American consumer culture. Moreover, the invocation of Eden is clearly ironic, meant to show the discontinuity between what immigrants expect America to look like and the reality they face when dropped off at random ports.

The text also reveals ambiguity regarding the American Dream itself, casting doubt on whether the possibility of transformation is always positive. After being in the U.S. for a few years, Jasmine reflects,

It is by now only a passing wave of nausea, this response to the speed of transformation, the fluidity of American character and the American

landscape. I feel at times like a stone hurtling through diaphanous mist, unable to grab hold, unable to slow myself, yet unwilling to abandon the ride I'm on. (138-139)

The fluidity and potential for self-making, which is ostensibly celebrated throughout the text, is presented here as an uncomfortable experience. Although she chooses to remain in the U.S. and become an American, Jasmine does not deny that the new culture in which she finds herself is fraught with its own perils, here depicted as a lack of stability.

In fact, the America that Jasmine encounters in the 1980s is undergoing drastic political and socioeconomic changes. Post-Vietnam disillusionment, an increase in illegal immigration, and an economic recession provide the backdrop for Jasmine's counter-narrative, the development of a more corporate and diverse United States. We learn early in the novel that Jasmine's newest hometown, Baden, Iowa, is profoundly affected by these changes, and her husband, a banker who provides loans to farmers, finds himself in the crossfire of a changing agricultural economy.<sup>31</sup> The decline in the American agricultural economy and the difficult economic times literally make their way onto Bud Ripplemeyer's doorstep: by the time the novel begins he is paralyzed from the waist down as a result of a gunshot wound to the back from a disgruntled farmer whose loan Bud could not approve. Jasmine observes, "In these times a good banker has to be able to walk away from dreamers and pleaders and potential defaulters;" in other words, the American dream of frontier life is clearly coming to an end as more powerful corporate interests gain control of the farming industry. More than one farmer turns to

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<sup>31</sup> A timeline of American agriculture on the USDA-sponsored website "Agriculture in the Classroom" shows that between 1970 and 1990, the percentage that farmers made up of the labor force shrank from 4.6% to 2.6%, and that although the U.S population grew steadily, the farm population shrank from 9.7 million to 2.9 million. Moreover, agricultural goes from accounting for 19% of total exports to 9.5% of total exports. In the 1980s in particular, economic recession lowered agricultural prices and raised indebtedness among farmers, affecting the Midwest most acutely ([www.agclassroom.org/gan/timeline](http://www.agclassroom.org/gan/timeline)).

violence or suicide throughout the text, including Jasmine and Bud's next door neighbor, a young man who is tempted by offers from big investors to turn his deceased father's farm into a golf course and struggles throughout the novel to keep his family land functional in order to avoid having to do so. These details challenge the mythology surrounding frontier life, calling into question the potential for the self-made, self-sufficient American settler.

In Jasmine's recognition of these unstable times, she likens her new home to the one she left behind, a move that contradicts the critics who argue that Mukherjee unproblematically celebrates the West over her homeland:

I see a way of life coming to an end. Baseball loyalties, farming, small-town innocence...In the brave new world of Elsa County, [Bud's ex-wife] Karin Ripplemeyer runs a suicide hot line. Bud Ripplemeyer has adopted a Vietnamese and is shackled up with a Punjabi girl. There's a Vietnamese network. There are Hmong, with a church of their own, turning out quilts for Lutheran relief. (229)

Just as in the country she left behind, in the United States Jasmine witnesses economic, political, and economic change. Although these changes in the U.S. perhaps allow Jasmine to more easily participate in American culture, to be a part of the wave of transformation rather than just an observer, it is important to note that America is not depicted as being immune from instability through any sort of first-world privilege. On the contrary, anger and tension beget violence even in this all-American farming community.

The novel also explicitly links the changing and troubled times to the growing underground world of illegal immigrants in the U.S., and Mukherjee makes use of what Alejandro Portes and Rubén G. Rumbaut call the "compassion fatigue" of the 1980s in

her portrait of Jasmine's America (xv).<sup>32</sup> By making her protagonist an illegal immigrant, Mukherjee is able to comment on the treatment of such immigrants, their invisibility and dehumanization in the rhetoric of the debate over their status. Jasmine is able to observe a world that her native-born American husband does not see, reflecting,

I wonder if Bud even sees the America I do. We pass half-built, half-deserted cinder-block structures at the edge of town, with mud-spattered deserted cars parked in an uncleared lot, and I wonder, Who's inside? What are they doing? Who's hiding? Empty swimming pools and plywood panels in the window frames grip my guts. And Bud frowns because unproductive projects give him pain. He says, "Wonder who handled their financing?" (109)

Bud's perception is possible thanks to the luxury of his natural-born citizenship. Unlike Jasmine, he cannot imagine living in the shadows of mainstream American society, whereas she sees this invisible population everywhere she looks.

In addition to calling attention to the underground world of illegal immigrants, this scene also reflects the unstable economic times, for which the influx of immigrants is blamed. As in the world she left behind, in the U.S. the most defenseless groups are

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<sup>32</sup> According to Portes and Rumbaut,

Public outcry about the growth of the foreign population and the pressure of influential newspapers and public policy centers led the U.S. Congress in the mid-1980s to consider a series of alternatives to bring unauthorized immigration under control. Following recommendations of the congressionally appointed Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy and after lengthy debate, a series of sweeping measures were passed by both houses. The resulting Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) became law in 1986 and led immediately to a number of important changes in the character and legal treatment of labor immigrants. (361-362)

Published in 1989, *Jasmine* reflects the immigration debates of its day, which were most likely reaching a fever pitch in the mid-1980s, when Mukherjee was working on the novel. Her previous book, *Wife*, published in 1975, deals primarily with the internal struggles of a newly arrived Indian immigrant and does not reflect a particular political attitude regarding immigration policy in the U.S. In fact, Mukherjee has said in interviews that *Wife* more directly addresses the isolation and discrimination she experienced as a minority in Canada under its multiculturalist policies. I believe the eruption of anti-immigrant sentiment during the recession of the 1980s played an important role in Mukherjee's construction of the America Jasmine encounters in the novel.

scapegoated and subjected to dehumanizing rhetoric. Early in the novel, Jasmine and Du watch the INS raid a “lawn furniture factory” that is really “a windowless shed the size of a two-car garage” on the local news (26). The agents use walkie-talkies and kick down doors as if hunting dangerous criminals, but find only two illegal Mexican immigrants in the shed. Jasmine describes the scene: “One minute they were squatting on the floor webbing lawn furniture at some insane wage – I know, I’ve been there – and the next they were spread-eagle on the floor. The camera caught one Mexican throwing up. The INS fellow wouldn’t uncuff him long enough to wipe the muck off his face” (27). Her narration emphasizes the excessive use of force against what are clearly nonviolent “perpetrators” and the lack of dignity afforded to them because of their lack of legal status. The tone of her narration reveals more than her stated empathy – “I know, I’ve been there” – but disgust with such exaggerated and inhumane treatment.

In the same report, two American women are interviewed, further revealing the “compassion fatigue” and scapegoating of immigrants plaguing Jasmine’s America. One woman says, “I don’t think they’re bad people, you know. It’s just that there are 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,” while the other is heard saying, “The border’s like Swiss cheese and all the mice are squirming through the holes” (29). The images of immigrants relieving themselves in someone’s yard, not because “they’re bad people” but because they have nowhere else to go, followed by the images of “too many of them” and “mice squirming” demonstrate how immigrants are dehumanized, how their presence is perceived as an infestation by those who lack the empathy to put themselves in the immigrants’ desperate situation. The second woman



makes what Jasmine describes as a “crazy connection” between the immigrants and her economic hardship, telling the reporter covering the INS raid, “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?” (27). Although most critics ignore these scenes because they seem to have little to do with the central narrative, I believe they are crucial for understanding Mukherjee’s attitude towards her new homeland and what this novel says about the role of immigrants in the U.S. The imperative that Mukherjee places on the immigrant’s contribution to American culture stems from a belief that such participation addresses its flaws and elicits improvements. It is easier to make the argument that Mukherjee idealizes the Americanization of her title character by ignoring these moments in the text, but doing so simplifies the more complicated project she undertakes in the novel.

Moreover, although Grewal argues that *Jasmine* supports the ““multiculturalism’ that is being embraced currently within liberal U.S. circles,” which “attacks one kind of racism practiced by the white working class...while remaining oblivious to the more subtle and powerful racism of the upper classes,” I would argue that Mukherjee aptly recognizes the reductive manner in which the “third world” is perceived by even the most educated Americans (“Reading and Writing” 226). She uses the novel to confront American readers with their misperceptions and disrupt certain pervasive stereotypes. For instance, take the description of Stuart, the worldly American who breaks up the marriage of Jasmine’s first American employers:

He had been to India several times as a guest lecturer in Delhi, as a World Bank consultant, and as a U.S. government aid officer. He spoke Hindi passably and owned so many Indian paintings and tapestries that his living room looked to [Jasmine] like a shop or an art gallery. His wife was an

Africa specialist, so the walls were hung with spears and masks that competed with mirror-work cloths and Moghul miniatures. (184)

Stuart's association with the World Bank – an institution whose practices have notoriously stunted independence and economic growth in the “third world” – is no accident. In addition, these lines reveal the troubling manner in which the third world is fetishized and objectified by even the well meaning and liberal-minded. We get the sense that Jasmine herself is troubled by the way disparate cultures are conflated as exotic on this couple's apartment walls like a “shop” or “gallery,” each souvenir representing a triumph over the foreign. The scene is also reminiscent of Edward Said's discussion in *Orientalism* of the ways the East comes to be known by the West as an object of study, analysis, and intellectual possession: these academic experts have somehow managed to tame the exotic by making it familiar, proving it on their walls.<sup>33</sup>

Moreover, throughout her narrative Jasmine is frequently confronted with cringe-worthy stereotypes made by ostensibly well-educated Americans who do not recognize the limitation of their knowledge of the East. She recalls that an infertile female professor tells her in a doctor's waiting room, “You have nice hips” (*Jasmine* 34). Jasmine's memory continues, “But she gave the ‘you’ a generic sweep. You teeming millions with wide hips breeding like roaches on wide-hipped continents. ‘Wide. Nature meant you to carry babies’” (34). Although Jasmine chokes out a polite expression of thanks (“What else could I have said,” she wonders), the incident annoys her at best, and at worst reveals her awareness of how she is perceived in her new homeland.

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<sup>33</sup> Said calls this move “the domestication of the exotic,” which although is not “especially controversial or reprehensible” but still represents “a method of controlling what seems to be a threat to some established view of things” (59, 58).

Even those Americans who love Jasmine, like her Iowan husband and mother-in-law, have perceptions of the world she comes from that are based on stereotypes and limited contact. Bud admits “that when Mother called him and told him that she was sending over a starving Indian to save he’d pictured a stick-legged, potbellied, veiled dark woman like the ones he’d seen fleeing wars, floods, and famines on television” (199). He envisions the victimized and weak third-worlder in need of American goodwill and kindness instead of an intelligent and capable woman (who happens to be brown skinned) with the skills to provide a professional service at his bank. Jasmine suspects that charitable Mother, whose group of friends raises money to feed the third world poor “out there,” shares her son’s perspective: “I am not sure what Mother imagines. On the edge of the world, in flaming deserts, mangled jungles, squelchy swamps, missionaries save the needy. Out there, the darkness” (21). Although Jasmine recognizes that their misconceptions are not dangerous or malicious, she also understands that the average American does not see her or her homeland as anything but lacking and backwards.

In addition to the liberal academic establishment and charity work, war provides yet another lens through which Americans see Jasmine’s world in the text. The novel takes place in the shadow of the Vietnam War, and perceptions of and relationships with Asia that developed during those tumultuous years in American history persist in the 1980s. Grewal argues that “Mukherjee’s work reveals the Third World as barbaric and the First as civilized...And it’s not only India that is viewed through a tourist’s lens, but also Vietnam, as becomes apparent in the section of *Jasmine* that concerns the young boy, Du, Jasmine’s adopted son” (235). Grewal contends that Du’s treatment by the text reinforces stereotypes regarding Asia as backwards and barbaric because of the trials he

endures in his homeland and his success in acclimating to life in the U.S. In my reading, however, the narrative surrounding Du –whose family was torn apart and who was orphaned in a refugee camp after the war – serves not only to demonstrate the cultural insensitivity immigrants face in America, but more importantly, to critique the involvement of the United States in Vietnam under the guise of spreading democracy. Jasmine recalls an encounter with Du’s history teacher, a Vietnam War veteran, at a PTA meeting:

“Yogi’s in a hurry to become all-American isn’t he?” I said, “Yes. He doesn’t carry a dictionary around anymore.” And then he said, “He’s a quick study, isn’t he? They were like that, the kids who hung around us in Saigon.” He didn’t make “quick study” sound like anything you’d like to be...

“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? (28-29)

Mr. Skola is oblivious to the fact that he is reproducing a painful encounter between East and West by condescending to know anything about Du through his war experiences.

His insensitivity is not purposeful, but reveals an internalized perception of a country and a people he knows only in the context of war and conquest.

This post-war perception of Asia is further complicated by gender, as women (and children) have historically suffered sexual humiliation as loot during times of war in their countries. Jasmine is not unaware of her exotic allure as a foreign woman, admitting at one point, “Bud courts me because I am alien. I am darkness, mystery, inscrutability. The East plugs me into instant vitality and wisdom, I rejuvenate him simply by being

who I am” (200). Although it seems at this moment that she embraces these stereotypes – or at least does little to correct Bud of them – at other times she recognizes when they become dangerous.

At a bar in Iowa, for instance, two men observe Jasmine with her older, American husband and one makes a comment that gets him punched by Bud: ““Whoah! I don’t know nothing about horsepower, but I know *whore* power when I see it!’ His next words were in something foreign, but probably Japanese or Thai or Filipino, something bar girls respond to in places where he’d spent his rifle-toting youth” (201). Again, Mukherjee chooses to point to the U.S.’s military presence in Asia as having caused this one-dimensional perception of Asians and particularly Asian women. Although the sentence that follows – Jasmine reflects, “I wish I’d known America before it got perverted” – is somewhat naïve in how it ignores the dark history of violence and rape against female African slaves in the U.S., it does not discredit what the bar scene reveals. By placing Jasmine in this situation, Mukherjee simultaneously establishes several points: a not-so-subtle critique of American foreign policy; the (willful) ignorance of mainstream Americans, who cannot (and do not care to) differentiate between the various Asian minorities they encounter; and the way Asian women in particular are objectified and dehumanized through Western stereotyping and sexual exoticization.

In other moments, these stereotypes prove violently dangerous. In the moments before Jasmine is raped by a Vietnam veteran who lost half of his face in the war, he is outraged by the fact that Jasmine claims to have had a husband who was an expert at repairing electronics and that she had watched television back home:

“Look, just don’t fuck with me. I been to Asia and it’s the armpit of the universe.” He dragged me to the television and pressed my forehead

against the screen. Then he brought my head back and slammed it against the set, again and again. “Don’t tell me you ever *seen* a television. Don’t lie to me about no husbands and no television and we’ll get along real good. I got things I can do for you and you got things you can do for me, and I got lots of other things I can do *to* you, understand? (112)

These facts complicate the power differential which allow him to dehumanize and rape her, and he is offended by the thought that she could be as civilized (or more so, given what he is doing to her) than he is. He needs her to be what he perceives the third world to be – backwards and lacking – to justify the narrative of U.S.-Asia relations that took him to Vietnam and mutilated him. The very existence of a technically skilled South Asian man with plans to open and run a business and a South Asian woman who is not shocked by a functioning television disrupt this narrative, forcing him to doubt his own place within it. Contact with the East through war and military occupation in the late twentieth century has troubling and lasting effects on American perceptions of people from those countries.

“Every night the frontier creeps a little closer”: The two-way process of American transformation

In having Jasmine acknowledge and experience immigration as a “third worlder” in the United States, and by emphasizing the two-way process of transformation that she undertakes, Mukherjee accomplishes a daunting and significant project. She does not explicitly scold her American audience for their perceptions of the world “out there” and its people, although she does not back away from pointing out that she has taken notice. Rather, Mukherjee undertakes a message that is more subversive than that by creating a character in Jasmine that proclaims in her development, “I am you.” All of her darkness,

foreignness, and exoticism become part of the definition of what it means to be American.

One way Jasmine transforms American culture during her stay in the Midwest is through food. She reflects,

People are getting used to some of my concoctions, even if they make a show of fanning their mouths. They get disappointed if there's not *something* Indian on the table. Last summer Darrel sent away to California for "Oriental herb garden" cuttings and planted some things for me – coriander, mainly, and dill weed, fenugreek, and about five kinds of chili peppers. (9)

Later, she narrates, "I took gobi aloo to the Lutheran Relief fund craft fair last week. I am subverting the taste buds of Elsa County. I put some of last night's matar panir in the microwave. It goes well with pork, believe me" (19). Although these two comments may seem insignificant, they indicate the novel's participation in shifting what the frontier and American Midwest represent in these rapidly changing United States.<sup>34</sup> By itself, food may not serve to defend a claim that Jasmine transforms the very definition of American culture, but in these passages it symbolizes a more profound change than culinary taste.

Jasmine's westward movement – first across the globe, and later from the East Coast to the Midwest, and finally to California – simulates the movement of early American settlers. In fact, at one point she even observes that "every night the frontier creeps a little closer" (20). In "Mukherjee's *Jasmine*," Carneb Faymonville reads Jasmine as a frontier heroine. She argues that "the Gold Rush mentality adopted by

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<sup>34</sup> Grewal makes light of this notion of food as transformative, arguing that "her power is to make people aware of her oriental mystery, to long for Otherness that she embodies, to make them want something Indian at their dinner table every day. Difference is reduced to curry – one that can be consumed by the dominant classes ("Reading and Writing" 233). However, one only has to review the array of academic work on the significance of food in immigrant literature to see that these passages are, in fact, significant.

Jasmine makes her feel that she is able to profit from the unchartered country of America...creat[ing] a life that replicates that of earlier immigrants and their eventual assimilation” and that “by moving to California at the end of the novel, Jasmine hopes to find complete assimilation into the national culture” (53). Although I find her central contention regarding Jasmine’s movement west mimicking that of earlier settlers compelling, I find her point about complete assimilation somewhat overstated. Instead, I would argue that like the earlier immigrants, who changed the landscape and culture of the American frontier and were instrumental in creating a model for American identity, Jasmine too, in her movement West, participates in the process of changing American national culture. What the text does is illustrate the way Jasmine, like a settler, transforms both land and culture.<sup>35</sup> Her herbs and spices take their places among more familiar crops; her dishes infiltrate even the most quintessential American institution, the church craft fair. By introducing her midwestern friends and neighbors to Indian food, she claims her stake in their community, assimilating them into a part of her culture.

In addition, as I have shown elsewhere in this chapter, Mukherjee’s project as a writer is heavily invested in the idea that the process of immigration can (and should) create new Americans, and that this process changes not only the immigrant but also the definition and complexion of who and what is considered “American.” Interestingly, Jasmine participates in the creation of new Americans quite literally, by procreating with

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<sup>35</sup> As I have noted, the frontier trope is not unproblematic, given what it represents in regard to the appropriation of Native American lands and the destruction of Native peoples. However, the frontier narrative clearly has an important role to play not just in mainstream American mythology but also in the imagination of the immigrant, who finds herself sometimes left out of the imagery of what it means to be “American,” but who can also find herself empowered by finding her own way to “settle” an ever-changing American “frontier.” In fact, in my next chapter, I refer to a passage in Elizabeth Nunez’s *Beyond the Limbo Silence*, in which the protagonist observes a typical frontier being played out on 1960s television. In that context, Nunez is explicitly challenging the violent and masculinist subtext of the frontier narrative and highlighting its ubiquitous presence in popular American culture.



Bud. Throughout the present-day narrative Jasmine is pregnant, “cocooning a cosmos,” and this knowledge underscores all of the commentary on identity and culture that appears in the novel (224).

Critic Aneja takes issue with this narrative detail and uses it to support her claim that Jasmine loses herself through the process of assimilation, arguing that “Mukherjee’s Jasmine does her best to insert herself into the flesh and blood of America, to the point where her body is literally impregnated by that of the white man” (73). This statement recalls the violation and power differential historically associated with miscegenation during slavery and in the colonized world, casting Jasmine as a victim. I am proposing, however, that this pregnancy does more to transform America than Aneja’s statement suggests. Jasmine’s child with Bud Ripplemeyer will most likely not have the blond hair that she observes on the dolls being sold to commemorate John Deere’s fortieth anniversary at a Mennonite charity event in Baden, Iowa. Jasmine’s new homeland is not the “simpler America” represented by this heartland scene, but one that is now defined by the diversity of its offspring. This baby will be an American in a way that neither Jasmine nor Du – who unlike Jasmine adopts a “hyphenated” (Vietnamese-American) identity – can be, through natural-born citizenship (222). In this more biological, genetic way, Jasmine further contributes to the “mongrelization” of American culture and identity that Mukherjee celebrates in her nonfiction prose.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> It is worth remembering a disturbing comment made by conservative American commentator John Gibson of Fox News on May 11, 2006, at the height of a recent wave of immigration debate. In response to a U.S. census report stating that 20% of the American population will be Hispanic by 2030, Gibson implored his viewers :

Do your duty. Make more babies...Now, in this country, European ancestry people, white people, are having kids at the rate that does sustain the population. It grows a bit. That compares to Europe where the birth rate is in the negative zone. They are not having enough babies to sustain their population. Consequently, they are inviting in more

Critics similarly take issue with Mukherjee's use of "Jane" as the name Bud bestows on Jasmine, arguing not only that Jasmine allows herself to be defined by the men in her life – and therefore is not the emancipated character Mukherjee ostensibly intends her to be – but also that this name in particular is reminiscent of Jane Eyre and the type of Western feminism associated with that literary heroine. Mukherjee is not unaware of this problem, however, and critics seem to ignore what she has Jasmine acknowledge and later decide regarding her name (and identity). Early in the text, Jasmine reveals, "Bud calls me Jane...I didn't get it at first. He kids. Calamity Jane. Jane as in Jane Russell, not Jane as in Plain Jane. Jane is a role, like any other. My genuine foreignness frightens him" (26). Bud wants to associate Jasmine with American icons: Hollywood bombshell Jane Russell and infamous frontierswoman Calamity Jane, both of whom are remembered in American mythology as simultaneously fierce and sexualized. By renaming her in this manner, Bud seeks to sanitize Jane of her difference and recast her feminine charm as something less exotic and more American. But Jasmine reflects, "In Baden, I am Jane. *Almost*" (26, my emphasis). In other words, she is aware that she is playing a role, and that awareness allows her a certain level of agency over her identity.

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and more immigrants every year to take care of things and those immigrants are having way more babies than the native population, hence Eurabia...To put it bluntly, we need more babies. Forget about that zero population growth stuff that my poor generation was misled on. Why is this important? Because civilizations need population to survive. So far, we are doing our part here in America but Hispanics can't carry the whole load. The rest of you, get busy. Make babies, or put another way -- a slogan for our times: "procreation not recreation." ([www.mediamatters.org](http://www.mediamatters.org))

Chillingly reminiscent of Hitler's eugenics, this nationally televised rant raised understandable concern regarding the tone of the immigration debate. Although I do not at all mean to suggest that Mukherjee is participating in a similar, reverse eugenics-type politics in *Jasmine*, I include Gibson's quote to emphasize the importance ethnic purity still has in discussions about American immigration. He implies that Hispanic babies somehow do not count in ensuring the survival of the American population. I find it interesting that by making Jasmine pregnant by a white American man, Mukherjee takes quite the opposite stance, arguing that a lack of ethnic purity is the future of American identity.

Later, when Bud asks her once again to marry him, Jasmine wonders, “Maybe things *are* settling down all right. I think maybe I am Jane with my very own Mr. Rochester, and maybe it’ll be okay for us to go to Missouri where the rules are looser and yield to the impulse in a drive-in chapel” (236). Here Mukherjee reminds us of another famous Jane, who remains both famous and infamous among Western and transnational feminist scholars. Although read by some as a liberated, individualistic female character, *Jane Eyre* is decried by others who believe the eponymous novel defines feminism too narrowly.<sup>37</sup> When Mukherjee chooses a different path for Jasmine, one that instead involves Jasmine’s abandonment of Bud and her life in Baden, she offers her own criticism of all that “Jane” represents in the novel. In fact, in the closing paragraphs of the novel, Jasmine admits, “It isn’t guilt that I feel, it’s relief. I realize I have already stopped thinking of myself as Jane” (241).<sup>38</sup> Although *Jasmine*’s critics may understandably take issue with the fact that Jasmine’s freedom from Bud and Baden arrives in the form of Taylor, another American man from her past, she says earlier in the text that unlike Bud, Taylor “didn’t want to scour and sanitize the foreignness” (185). It is possible, then, to read her continued westward journey as an affirmation of a self-designed and self-designated identity. The “promise of America” that Jasmine imagines

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<sup>37</sup> I will spend more time on Gayatri Spivak’s argument in “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” in my next chapter, where it is central to my argument.

<sup>38</sup> In his article “Of Shattered Pots and Sinkholes: (Female) Identity in Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*,” Ralph J. Crane argues that Mukherjee’s first three novels (*The Tiger’s Daughter*, *Wife*, and *Jasmine*) can be read as an extended bildungsroman in which the *Jane Eyre* model is subverted. He posits, “Indeed, her references to *Jane Eyre*...show Mukherjee’s awareness of the difficulty of trying to live a female bildungsroman. Instead of reading one, Jasmine creates her own version of *Jane Eyre*, she lives a life which shows that the solutions of literary convention don’t always work” (121). Although Crane does not deal thoroughly enough with issues of cultural identity and how it is problematized by Jasmine’s final decision to leave Bud, I do find his reading of her departure useful in how it represents a rejection of the “Jane” identity.

west of Iowa is the promise of agency and self-transformation, for which these critics do not allow Mukherjee due credit.

In a 1996 opinion piece written for the *New York Times*, Mukherjee boldly jumps into the immigration debate of that moment, which surrounded then Vice-President Al Gore's "Citizenship U.S.A." drive. This initiative sought to make "thousands of long-term residents" citizens, and deeply offended those skilled laborers who resented that their legal benefits were in danger should they opt not to take the oath ("Two Ways" 13). Although the article is called "Two Ways to Belong in America," which acknowledges that there is, in fact, more than one way, perhaps Mukherjee should have titled her piece "Two *of the* Ways to Belong..." in order to avoid the angry letters she received in response to it, accusing her of being anti-immigrant and believing that assimilating and not assimilating are the only two ways of "belonging."<sup>39</sup>

In the article, Mukherjee addresses the citizenship controversy through the contrasting stories of her own and her sister Mira's lives in the United States. Although she mentions a few times that she and Mira have differing views on immigration and citizenship – Mira reluctantly took the oath in order to retain her benefits and not because she felt any sense of cultural or political obligation to her new homeland, while Mukherjee embraces her citizenship as a badge of her "mongrelization" – Mukherjee also

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<sup>39</sup> The letters to which I refer were written by Susan Koshy, whose criticism of *Jasmine* I have addressed in this chapter, and Amitava Kumar and Sheila Jasanoff, also successful academics. Koshy in particular writes that "Bharati Mukherjee's fable of immigrant identity... accords with right-wing arguments that it is not quite ethical for legal immigrants to accept economic benefits from the United States without assuming citizenship" ("Forget Love" A26). Although Mukherjee does ask "Have we the right to demand, and to expect, that we be loved?" her argument is less of a political referendum on the immigration debate and more a personal essay about herself, her sister, and their decisions to become citizens. She never accuses her sister of behaving unethically towards her adopted homeland and its government, just as she does not defend the government's position towards immigrants. These letters do, however, reflect an internal debate within the South Asian immigrant community about national and cultural identity, and Mukherjee's article clearly strikes a chord among those who resent her attitude towards immigration and citizenship.

acknowledges that the current bills are “anti-immigration” and “scapegoating” and does not defend them. The article, in short, describes the differences between the ways that she and her sister arrived at citizenship and explains Mukherjee’s choice, which she sums up nicely in the last paragraph:

Mira and I differ, however, in the ways in which we hope to interact with the country that we have chosen to live in. She is happier to live in America as expatriate Indian than as an immigrant American. I need to feel like a part of the community I have adopted...I need to put roots down, to vote and make the difference that I can. The price that the immigrant willingly pays, and that the exile avoids, is the trauma of self-transformation. (13)

These sentences reaffirm what Mukherjee writes in other essays regarding the immigrant’s responsibility to change American culture even while being transformed by it. This responsibility should not be interpreted as a burden, but as the most productive way to fight the very discrimination Mukherjee’s critics accuse her of defending.<sup>40</sup>

This attitude towards citizenship reflects what Mukherjee sees as her role as a new American writer. In “American Dreamer,” she repeats the sentiment included as this chapter’s epigraph and adds an important sentence: “The transformation is a two-way process: It affects both the individual and the national-cultural identity” (7). She continues, “Others who write stories of migration often talk of arrival at a new place as a loss, the loss of communal memory and the erosion of an original culture. *I want to talk of arrival as gain*” (7, emphasis added). Mukherjee more explicitly conflates the

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<sup>40</sup> In “American Dreamer,” published the following year, Mukherjee responds more directly to her critics and is more explicit about what she sees as their “defense against marginalization” and identity politics: “I ask: Why don’t you get actively involved in fighting discrimination? Make your voice heard. Choose the forum most appropriate for you. If you are a citizen, let your vote count. Reinvest your energy and resources into revitalizing your city’s disadvantaged residents and neighborhoods. Know your constitutional rights, and when they are violated, use the agencies of redress the Constitution makes available to you” (6-7).

responsibility of the immigrant-as-American with her role as an American writer in “A Four Hundred Year Old Woman”:

I am an American writer, in the American mainstream, trying to extend it. This is a vitally important statement for me – I am not an Indian writer, not an exile, not an expatriate. I am an immigrant; my investment is in the American reality, not in the Indian. I look on ghettoization – whether as a Bengali in India or as a hyphenated Indo-American in North America – as a temptation to be surmounted. (34)

She does not see herself, as many of her critics would, as a diasporic writer. Although this is not to say that her writing remains unaffected by her origins, Mukherjee makes it clear that her literary agenda mirrors her strategic cultural and sociopolitical identity. Furthermore, she writes, “My duty is to give voice to continents, but also to redefine the nature of *American* and what makes an American. In the process, work like mine and dozens like it will open up the canon of American literature” (36). In other words, Mukherjee’s desire to change American literature is inextricable from her contention that the presence and civic and cultural participation of immigrants expands American identity. These attitudes towards her craft and immigrant American identity support a reading of *Jasmine* and the development of its title character as a metaphor for Mukherjee’s writing career: shaped by a colonized past and deeply invested in contributing to a more diverse American future.

## **Chapter Two: Diasporic Development in Elizabeth Nunez's *Beyond the Limbo Silence***

While *Jasmine* represents Mukherjee's determination to contribute to the American literary canon, albeit to make it more inclusive of immigrant and ethnic minority writing, Elizabeth Nunez's *Beyond the Limbo Silence* represents a body of Caribbean literature that deals with similar issues of gender, identity, migration, and the postcolonial experience.<sup>41</sup> This 1998 novel depicts the manner in which the complexities inherent in West Indian identity are translated in the United States. Set in both Trinidad and a rural Wisconsin college town, it is also heavily invested in the civil rights struggle of the 1960s and the difficulties facing ethnic minorities immigrating to the U.S. during this volatile period in American history. While it is inarguably bound in Caribbean historical, cultural, and socio-political realities – particularly the experiences of British colonialism, postcolonialism, and American neocolonialism – what I find most fascinating about this novel is how it assimilates these realities into the narrative of its immigrant heroine and the diasporic identity she comes to realize for herself as she comes to terms with what her skin color, class, and gender represent in the United States.<sup>42</sup> As she learns about and becomes increasingly invested in the civil rights movement in the United States, she better understands the complicated histories she left behind in Trinidad; as such, she finds herself unexpectedly connected to African Americans in their shared histories of violence, slavery, oppression, and struggles for independence and equality.

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<sup>41</sup> Nunez is part of a tradition of diasporic Caribbean fiction that includes writers such as Edwidge Danticat, Cristina García, June Jordan, Jamaica Kincaid, and Paule Marshall.

<sup>42</sup> Although diasporic identity is necessarily transnational, the converse is not always true. For the purposes of this chapter, being a “diasporic” transnational heroine not only frees this novel's protagonist from the constraints inherent in a fixed national identity but also gives her access to a global African identity.

Sara Edgehill's narrative begins when, at the age of 20, she informs her grandmother that she is leaving Trinidad to attend a Catholic university in Wisconsin on a scholarship. Spanning roughly a year of her life, albeit a very eventful year for both Sara and the civil rights movement in the United States, Sara's narrative repeatedly takes readers back to her childhood in colonized Trinidad. As a result, her development, unlike that of a traditional bildungsroman, is not a linear one. Rather, one could imagine that if it were to be mapped out visually, it would look like a series of intertwined figure eights, allowing Sara to confront memories that help her make sense of her experiences in the U.S. This chapter will argue that the novel should be read as a coming-of-age narrative that charts the development of a young, black, Caribbean immigrant woman, and that must subvert both the stylistic and thematic conventions of that genre in order to pave the way for a new type of transnational heroine and do justice to the complications therein. Nunez accomplishes this subversion in two important ways: first, by adopting a non-chronological narrative structure; and second, by making Sara's a project of identity un-development. In doing so, the novel offers a compelling example of an ethnic American and immigrant identity informed by intertwining histories and global diasporas.

Recent scholarship on "third world" histories contributes to how I understand this stylistic and thematic subversion of a centuries-old Western literary genre. For example, both Edouard Glissant and Walter D. Mignolo recast the ostensibly natural relationship between linear, chronological time and progress as a product of European justification for imperial rule. Glissant argues that by imposing this notion of time, Europeans were also able to insist on a single history, one defined by them and one that ignores the many complex histories of the people(s) they conquered. He writes, "one of the most disturbing



consequences of colonization could well be this notion of a single History, and therefore of power, which has been imposed on others by the West” (93). Similarly, Mignolo argues that once the savage Others were no longer located beyond the geographic space known to European explorers, imperialist discourse instead insisted upon locating them in a chronological space that was characterized as “behind” in order to argue against their humanity. He notes, “toward the nineteenth century the question was no longer whether primitives or Orientals were human but, rather, how far removed from the present and civilized humanity they were” (“Globalization” 35).<sup>43</sup>

Both theorists believe that this conception of history must be reconsidered in order for the third world to be free of intellectual Western hegemony.<sup>44</sup> For Glissant, who explores the possibilities of a national literature coming out of the Caribbean, “if Western literatures no longer need a hallowed presence in the world, a useless activity after these serious charges against Western history, an activity that would be qualified as a kind of mediocre nationalism, they have *on the other hand* to reflect on their new relationship with the world” (101). This new relationship requires a revision of the literary techniques imposed on subjects of imperialism that reflect the imperialist view of time and history. Further, he suggests that “[t]he struggle against a single History for the cross-fertilizations of histories means repossessing both a true sense of one’s time and identity: proposing in an unprecedented way a revaluation of power” (93). I am

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<sup>43</sup> As I will later show, this attitude is prevalent in the Midwestern American community to which Sara immigrates; she is repeatedly faced with an exoticized perception of herself that reasserts their civilized, first-world positions and that represents her otherness so that it is easy to (mis)understand and therefore, less threatening. Reviewer Heather Hathaway notes that Sara and her fellow West Indian scholarship recipients occupy “a liminal status between being external objects of exoticism and internal threats to white hegemony” (553). Recognizing this position and using it to her advantage constitutes an important moment in Sara’s development.

<sup>44</sup> This attitude towards the rethinking of History is not unique to colonial and postcolonial theorists. Similar moves to examine history from the perspectives of marginalized groups – women, minorities, Native peoples, the working class – also exist in the academic study of both British and American history.

suggesting that the structure of Nunez's novel speaks directly to this revelation. Sara's development does not progress through a linear plot structure. On the contrary, the way that the narrative repeatedly re-visits Sara's childhood in Trinidad is essential to how she makes sense of her present condition and to the reader's understanding of how she is assimilating these past experiences. Moreover, this structure reflects the significant role that various histories – Afro-Caribbean, Amerindian, Indo-Caribbean, African-American, Trinidadian – play in her development and the identity Sara has the potential to adopt.

This identity is often threatened by what Sara knows about her white Creole great-grandmother, known locally in Trinidad as “mad Bertha.” Bertha's namesake, the madwoman in the attic from Charlotte Brönte's prototypical western female *bildungsroman*, *Jane Eyre*, has come to represent the manner in which racial and social circumstances create a particular *type* of Caribbean woman whose identification depends on imperialist othering and whose resistance to a socially prescribed identity comes to be constructed as madness. Gayatri Spivak's “Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” provides a useful framework for understanding Nunez's resurrection of this enigmatic figure. In that article, Spivak says that the “empire of the literary discipline” not only allows for the “emergence of the ‘Third World’ as a signifier” but also reproduces, in texts, imperialist worldviews. Her argument allows us to consider the manner in which mad Bertha is reproduced in both Caribbean and Western texts as a signifier of the otherness of the third world. Moreover, Spivak suggests that the two vehicles utilized by Jane in her individualist development, soul-making and sexual reproduction, are available only at the expense of Bertha's demise.

Even in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which Spivak argues allows Antoinette/Bertha to reclaim her humanity via her understanding of the term "legality," this figure is unable to escape her signification to the imperial world. This position seems insurmountable for Spivak, who concludes that

Attempts to construct the "Third World Woman" as signifier remind us that the hegemonic definition of literature is itself caught within the history of imperialism. A full literary reinscription cannot easily flourish in the imperialist fracture or discontinuity, covered over by an alien legal system masquerading as Law as such, an alien ideology established as only Truth, and a set of human sciences busy establishing the "native" as self-consolidating Other. (254)

What this 1985 essay does not seem to consider are the possibilities of a text created in response to the imperial structure, self-conscious of itself as a product of that structure, written decades after independence with the sensibilities of an author who herself has come to understand the potential contained in a transnational, diasporic identity. Nunez challenges Spivak's position by using the immigrant narrative to once again "reinscribe" Jane/Bertha/Antoinette. As Sara comes of age, we witness her struggle to cast off identifications that limit her engagement with her own blackness, such as her white ancestors and comfortably middle-class family. Unlike Bertha, she is also finally empowered by her gender to forge this identity by subverting both Christian soul-making and sexual reproduction in her choices to embrace obeah and abort her unborn child.<sup>45</sup> So while the traditional *bildungsroman* is invested in the project of identity consolidation for its protagonist's development, this text is necessarily invested in the opposite. Sara's

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<sup>45</sup> Obeah, like voodoo or *santería*, describes the West Indian adoption of West African religious traditions. It plays a central, albeit conflicted, role in the novel. Nunez's use of obeah represents the pull between the European and African influences in the Caribbean, where the former is perceived as civilized and the latter (misunderstood) as backwards. Fear of obeah is also used to represent the fear of uncontained blackness, and provides an important link to *Wide Sargasso Sea*, where Antoinette/Bertha's choice to use obeah is the turning point that marks her failure in the eyes of Mr. Rochester and her descent into madness.

identity must unravel in order for her to understand how she has come to be signified by the colonial and postcolonial state in both Trinidad and the United States.

**“Me? I?”: Unraveling and Madness in Sara’s (Female Postcolonial) *Bildungsroman***

To better understand Sara’s unraveling, or the de-consolidation of her prescribed identity, it is useful to examine her upbringing in a West Indian British colony. In Trinidad, Sara’s expectations of the world – and to an extent, her self-perception – are largely based upon the canonical Western novels that obsessed her as an adolescent. Louis Althusser’s terminology from “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” is useful here because Trinidad’s colonial library, whose collection is almost entirely limited to canonical Western texts, seems to function as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) by reinforcing colonial ideology through literature. Althusser argues that the state utilizes ISAs – institutions such as religion, schools, the family, the legal and political systems, unions, communications (media), and culture – to reproduce and affirm its power (143). His inclusion of schools and culture is particularly instructive because Sara spends her formative years in European-run Catholic school, devouring texts by “the best of the English writers our colonial library had to offer: Chaucer, Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton, Pope Johnson, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth, Fielding, Austen, Brönte, the Brownings, and the few Caribbean writers who were available to me then” (34).<sup>46</sup> From

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<sup>46</sup> As I will show in later sections, as Sara develops her diasporic identity she recognizes the manner in which her religion and schooling also caused her to internalize a belief that what she inherited from the British was inherently better than what her African ancestry offered. Interestingly, these misconceptions about the Caribbean that Nunez attributes to Sara and, as I will show later, her white classmates reflects Nunez’s own admitted lack of knowledge about Caribbean history as a young woman. In a recent interview she says, “I thought [the British] were very superior. That’s what I wanted to be. I was for all purposes a black English girl...and my idea of Africans were those people in the TV and in the movies, running around in grass skirts, with Tarzan out to get them – eliminate them from the jungle. That’s what you were taught. I never read a book by a black writer. It was never on the curriculum” (Lewis).

these novels, she has internalized the imperialist tendency to devalue what is native to the Caribbean as uncivilized or backwards, even if she does not consciously associate *herself* with those characteristics by virtue of her class.

Althusser is most concerned with the Marxist implications of ISAs because they facilitate the “reproduction of the ability to manipulate the ruling ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression, so that they, too, will provide for the domination of the ruling class” (132-133). I am suggesting that the institutions he mentions also perpetuate the colonial mindset in how they function to divide the colonized population, using race in addition to class, thereby reinforcing colonial power (132-133). In a sense, these institutions trick the upper and middle classes into believing that they are favored by the colonial state; in order to preserve that favor, they reinforce and reproduce that power. Sara admits to thinking before leaving Trinidad, “I would miss the people I looked down my nose at, the ones who had seemed insignificant to me because I thought, from the books I read, that the world of the big countries was filled with people more civilized, more sophisticated, kinder;” and at another moment she reflects, “Once, in the sweltering heat of the August hurricane season, I tried to trick myself into believing the stories in the English books I had read: winter was nicer than the sultry heat of the tropics” (43, 49). Nunez is suggesting that while at best these novels fail to prepare Sara for the realities of life outside the Caribbean, at worst they skew her perception of herself and her people. At the time that she read the books, Sara did not recognize that in the eyes of those who created these stereotypes, she was “*always already*” one of those people at whom she looks down her nose (Althusser 172). That is,

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she had adopted a perception of herself in relation to the people she leaves behind in Trinidad that allowed her to feel superior to them without recognizing herself as one of them. Interestingly, the text indicates that by the time Sara narrates these moments, she somehow knows better: she understands that her perceptions are the result of the books she had read; she recognizes having tried to “trick” herself.

These experiences with literature, coupled with her middle class, Catholic school upbringing, contribute to a self-perception that therefore comes to be dismantled when Sara migrates to the U.S. When she first arrives in America, Sara is met at the airport by Mrs. Clancy, who knew Sara’s Uncle Thomas many years prior, before he was lynched in Georgia. In an attempt to teach Sara a lesson about who she is and what her brown skin signifies in the United States, Mrs. Clancy’s first words to Sara are painfully insulting, calling her a “monkey chaser from the banana bush” (42). Sara is not only hurt, but surprised to be mistaken for uncivilized: “Me? I?” (42). This description contradicts her self-perception; she sees herself as educated and middle-class, a good Catholic girl. When Mrs. Clancy repeats herself, Sara breaks down into tears, understanding for the first time that despite her own self-image, she is, after all, living the result of an American priest’s search for “raw talent in the primitive world” (28). Despite teaching Sara this harsh lesson, Mrs. Clancy ultimately shows herself to be a friend, telling Sara the true story behind her uncle’s murder.

Thomas, like Sara, came to the U.S. with a self-perception that does not conform to how he was perceived in the Deep South. Mrs. Clancy tells Sara, “He always thought he could go anywhere. I told him, a drop of black blood make you black, Thomas” (45). Thomas believed that the light skin he inherited from his white grandmother, Bertha, was

enough to distinguish him from African Americans. Moreover, a property-owning dentist with a Cadillac in New York, Thomas mistakenly thought he was protected from the types of violent injustices facing black men in America at the time. He did not understand that the skin-shade and class hierarchies that give him power in Trinidad are irrelevant in Jim Crow America. Wrongly accused of raping five white girls, Thomas paid with his life for being the wrong race in the wrong place at the wrong time. Mrs. Clancy connects his attackers' mindset to the insults she hurled at Sara earlier: "He probably called himself doctor. They wanted to put him in his place. All they saw was the bush. I don't mean Trinidad bush. Africa. All they saw was the jungle. To them we were animals" (46). This story echoes for Sara what her grandmother tried to tell her when she simulated a lynching with a dishtowel in her kitchen the day Sara told her she was going to America: in many ways, being Black in Trinidad is not the same as being Black in the United States; however, in more important ways, being Black means facing similar violent prejudices regardless of national origin and class status. By insulting Sara, Mrs. Clancy was trying to put her "in her place," to make her aware of the racial codes in the U.S. and therefore protect her from misunderstanding how her skin color could be perceived.

Sara's self-perception is tested again during her uncomfortable taxi ride from the airport in Osh Kosh to her college, when she tells the (white) taxi driver, Charlie, that she has come to Wisconsin to attend school. He responds "with such disbelief that it immediately triggered [her] defenses" (50). After telling him that she has a scholarship, Sara is subjected to a series of tense questions about how she got it, what she did to

deserve it, what type of accent she has, and where she is from. Charlie seems bothered that the college went all the way down to Trinidad to give her a scholarship:

“I have three sons myself,’ he said. He put his cap back on his head. His voice was quiet now. Distant. ‘The oldest one goes to college in Milwaukee. Works thirty-five hours a week like me, driving a cab. Goes to school at night. Nobody came up to him or me to give him a scholarship. Not like we live far away like you. Just right down the road a few miles ahead. Wisconsin-bred and Wisconsin-born’” (52).

Sara feels a need to apologize, understanding that she has overstepped an invisible boundary, one that limits a woman of color from the third world from acquiring more than what a native-born white American man has been offered. She quickly makes up a lie, telling Charlie that she has to work as a cook to pay for her scholarship. Charlie, who grins a “satisfied smile,” is pleased that order has been restored to his world-view (52). When he drops Sara’s suitcases at her feet on the curb instead of carrying them inside for her, Mother Superior, who has come out to greet Sara, asks him, “Aren’t you going to bring them in?” (54). She quickly realizes that “something in the way he stepped backward toward the car, rubbing his hands against his thighs and shaking his head, warned her not to press him further” (54). Charlie’s refusal to carry Sara’s bags for her as he presumably would for a white passenger shows his unwillingness to reverse the roles defined in the master-slave paradigm. It does not matter that she is a paying customer; in fact, the fact that she can afford to be, while he has to work to make a living, makes matters worse. This racialized, nativist reaction reminds Sara that how she is perceived in the U.S., and particularly what her skin color represents, is loaded and provocative. More importantly, it contradicts her self-perception as she continues to come to terms with the racial codes in her new surroundings.



Throughout the novel, Nunez links the dismantling of prescribed identities with emotional and mental unraveling by invoking Sara's white great-grandmother and her literary namesakes. She forces us to consider how perception and context determine "madness," aptly reinterpreting this madness as cross-cultural misunderstanding. Sara, considering her own emotional fragility and the fact that it may indicate a propensity for madness, reflects,

I had read *Jane Eyre*. I knew about the mad Berthas, the white Creole women in the West Indies who had gone mad with their guilt. Neither fish nor fowl, neither European nor African, but now born and bred West Indians, they were left to face the relics of slavery, the scuttle that was left behind when the Europeans left. And the guilt, mostly the guilt. Our mad Bertha, my grandmother's mother, was made even more insane when she tried to cross over. When she thought, *Wasn't I now West Indian? Shouldn't I now choose one of them? One of us?* (75)

This observation recalls Bertha/Antoinette's emotional appeal in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which rewrites *Jane Eyre*'s monstrous Bertha, giving her a voice with which to tell her story: "I've heard English women call us white niggers. So between you I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all" (Rhys 102). These passages demonstrate that what constitutes "madness" originates from an understandable confusion that occurs when the line between "us" and "them" is blurred. For Sara's great-grandmother and Rhys's Antoinette/Bertha, the geographic and cultural displacement of an English-bred girl born and raised in the Caribbean causes this confusion. Nunez writes in her article, "The Paradoxes of Belonging: The White West Indian Woman in Fiction": "the white creole woman is an outcast, a sort of freak rejected by both Europe and England, whose blood she shares, and by the black West Indian people, whose culture and home have been hers for two generations or more" (281-

282).<sup>47</sup> This neither/nor designation forces these women into an undefined space; when they react to this isolation by further withdrawing (like Rhys's Bertha does) or attempting to become part of the black culture that surrounds them (like Nunez's Bertha does), this behavior is misunderstood as mental instability.

But Nunez's novel suggests that "madness" is not unique to the displaced white Creole woman, but also inherent in anyone who feels displaced, geographically or otherwise. Although Sara's mental breakdown as a young girl in Trinidad was ostensibly the result of unrequited romantic feelings for Eric, a neighbor's son, Nunez links Sara's conception of romance to her colonized mentality:

It was Zeta who introduced me to romantic love. I met her when I was thirteen. Our island was an outpost in the British Empire and books took forever to get to our colonial library. The most modern we had were the novels of Jane Austen and Emily Brontë. Zeta had read *Pride and Prejudice*, and from her I discovered the first of the books that would thrill me with their stories of romantic love. The moody Darcy burning with desire for the unsuspecting Elizabeth: how many nights I dreamt of him. (29)

At first glance, this passage could be read as describing the discrepancy between romance novels and realistic love that proves disappointing for any young girl.

When Eric fails to live up to Sara's expectations, however, Nunez's invocation of the colonial library reminds us that these models are unrealistic ones for Sara for more significant reasons. Her reaction, interpreted as an emotional breakdown,

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<sup>47</sup> This article, which appears in a 1985 volume of *Modern Fiction Studies*, reveals Nunez's ongoing interest in the figure of the alienated white Creole woman. In it, she examines both Antoinette/Bertha (Rhys's version) and the white creole protagonists in Phyllis Shand Allfrey's *The Orchid House*. Nunez notes that it is Creole women, not men, that are subjected to the insult "white cockroach," for they are the ones who "must bear the guilt of the horrors of slavery inflicted by their own white ancestors upon the people whose country they now call their own" (282). That white Creole men are exempt from this alienation speaks to the power imbalance between men and women, regardless of race. Because of their lack of authority, white Creole women are easier to scapegoat than their male counterparts.

originates from her already confused identity: Sara wants to be Jane, but as a colonized other, she can only be Bertha.<sup>48</sup>

As she comes to terms with her own history and its relation to what she encounters in America, Sara has to dismantle the myth of mad Bertha that threatens to repeat itself in her own unraveling. When Sara faints on her very first night in Wisconsin – overcome by the “whiteness” of her new surroundings – sister Agnes, who knows about Sara’s breakdown in Trinidad, likens the fainting spell to Sara’s emotional “sickness” rather than imagining that Sara could be experiencing culture shock (54-70). In another instance, when Sara confronts Sister Agnes about wanting to give up her scholarship so that a local African-American girl might benefit from the funds instead, the nun has a similar reaction. She accuses Sara of caring about civil rights only because her boyfriend, Sam, does, and when Sara begins to cry, Sister Agnes scolds her, “Learn to control yourself, Sara. Learn” (213). For Sara, these words immediately conjure the mental image of her great-grandmother Bertha tied to a hospital bed. Much later in the novel, Sara is institutionalized after the obeah ritual she performs in order to help her African-American boyfriend Sam find the missing civil rights activists. Like Bertha, her behavior in each of these instances is attributed to mental instability rather than understood as a symptom of her increasingly fragmented identity. For much of the novel, Sara struggles with the task of reconciling her comfortable position in America with a burgeoning identification with African Americans and their shared histories. The

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<sup>48</sup> That is not to say that the romantic elements in these novels do not program Sara to internalize the belief that her confused identity could be validated by the love of a man. One of Sara’s personal demons is the persistent sense of her unattractiveness, which she believes is a disappointment to her beautiful mother (who, incidentally, is unable to become pregnant after having Sara). Indeed, as I will later show, Sara attempts to anchor herself in America through her affair with Sam. However, part of her development relies on her willingness to let him go, not only so that he can continue his civil rights work, but also so that she can find, as Courtney puts it, “other ways to fight” (204).

difficulties Sara encounters in belonging in America, her guilt over not fully comprehending the gravity of the African-American condition, and her uncertainty regarding how she is to react to it threaten to subsume her, as it did her great-grandmother. Therefore, Sara's development constitutes not only a personal resistance to inheriting her great-grandmother's "madness," but a political resistance to the racial and social conditions that threaten to force her, as a Caribbean subject migrating to America, to conform to the identity that her childhood in colonial Trinidad has prescribed. Nunez's project rewrites the Berthas of both Brönte and Rhys, allowing her to procreate so that her mixed-race descendants might produce an alternative interpretation of her madness. But before she can do so, Sara has to make sense of the relationship between American racism and race/class relations in colonial and postcolonial Trinidad.

### **"You, not us": The Paradox of American Gifts and American Racism**

Before Sara arrives in America, she knows little about the struggle of African Americans other than what her grandmother had warned her about when she tied a towel around her neck to show Sara how her uncle Thomas died in Georgia: "The word is *lynched*...Lynched. Your great-uncle Thomas was lynched. Strung up on a tree, American style. No questions asked. No jury. Rope round his neck. His body like any old sack of black coals" (17-18). Although Sara's family discredits the old woman's rendering of what happened to Thomas, this sordid gesture follows Sara to the United States, where she learns that her grandmother was right. Once she is able to assimilate it into what she learns about American racism and her experiences with Americans in

Trinidad, she better understands her grandmother's disturbing reaction to the news that she is leaving.

Sara's perception of America prior to arriving consists of images derived from popular culture – cowboy movies and television shows that idealize the American spirit as persevering, bold, opportunistic, and brave – and from how these images were appropriated by the independence movement in her own country in order to inspire nationalism.<sup>49</sup> She recalls hearing Eric Williams, the independence activist who went on to become Trinidad's first prime minister, speak at a demonstration:

He told us stories about the fighting spirit of the Americans to set us on fire on the eve of our independence from British rule. The Americans, he said, had defied the British. They had refused to follow the British religion or to pay them taxes. Later they fought a bloody war against the British for their freedom. "Live free or die"... They had won the right to be themselves. They had severed themselves from the weight of an ugly past. They were not Europeans with a suitcase of memories. They were Americans, a new people in a new world. I envied their absence of baggage. How was I also to know about their shame? Their enslavement of black people? (Nunez 92)

In *The Empire Writes Back*, Ashcroft et. al. make a compelling point regarding the differences between *types* of colonialism that is instructive here, particularly in regard to the privilege of "settler colonies" such as the United States that "established a transplanted civilization which eventually secured political independence while retaining a non-Indigenous language," over the West Indies, where the "entire contemporary population has suffered a displacement and an 'exile'" (25). They note, "The West Indian situation combines all the most violent and destructive effects of the colonizing

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<sup>49</sup> Earlier in the novel, when Sara first reflects on what she knows about Americans, she recalls the American tourists who would take pictures of her and the other neighborhood children, offering them coins that they had to refuse because "how could we explain to mothers who knew everything that someone wanted to pay us merely for standing there, arms around each other, acting the fool" (20). This recollection hints at the pressure Sara will face later in the novel to allow herself to be exoticized in order to garner favor from (white) Americans seeking to distinguish her from African Americans.

process,” namely the destruction of the native population, African slavery, and “the only slightly less violent disruption of slavery’s ‘legal’ successor, the nineteenth-century system of indentured labour” (25). This understanding of the differences between colonization in North America versus the Caribbean makes the admiration of American ideals by West Indians doubly problematic: first, because the difference in the colonial situations afforded Americans certain privileges that facilitated their freedom; and second, because that freedom was won at the expense of not only the indigenous populations displaced and effectively destroyed in the process of settlement and independence but also the African slaves whose humanity – and therefore freedom – was overlooked by the independence movement in the United States.

Thus, in this historical moment in Trinidad, ambivalence towards the United States is understandable. Ironically, given its fraught racial history, America provides a model for freedom from British rule that Trinidadians admire. On the other hand, Sara and her family experience firsthand the manner in which Americans have installed themselves in Trinidad by way of their “gifts,” the implications of which Sara does not fully comprehend until after she leaves Trinidad. It is not until she is confronted with the deeply rooted struggle of African-Americans in her new home that Sara understands how she has been appropriated by white America to justify the treatment of the non-immigrant Black population and how the “gifts” she and her family received from the Americans in Trinidad foreshadowed the situation in which she finds herself in the U.S.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> However, the myth of America’s “romance with liberty” is deeply engrained in Sara, and she does return to it in moments of weakness when the unimaginable violence committed against African Americans is too painful to accept. In these moments she returns to “the pilgrim fathers; the Boston tea party; no taxes without representation; a constitution that guaranteed freedom of speech and the right to pursue happiness. I could not imagine the atrocities Sam was describing to me would be permissible, even possible, in a country with such a history” (162).

America's neocolonial presence in Trinidad is associated with the decaying British empire and an unofficial transfer of power that Nunez depicts as somewhat insidious. The result is a complicated relationship with the United States, which while in some ways is mutually beneficial, serves to consolidate America's political and economic power on the island. One example Nunez provides is the road, "a gift from the Americans to the Trinidad colonial government," which provides access to one of the most popular and scenic beaches on the island (36). Sara's father sees this gift as repayment for the military base the British colonizers allowed Americans to build during World War II on prime Trinidadian land; the agreement would last for ninety-nine years. Sara recalls her father lamenting, "And no one asked us anything" (36). On a final trip down that road with her father before leaving for the United States, Sara reflects,

By then, I knew more about the Americans than I had as a child...A military air base at Walter Field stretched across central Trinidad; the farmers just rolled their belongings into bundles and left their lands when the British told them to move. And the naval base in Chaguaramus: the fishermen simply had to find new waters, and there would be no more family picnics on Sundays on the beach at Teteron Bay. All for fifty battered American destroyers when the mother country was afraid that Germany would become their father country. (36)

This critique of British colonialism highlights the injustice of forcing Trinidadians from their own land and of treating their losses as necessary collateral damage in the negotiations between two powerful Western nations. Mr. Edgehill's pointed comment, "Even the Americans knew that they had taken too much," acknowledges the new political reality established by America's post-war rise to neocolonial superpower. Moreover, this conversation signals a shift in Sara's perception of America and white

Americans, foreshadowing the conflicted relationship she comes to develop with her new homeland. Her narration continues:

The road the Americans had built, giving Maracas Bay to us – though only to those of us in the middle class who had cars – eased the resentment of ninety-nine years. I was ready to filter out my father’s words, his anger about discarded fuel and debris snaking down from the huge military ships in Chaguaramus, soiling our waters in Carenage Bay. Fishermen’s sons, naked and brown like the earth, splashing in oil-drenched waters, wondering later about the eczemas that grew on their legs, pustulant and ugly. (37)

This passage reveals the manner in which the Americans’ unofficial debt repayment reflects their privileging of Trinidad’s middle class – only those who could afford cars benefit from the “gift” – over the working class. Farmers and fishermen, whose livelihoods suffer when natural resources are reappropriated without their consent, lose out again when their class is excluded from the Americans’ attempt to ingratiate themselves with the Trinidadian public. Not unlike their British predecessors, whose rule reinforced and exploited class differences among Trinidadians, the Americans understand the importance of keeping the favor of the more powerful middle class. In these passages, Nunez is contributing to a conversation among historians of the Caribbean and West Indian writers about the American presence in that region after World War II. However, in addition to addressing the social, political, and economic implications, she adds an interesting dimension to the discourse by investigating the effects of this American presence on the relationship West Indian immigrants in the U.S. have with their new homeland.

Sara’s father’s solidly middle-class position in Trinidad’s Ministry of Labor also makes him the recipient of American “gifts,” but on a far more personal level (26). His



duties include keeping Americans from paying Trinidadians in U.S. dollars because “Trinidadians were discovering that, with the rate of currency exchange, they could make a teacher’s salary cleaning toilets on the base” (26). Although the Americans were angry, claiming the Trinidadian government was attempting to take money from its citizens and assuming the role of benefactor, in reality their wages were effectively stunting intellectual and professional growth among Trinidadians by creating a broad working class among Trinadians what would be dependent upon Americans for work, for “who needed math to clean a toilet bowl?” (26) Given Mr. Edgehill’s position, the Americans sought to gain his favor in negotiating this dispute, which he staunchly refused until he needed the polio vaccine that could save Sara from the disease that had begun killing off her classmates:

The gifts from the Americans started arriving at our house that year [of the labor dispute]: boxes of chocolates, cigarettes, chewing gum. My father returned them the next day, but the gifts kept coming, each time more numerous, each time more expensive. Radios, cameras, watches, my father returned them all...But that night of my sickness I saw the captain of the naval base hand my father a small box of chocolates and witnessed the humiliating smile of gratitude that crossed my father’s face as he accepted it. (26-27)

But for Sara’s father, who from that day forward accepts the gifts he receives from the captain and keeps them in the shed until years later when he finally burns it down, accepting any gift is like selling off his integrity. He understands that his job requires him to negotiate on behalf of the very Americans who seek to control his people and his nation in a less official, if not more insidious way, than the British. Moreover, he knows that because of his American connections – and therefore his class status – his family survives while less fortunate ones are ravaged by polio. Saving Sara strips him of the

quiet form of resistance he had been exercising up to that point by refusing the Americans' gifts.

Mr. Edgehill's parting words to Sara before she leaves offer a cryptic warning, steeped in the painful compromise he is forced to make with Americans in Trinidad. He tells her,

Don't let America fool you with its righteous words. Freedom, independence, the right to choose, justice – these are for them alone. Americans are sentimental. They cry and weep at the movies, at make-believe – but don't think real life moves them. Be careful, Sara. To them, you owe them everything. They owe you nothing. Your scholarship? They have paid for your silence and your friendship. (38)

He uses the most popular catch-phrases of American ideology to show Sara that the pervasiveness of this rhetoric makes the absence of these values in practice even more dangerous. In other words, because they believe that they are acting on behalf of these values, (white, mainstream) Americans are unwilling to consider perspectives that challenge their dominance. Moreover, Sara's father seems to be aware of what she will face in America in terms of negotiating her identity and of the role of race in such a negotiation. Sara's narration implies that she will come to understand his words: "I would wonder later, why, in spite of what he knew, he let me go to America" (39). Indeed, much later in the novel, her father's parting words come back to haunt Sara when she finally recognizes the price she is paying by having accepted the scholarship.

In "How I Came to America," Nunez discusses some of the autobiographical elements of *Beyond the Limbo Silence*, including facing the same questions Sara faces regarding her scholarship. Like Sara, Nunez came to the United States in 1963 to attend "that all-white college in that all-white town" in Wisconsin (Nunez "How I Came...")

373). She remembers that on her first trip out of Oshkosh, she saw for the first time “African Americans in America in such numbers that [she] could not suppress the question that continued to haunt me for the rest of my college years: why me? Why had these white Americans in Wisconsin gone 3,000 miles overseas to get me, a black girl from Trinidad, when 30 miles away there were black people eager as I was for a fully-paid education?” (375). In the novel, Sara describes a similar experience: “Milwaukee shocked me with its blacks and its poverty... The people on the street were brown like the people I had left in Trinidad, and yet they frightened me. When they turned to stare at the bus, I saw a guardedness and an anger in their eyes I had never seen before” (191-192). Although Sara’s narration hints at the separation she feels, as an immigrant, from African Americans, it also addresses the guilt she comes to feel because of her own privilege. Soon after that episode, during a conversation with Sam, he points out that African Americans are not allowed to study at the college she attends. At that point, Sam makes explicit the division between them: “You, not us” (199). Sara struggles to understand why it is that she is allowed to study there while African Americans are not, but it takes her only a minute to make the connection back to her father’s message. The price she pays is allowing herself to be used by the white Catholic school that wants to feel as if they are doing something good for the black community.

Nunez’s December 2005 personal essay also makes a very interesting point about the opportunities, both educational and professional, that were made available to Nunez thanks to the Civil Rights bill of 1964. She directly links the passage of that bill to the immigration bill of 1965, which removed “national origin” (and effectively, race) as a factor to be considered for immigrants trying to get a visa. Without that law, Nunez says,

she may not have been allowed to return to the United States after having returned to Trinidad when she graduated from college. Nunez laments not having been as “lucky” as Sara; she did not realize “that it was to black America that [she] owed [her] good fortune” until much later, when she got a job as an English professor at Medgar Evers College (374). She recalls that

[i]n 1972, I gave no particular significance to its name. I had no idea that a young husband, a father of small children, had been callously shot in his driveway in Mississippi as he was returning home after working all night registering African Americans to vote. I had no idea that the very existence of that college was the result of a struggle to force the hand of the City University of New York to provide higher education for the city’s under-served black population. (375)

Perhaps because it took so long for Nunez to make the connection between her successes and the violent struggle endured by African Americans that made them possible, it seems as though she was eager for Sara to work through this knowledge earlier. Sara’s real education, which takes place during her first years in the U.S., offers Nunez the opportunity to explore the civil rights movement as a component of immigrant identity formation. Moreover, through Sara’s experiences, Nunez explores the many challenges the immigrant faces in attempting to negotiate a sense of belonging that honors the complicated histories of both the new homeland and the one left behind.

**“I give them what they think are calypsos”: Different Ways of Belonging in America**

When she first arrives in the United States, Sara feels caught between her fellow “third world” scholarship recipients, Angela and Courtney, who share her Caribbean identity but assume different ways of belonging in the United States due to their different racial and cultural backgrounds. Angela, whose family is Indo-Caribbean, accepts the privilege that her non-African Caribbean identity affords her in the United States. She is

in love with the idea of America and the potential for opportunity and progress she believes define the American Dream. Courtney, on the other hand, is proudly Afro-Caribbean. She believes in and practices obeah and she feels cynical towards the nuns and her white classmates, with whom she feels she could never truly belong. Of Angela, she says wryly, “To [her] every place but here is the bush” (60).

In their new home, the complexities surrounding Caribbean racial and cultural identities affect how the three girls relate to one another and how each one sees herself in relation to white Americans. Courtney is acutely aware of the racial injustices that remain prevalent in her new home and avidly supports the civil rights movement, understanding her own family’s history of enslavement as part of the same struggle. On the other hand, Angela repeatedly tries to appeal to Sara’s mixed racial heritage in an attempt to justify their similarity to their white classmates and difference from Courtney’s blackness, saying, “It’s the African in her...All that mumbo jumbo. She’s pure African, you know. Not colored like you. I can see you have white blood. You and I are more like them” (84). By referring to obeah as “mumbo-jumbo” Angela trivializes it as backwards and meaningless, stripping an entire spiritual system of its relevance and power because of its African origins. Even so, Sara witnesses Angela’s fear of Courtney’s obeah, which reveals that Angela has not completely dismissed that which she outwardly ridicules. Moreover, her elevation of Sara’s “white blood” shows that she does not feel that the civil rights struggle taking place around the country at that time involves her. She repeatedly encourages Sara to adopt a similarly unburdened attitude towards belonging in America.

Perhaps because she is not burdened by what black skin represents in civil-rights era America, she finds it more tolerable to allow herself to be exoticized by her white American classmates and their community. While Courtney works in the college cafeteria, Angela earns extra money by singing at local events. She explains how she got the position to Sara:

What really happened, though, is that Mrs. O'Brien had some people over for dinner and she invited me to meet them. They asked me all sorts of questions about British Guiana – how hot it gets, do we have snakes, what kind of houses we live in. Questions like that. Then one of them said she liked West Indian calypso and she began to sing, "Come Mister Tallyman, Tally me Bananas." Before I knew it they asked me to sing it and I did. I sang "Jamaica Farewell," "Yellow Bird," and "Kingston Market." They loved it. (80)

The implications of these questions – that her homeland is uncivilized (hot and full of snakes) and that her people do not live in normal houses – do not bother Angela. Furthermore, Sara's feeble protest, "But those are not calypsos," and Angela's response, "To you and me, but not to them," indicates her complacency with an American attitude towards her foreignness that ignores relevant cultural details in service of their preconceived image of the Caribbean. That Angela allows her audience to misinterpret one of the most important cultural forms of her region demonstrates a willingness to compromise her integrity, which alienates Sara, who has already begun considering the compromises she will have to make in order to fit in at her new school.

In another episode, Sara is faced with the choice to allow herself to be misinterpreted and exoticized by her white classmates in order to fit in with them the way that Angela does. Refusing to believe that Sara's home in Trinidad had running water, Sara's classmates ignore her protests that her family has faucets and that she's never worn a grass skirt. She pleads with them, "Really. Truly! Ask Angela," but they insist –

with Angela at the forefront – that she show them how she carries water in a bucket on her head (because that’s one of the American girls had once seen on a post card) and laugh at her humiliation (95-96). Again, Sara recognizes that in her new home, how she is perceived and how she sees herself are painfully at odds. Moreover, she senses the truth in her father’s warning that friendship with mainstream white America would be complicated and morally costly. Later, when Angela attempts to console her, “Give them their fairy tales. I give them what they think are calypsos,” Sara recognizes that Angela “would be the way the girls wanted her to be. They had made the world, and if in hot countries the natives wore grass skirts and balanced buckets of water on their heads, so be it” (97).<sup>51</sup>

Because of her mixed racial background, Sara is not convinced by Angela’s approach. She knows that she “came [to America] with [her] self-consciousness, [her] memory burdened with histories of slavery, exploitation, colonialism, deprivation,” which alienate her from her white American classmates (90). In fact, Angela’s “mumbo-jumbo” comment about Courtney and her behavior in front of their white classmates confirms for Sara what she has already begun to understand:

I, through whose veins ran the blood of slave masters, closed ranks with [Courtney] with my African blood...My African ancestors and Courtney’s were brought to the Caribbean as slaves, chattel, commodities to be used and then traded or put out to pasture. Angela’s ancestors came as indentured laborers. No slight difference in countries where the people had learned to mimic the intricacies of British class structure. (82-83)

Sara’s revelation recalls Mignolo’s assertion in *Local Histories/Global Designs*, where he makes the case for an empowered “third world” identity via diasporic transnationalism. He introduces the notion of “diversality” as a way of thinking about diasporic identities

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<sup>51</sup> See note 3.

that are simultaneously unique and related to other subaltern identities. This term is useful here because it accounts for Sara's transnational bond with Courtney given their shared African heritage, and for thinking about Sara, whose blackness links her to the civil rights movement despite the national and class differences that threaten her ties to the African American community. However, it fails to acknowledge the implications of internal differences among these three immigrants, such as Angela's unwillingness to recognize the African part of her West Indian background.

In *Alien-Nation and Repatriation*, Patricia Saunders addresses the complications that face Caribbean women who migrate to the metropole, noting,

Efforts to “make it” for women living in the metropole involved a tremendous effort to make themselves, both out of what they left behind (possibly to return later), and in the new landscapes they encountered as immigrants. While giving expression to the various complexities of what “making it” in America meant, women also had to make meaning of their identities in an effort to reconstruct and represent them in relation to new cultural, political, and historical terrains...In other words, they needed to make meaning (race, nation, sexuality, and class) *mean* differently without reinscribing themselves within the “absent presences” of the Caribbean canon they were resisting and revising. (132)

Courtney, Angela, and Sara – despite their similarities – are actively engaged in this process, and this argument better accounts for the differences between them that cannot be elided for the sake of regional immigrant solidarity. Although Nunez's supporting characters at moments read like caricatures of polarized immigrant experiences, Angela's willingness to disparage the Caribbean as “the bush” in order to be accepted by her American classmates and Courtney's staunch refusal to believe that she could ever be anything other than an outsider in the U.S. provide useful foils for Angela's more thoughtfully negotiated identity. Although they find different ways of belonging (or not belonging; at the end of the novel Courtney returns to St. Lucia), each must translate her



West Indian identity – already necessarily complicated by race, gender, and culture – into something she can live with in the U.S. While Angela and Courtney take opposite approaches to this process, Sara attempts the more challenging task of occupying a middle ground that resists the colonial, nationalist, and racist ideologies, even if at different times each of those ideologies afford her privilege in Trinidad and the U.S. Her more complicated approach involves neither acceptance nor rejection of these ideologies; instead, she must translate how she has been appropriated by them at various moments during her childhood in Trinidad to determine her place among African, white American, and African-American identification strategies.

**“The crowd black and sweaty”: Translating Trinidadian Independence in the U.S.**

The translation of the black experience is one of Brent Hayes Edwards’ concerns in the prologue to his book, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*. Although his work focuses primarily on the factors that contributed to pan-African identities and the manner in which diaspora could be defined as a set of cultural, intellectual and political practices rather than as a particular space or condition, I find it useful to think of Sara’s negotiations between what she knows from her life in Trinidad and what she experiences in the United States in these terms.

Edwards writes,

Attempts to articulate the ‘race problem as a world problem,’ in Locke’s phrase – to foster links among populations of African descent in order to organize the ‘darker people of the world’ across the boundaries of nation-states and languages – are necessarily skewed by those same boundaries. That is, the level of the international is accessed unevenly by subjects with different historical relations to the nation. (6-7)<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Edwards is quoting Alain LeRoy Locke (1885-1954), African-American writer and philosopher.

In other words, different nation-states have implemented different policies, official and unofficial, in regards to its darker-skinned population. Moreover, the “race problem” is internalized differently in nations where racial “minorities” are not, in fact, in the minority (such as Trinidad and other Caribbean nations). Sara’s initial inability to recognize the race problem in America stems from the fact that she has internalized a different sort of race problem from Trinidad, one that shares with the United States its origins in slavery, but one that was transformed after emancipation into a class-centered problem. Edwards continues, “if the cultures of black internationalism are shaped by the imperatives of what Edward Said had called ‘adversarial internationalization’...those cultures are equally ‘adversarial’ to themselves, highlighting differences and disagreements among black populations on a number of different registers” (6-7); however, the concept of *diaspora*, he argues, “forces us to articulate discourses of cultural and political linkage only through and across difference in full view of the risks of that endeavor” (13).<sup>53</sup> These differences (of class, national, language, religion) come to a head in the postwar United States, where formerly enslaved African Americans – whose emancipation occurred more recently than it did for African slaves in the Caribbean and who are still suffering the unique brutality of Jim Crow racism – are joined by other black immigrants from around the world. Although there is a history of West Indian

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<sup>53</sup> For more on this topic, see Winston James’s *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia*. Saunders also deals with this issue when she compares *Beyond the Limbo Silence* to Paule Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, another West Indian coming-of-age novel. Both novels, she argues, acknowledge the way the West Indian immigrant’s desire to succeed (financially and socially) in America at times requires her to separate herself from African Americans. She cites the persistence of middle-class aspirations (in addition to national, language, and cultural differences) as a threat to political solidarity across the African diaspora (19-21).

In addition, although black internationalism as a strategic political movement is not explicitly relevant to my reading of Nunez’s novel, it is inextricable from Edwards’ development of diaspora as the best-equipped model for considering transnational blackness, which is central to my argument regarding Sara’s development.

immigrants participating in the American civil rights movement, this history does not preclude the complicated realities of darker-skinned immigrants who separate themselves from African Americans in an attempt to protect themselves from racism. In order to develop an identity that includes an understanding of her connection to both Trinidadian and American forms of oppression, Sara must come to recognize how she is figured into each system, and particularly how her middle-class position in Trinidad at times excludes her from engaging with the issue of race in the United States. It is not until she is able to translate her socio-racial experiences in Trinidad into an American understanding of racism that Sara comes to understand herself, in the contexts of both systems, as a transnational, diasporic subject.

Sara further recalls that Eric Williams spoke about the enslavement of Africans in America at independence rallies, but by that time her mother no longer allowed her to attend the demonstrations in Woodford Square: “‘The dregs of society are now coming out there,’ she said. I knew she meant the poorest and blackest of us” (Nunez *Limbo Silence* 92). For Sara’s middle class family, poor and black are conflated, and thus both are to be avoided. Her family is racially mixed, and despite the fact that both Sara and her mother have brown skin, Sara’s class status requires that she not associate with “the crowd black and sweaty” (172). Because of this background, Sara at times finds herself at odds with Sam with respect to her ability to empathize with the African American struggle she witnesses in 1960s America. In order to understand herself as part of that crowd, both in Trinidad and its American translation, she must overcome the difficulties her privileged position of middle class foreigner present in granting her access to black

American experience, even if it is that same privilege that allows her to come to America in the first place.

This task is further complicated by the fact that what excludes her from black America is also what keeps her safe in white America, and at certain moments, Sara allows herself to be defined in opposition to black America. Signified as an exotic, Sara's blackness is presented as being less threatening to the white Americans she meets in Oshkosh. As a foreigner, she represents the privilege necessary for migration (class, education). Moreover, as a foreigner with a British accent, she is further stripped of what black skin signifies in civil rights era America. Invited to sing with Indo-Caribbean Angela at a Knights of Columbus dinner, Sara faces her uncomfortable position: neither white nor African American, she willingly accepts the alternative role of exotic immigrant. She justifies her submission to the white family's curiosity about her culture: "I wanted the Weavers to know we were as complex and as diverse as they were. My parents were not ordinary people, either. They were middle class; they were literate; they were well-read. And when, in the car, Mrs. Weaver noticed my accent, I emphasized it and became proud of ancestors who were never mine, who had tortured mine" (170). Mrs. Weaver's response resonates with Sara: "You pronounce your words beautifully. Not like many of the people here" (171). What Mrs. Weaver does *not* say, "not like many of the *black* people here" later shames Sara, who narrates the incident, "I smiled... The sudden rush of pride, its source not to be considered then, not analyzed. I did not stop to think of who she meant" (171). In her willingness to accept any compliment from people who know absolutely nothing about her or her history, Sara betrays her connection to the African American community and reveals the complicated

position that she is in as a middle-class black Caribbean immigrant in the United States. However, she also remembers that she did not always pronounce her words so “beautifully.” In the middle of narrating this evening, Sara’s mind wanders back to her first day of Catholic school, when she says to her father, “Ena say dat dis school harder dan the odder school I was in” (173). His response surprises Sara: he grabs her roughly by the collar of her school uniform and forces her to repeat herself, “chang[ing] the tense...imitating the English accent he had used” (173). He warns her that “[p]eople know who you are by the way you speak” (174). This memory demonstrates that Sara’s training in distinguishing herself from the less privileged (and therefore less acceptable) members of society began early. Her father understands that in order for his daughter to prosper in a country whose hierarchy was determined by the British, she must strive to be as much like them as possible, even if this self-interestedness borders on complicity with the oppressor. The translation of this mindset in the United States means allowing herself to be similarly alienated from (less privileged, less acceptable) African Americans.

Later that evening, she is once again defined in a manner that separates her from black Americans when she is asked about the supposedly bloodless revolution by which Trinidad acquired its independence from Britain. Sara is transported back in time to the day that she cut school to hear Eric Williams speak in Woodford Square. This time, her recollection reveals, “I suffered detention for a week when I returned to school the next day. My mother cried: her daughter with a bunch of hooligans” (172). Sara goes on to recall the way her French Creole history teacher likens the crowd in Woodford Square to the “unruly rabble” that her mother imagines, and the manner in which their nationalist demonstration is perceived by the middle class as a threat: “They are organizing to take

what we have worked for...Let them find jobs. They won't have the time to be loitering around Woodford Square in the middle of the day. The next thing you know they'll be in our schools sitting next to you. How'd you like to have the daughter of your mother's maid sitting next to you in class?" (172-3) Sara's memory of the way that her teacher and parents taught her to distinguish herself from the masses of black people protesting in Woodford Square is interrupted by words from one of the Knights, who says to her, "Yup, the people down South could take a page from your book"(174). By comparing Trinidadian independence with the American civil rights movement, he elides the differences between the two, particularly the distinct brutality of Jim Crow America that fueled the latter. In doing so, he elevates Sara so that her black skin is more acceptable than the black skin of African Americans.

When Mrs. Weaver steps in to rescue Sara from the Knights' complaints about how the "Negroes" in America are "burning and looting" in protest of their oppression, Sara recognizes the similarities between what she remembers from Trinidad and the ways her exoticism has been appropriated by the Knights:

[W]hen she spoke again of how intelligent I was, how cultured, and when the ladies remarked again about my accent – *very British* – I, too, allowed them to separate me from those burning and looting Negroes as I had allowed my history teacher with her fears of being recognized to carve a space between me and Woodford Square, so that when independence came, I did not know how. (174)

Sara's figure-eight narration of this evening and the manner in which it forces her to repeatedly revisit experiences from her past in Trinidad illustrate a burgeoning consciousness of how her complicated position in the United States relates to the position she was in as an educated, lighter skinned, middle class Trinidadian. In Trinidad, her

emulation of British values – education, religion, language – alienate her from her own national identity. In the America that Sara comes to know, where Jim Crow racism severely limits African Americans’ access to education and other vehicles for upward mobility, these values mark her difference from them.

Interestingly, in a 2002 interview, Nunez reveals that when she started teaching English at Medgar Evers College in 1972, “[t]he faculty loved nothing better than to tell [her] that [she] wasn’t black. They said it in the most horrendous ways, and [she] was constantly struggling to explain that [she] was black, finally realizing that [they] weren’t speaking the same language” (Lewis, online resource). Each of these examples speaks to the unfortunate manner in which the dark-skinned immigrant is appropriated by those who want to use them as an example of how *not* to be “black.” For Sara, this state of perpetual alienation –neither black nor not black, neither British nor American, and even distanced from Trinidadian nationalism – is similar to the alienation that made “mad Bertha” mad. This recalls the outcasted position that forces white Creole women to choose between “exile in a foreign land whose people dump the burden of their cruel past on her, or a quest for belonging and identity, a struggle to explain herself in islands where she can hope perhaps for forgiveness and purposefulness” (Nunez “Paradoxes of Belonging” 282). While these descriptions apply more directly to the figure of Bertha, they can be aptly translated to explain Sara’s position in the United States, where she is neither African American nor white and where she frequently struggles with the guilt she feels over her middle-class privilege. Sara’s potential to translate this state of alienation into something empowering rather than marginalizing depends on her willingness to give

up the middle-class sensibility that kept her comfortable in Trinidad and keeps her safe in the U.S. and to instead find agency in her otherness.

In regard to Sara's ultimate ability to do so, Saunders argues that "Sara's investment in her middle-class upbringing in Trinidad limits the possibilities of her experience in the United States" (148). Furthermore, she suggests that

[d]espite the constant barrage of political and cultural signs that invade the sanctuary of the College of the Sacred Heart and her family's middle-class values, Sara refuses to read these signs as part of the same system of racial oppression in colonial Trinidad. Whenever there is an opportunity to break with the middle-class respectability that her mother has instilled in her as essential to any sense of being in the world, Sara chooses instead to focus on these values: the shame, the responsibility of being privileged, and most definitely, the love and attention of men to concretize a woman's existence in the world. (148)

I would argue that Sara's back-and-forth narration indicates otherwise. Although I agree with Saunders that these values most certainly threaten Sara's development at several points in the novel, and despite Sara's unwillingness to directly challenge Mrs. Weaver's and the Knights' distorted perceptions of her history, the memories that their comments elicit show that she has, indeed, made important connections between African American oppression and what she witnessed in Trinidad. These scenes most effectively highlight Nunez's use of a non-chronological narrative structure. The juxtaposition of those memories with her conversations at that dinner party forces the reader to confront multiple versions of these historical moments, showing how one version becomes privileged at the hands of the ruling class. Sara does ultimately break with her middle-class values, as I am about to show, challenging her religion and class status as well as the expectation that a girl in her position marry and have children.



### **“You call that abortion? We call it life”: Obeah, Gender, and Resistance**

In order to better examine the final steps in Sara’s development, I would like to return briefly to Spivak’s “Three Women’s Texts” and her claims regarding Western women’s selfhood. Her critique of imperialism in this essay derives from conventional readings of *Jane Eyre* in which Jane is figured as the ultimate female individual. Spivak notes that this argument reductively assumes the privilege of Western forms of feminism and posits that Jane is the ultimate individualist, and that her “subject constitution” requires the othering of Bertha. This reading would imply that Sara, figured as exotic and foreign by the white Americans, might be able to succeed in the United States at the expense of black Americans, her “others”. But Sara, having begun to deconstruct the classism and racism that would signify her in this manner, carries out her agency in a manner that depends upon her own otherness instead, and this agency is largely a result of her being a woman and seeking out a type of feminism that is not individualist but transnational. Sara’s development ceases to center on her personal journey and becomes one that links her identity to the struggle of African Americans, Indo-Caribbeans, Afro-Caribbeans, and even the misunderstood white Creoles taken for mad as a result of their identification with West Indian culture.

Sara recognizes the exclusion of women from nationalist movements early in the text, when she imagines American settlers claiming America: a man “driving a wood stake deep into the earth. His wife, in a pinafore, would be standing behind him, hugging a son and daughter to her sides. One blow is all it would take for him to lay claim to the land in the Wild West where the deer, the antelope, and the Indians roamed” (66). Apart from the violence of the language that describes American settlement, which clearly

recalls not only violence to nature but also the destruction of Native American populations and the exploitation of other minority groups (African slaves, Chinese railroad workers), two very important images in this passage contribute to the manner in which gender is presented in relation to the nation. First of all, the male settler's actions are highly sexualized by the image of penetration; the land is feminized, passive against this violation. Second of all, the woman is standing behind her husband while he performs his duty, carrying out her role as nurturer of the new "American" family.

As it is presented by Sara's boyfriend Sam throughout the novel, the Black Nationalist movement in America similarly excludes women. In explaining to Sara why he will be gone through the spring, "Sam became enflamed with the trumpet call to recover, as he saw it, the Negro's *manhood*" (188; emphasis added). Later, when describing Malcolm X to Sara, Sam makes it clear that the leader is concerned with "the dignity of the black *man*" (197; emphasis added). Nowhere in his discussion of Black Nationalism does Sam define blackness as a condition that affects black women as well. Sam's language demonstrates that Sara's West Indian background is not the only characteristic that limits her participation in this movement; even if she were an African *American*, this fight would still not be hers to take on.<sup>54</sup>

That this gendering of the black nation should come up in the novel is not surprising considering the attention that scholars are paying to what happens to questions of feminism in light of emerging nationalisms. Transnational feminist scholar Geraldine

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<sup>54</sup> Sam's attitude reflects a well-documented gender bias in the U.S. civil rights movement. Black women's struggle for equal rights was often overlooked in service of the more visible project of racial equality, and their contribution to the civil rights movement remains largely unacknowledged, especially in popular representations of that time period. The emergence of a black feminist movement in the 1970s was partially a result of these omissions and partially a response to the white feminist movement's lack of interest in the challenges facing African-American women.

Heng concerns herself with this matter in her essay, “‘A Great Way to Fly’: Nationalism, the State, and the Varieties of Third World Feminism,” in which she argues that the relationship between feminism and nationalism is inherently conflicted:

[F]eminist movements in the Third World have almost always grown out of the same historical soil, and at a similar historical moment, as nationalism. However, because the contestatory nature of the relationship between feminism and nationalism remains underemphasized in scholarship on the subject, both at the historical origin of feminism and nationalism and today, the subtext of many an academic study on women and Third-World anti-imperialist struggle, national reform, or national liberation movements is also inadvertently the record of a triumphant nationalism that makes its gains and wins its accomplishments at the expense of a subordinated feminism. (31)

Throughout the novel, it becomes apparent that Sara’s needs as a woman are subordinated when they get in the way of Sam’s participation in the civil rights movement. Although the 1960s were also a tumultuous time for the women’s rights movement, Nunez does not explore this aspect of American history explicitly in the text (perhaps because the emerging feminist movement did not yet consider women of color as part of its plight). Because the “contestatory” relationship between nationalism and feminism is often a matter of anti-Western sentiment that gets mapped onto the perception of women’s rights as a matter of modernity, Heng suggests that third world feminisms often have to “assume the nationalist mantle itself: seeking myths, laws, customs, characters, narratives, and origins in the national or communal past or in strategic interpretations of history or law” (34). In *Beyond the Limbo Silence*, Sara accesses this “communal past” by adopting a transnational Africanist position in her choice to abort her pregnancy and participate in Obeah rituals with Courtney.

In the second half of the novel, Sara subverts both of the functions that Spivak argues are expected of the imperial female: sexual reproduction, and (Christian) soul

making.<sup>55</sup> The obeah-assisted abortion has both spiritual and political significance.

Courtney justifies Sara's decision to go through with it by linking the abortion to a form of black nationalism, a form of resistance against white power by linking the reproductive black female to the plantation economy:

Go ahead, feel sorry for yourself, feel guilty, look for answers their way. Mississippi, St. Lucia, Dominica, Trinidad, it was the same for women like us. We bred for them. We made more slaves for their plantations. We made children to be killed their way, with whips and chains, to be treated like animals. To wake up with the sun, in pens meant for animals. To grovel under the whip, to mate under the whip, to sleep under the whip. Some of us said no. We gave back our unborn children to the ancestors. You call that abortion? We call it life. Think of how your spirit has helped us already. She will help us again. Think how, if you did have a child, it would stop Sam from doing what he has to do. Think, Sara. You can't run away. The spirits connect you and me and Sam and Mississippi and all black people in America. Remember that. (258)

Courtney's words demonstrate how the abortion will serve the practical purpose of liberating Sam from the burden of fatherhood so that he can continue to fight for civil rights. More importantly, however, we see how the abortion serves as a form of resistance for the black woman whose body was historically reduced to its reproductive purposes for the economic and sexual benefit of the white master. Unlike *Jane Eyre*, the black female subject is denied the choice to become a mother, so this aspect of individualism is irrelevant. As a diasporic heroine, Sara is linked to all the women of African descent who have sacrificed their own blood in protest of this particular signification of the black female body. In addition, the spiritual layer that Courtney alludes to, facilitated by the obeah ritual that accompanies the abortion and that later frees the spirit of this unborn child into the world to help find the bodies of the civil rights workers in Mississippi, further links Sara to the suffering of the African diaspora.

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<sup>55</sup> Spivak notes that Jane, in fully realizing her identity at Bertha's expense, participates in both.

Earlier in the novel, Sara had revealed her shame of the obeah traditions to which she finally submits. As a child, she was slapped when she asked her mother if the herbs with which she bathed when polio seized her town had been blessed by the Obeahman (22). Her mother said, “I don’t really believe any of this you know, Sara, but we can’t take any chances” (23). But Sara knows her mother believes because it is an Obeahwoman that her mother turns to when she cannot get pregnant with a second child. And when Sara leaves for the United States, her mother gives her a bag of herbs with the instructions, “Never, unless you have to, and you’ll know when that is” (41). Sara is ashamed, embarrassed by the bag of herbs she keeps hidden in her room, yet she never throws it away.

Throughout the text we come to see how obeah is linked to African identity, and, for middle-class West Indians like Sara’s family and Angela, primitive behavior, “mumbo jumbo” (185). When Courtney proposes that “[t]here are other ways to fight” with obeah, Sara is flooded with images that link the practice to what her family has always aspired to leave behind: “*Tall, thin men, bodies hard and rugged like the trunks of coconut trees, their muscles taut from cheekbones to ankles, leopard skins draped across their shoulders, in their hands a long, knobbed pole,*” which Sara “blink[s]...away” (204). This image represents a stereotypical Western fantasy of Africa, not so different from her white classmates’ perceptions of a Caribbean where natives wear grass skirts and carry buckets of water on their heads. Furthermore, it shows that Sara’s complicated relationship to obeah is linked to her lack of knowledge about Africa. She recognizes her reluctance to embrace the religion that would link her spiritually back to Africa, and presumably to all those Afro-Caribbeans and African Americans with the same roots,

reflecting, “So it had been for me with Obeah and Catholicism: they were intertwined. I questioned neither, though I taught myself to be ashamed of one” (205). However, when Sara overcomes that shame, she is finally able to transcend the restrictions placed upon her by class, nation, and gender to participate in the search for the missing civil rights workers in Mississippi.

Melvin B. Rahming writes about the spiritual dimension of Nunez’s work in his essay, “Theorizing Spirit: The Critical Challenge of Elizabeth Nunez’s *When Rocks Dance* and *Beyond the Limbo Silence*.” Although he might overstate the role of spiritual matters in the novel in order to justify his project of theorizing “spirit-centered literature,” I am more interested in his argument that the spiritual dimension of *Limbo Silence* is relevant to its transnational possibilities. Rahmig posits that spirit-centeredness can itself be perceived as a “globalizing force, for it ultimately assists in the dissolution of geographical, national, cultural, and aesthetic boundaries and harbingers humanity’s realization of its essential oneness and the oneness of the cosmos” (2). He terms this force “cosmicism,” asserting that it goes beyond either globalization or universalism, both of which seem to be too material for his liking. While my argument stops short of attributing the novel’s project to Rahmig’s notion of cosmicism, it is worth mentioning that in the final obeah sequence, during which the spirit of Sara’s unborn child is identified as Yoruba and released to assist the civil rights cause, Courtney uses the spiritual to unite herself, Sara, the African American struggle, and all of the African tribes that she lists in her attempt to identify Yoruba. As a result, Sara is able to link her Afro-Caribbean experiences with the injustices against African Americans, and free her great-grandmother Bertha from her “madness.”

This ending is jarring to say the least, because although it is consistent with the racial and cultural themes in the novel, the supernatural experience shared by Courtney and Sara seems to dwarf the possibility of any material resolution. In her essay on Erna Brodber's *Louisiana*, "Two Places Can Make Children," Kezia Page makes a related argument about the function of the supernatural in linking the African unity among Caribbean and American blacks of different generations. Unlike Rahmig, however, Page finds that this reliance on the spiritual for African unity obscures the problematic material differences – ones like race, class, and nation – that often prohibit such unity. Saunders does not necessarily agree, arguing that Brodber's text "effectively argues for an engagement with African Diaspora politics built on cross-cultural histories and transigrations at the political and spiritual levels" through a "South-South dialogue between cultures of the Caribbean and in the southern states [that] allows for a more seamless narrative of cultural belonging, regardless of time and dis/placement" (19, 140). On the other hand, it is the consideration of class and identity politics, Saunders suggests, that prevents *Beyond the Limbo Silence* from participating in any vision of diasporic solidarity.

However, Sara makes it clear that she remains in the United States after these experiences: in her narration of the night she spends in Sam's apartment, a few months before the abortion and obeah rituals, when Sam hands her a copy of *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, Sara reveals "I would read it a year later but by then I would have already understood the meaning of its title" (194). Although this novel represents a very masculinist account of the African-American experience, this comment reveals that she finally does read a book by an American – more importantly, an African American –

which has more relevance to her own experience than the volumes of canonical British novels she had read as girl ever could.<sup>56</sup> This passing reference to her future in the United States indicates that Sara identifies herself as part of the African diaspora, and because she recognizes herself in this manner, she acknowledges the limitations of the nation and geography. Sara's narration reveals that her Trinidadian identity was built upon the class and race-based stratification imposed by the British. Moreover, the manner in which America's dark racial past gets obscured by its liberatory nationalist narrative and the manner in which the realization of the American dreams puts immigrants at odds with America's black population further confirms the suspect nature of national identity.

The novel's ending also speaks directly to the misunderstanding of cross-cultural identification as madness. Sara narrates,

I spent two weeks in the psychiatric ward of the hospital. Sister Agnes said I had a nervous breakdown. Temporary insanity. It was easy for her to define it so. She had been looking for traces of insanity in me from the moment I had arrived in Oshkosh. But I knew that I had not gone mad. I knew I was saner than ever before. (315)

Although throughout the novel Sara often worries that the unraveling she is experiencing hints at an inheritance of madness, the novel offers a different perspective of what it means to "break down." Indeed, in coming to terms with who she is America, Sara breaks her identity down to its many components: gender, race, class, nation, religion, education. Her development relies on this de-consolidation because of the way that each of these parts was the result of conditioning that reinforced oppressive systems such as

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<sup>56</sup> See note 13 about African-American women and the civil rights movement. Nunez could have chosen a book by an African-American woman for Sara to read, but her choice does reflect that in the late 1960s – because of the masculinist African-American identity that emerged out of the civil rights movement – Sara's options would have been limited.



British colonialism and American racism. The end of her narrative indicates that the classification of her “breakdown” in this manner was a final unsuccessful attempt by the Sister Agnes – and the white establishment she represents – to contain Sara’s subversion.

Furthermore, Sara’s abortion represents a challenge against the ways in which the female body and reproductive rights have been used politically in the contexts of slavery and the postcolonial nation-state. While in *Jasmine*, Mukherjee suggests that pregnancy has the potential to be subversive, in *Beyond the Limbo Silence* it symbolizes the reproduction of oppressive power. Sara’s translation of her postcolonial past requires that she come to see her pregnancy in this manner and make the choice not to become a mother. In that way, she also challenges stereotypes about the reproductive capacities of “third world women” that appear in *Jasmine* as well as Courtney’s evocation of the reproductive, black, female slave. However, as I noted in my introduction and will continue to assert, this project is invested in the assumption that individual contexts provide for different interpretations of gender roles and motherhood in particular. In the following chapter, I will discuss the fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri, examining the ways that motherhood and traditional gender roles function in a very different way to facilitate the navigation of national and cultural identities.

### **Chapter Three: Immigrant Motherhood and Transnationality in Jhumpa Lahiri's Fiction**

Although Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* is the story of Gogol Ganguli, the American-born son of Bengali immigrants, it begins and ends with his mother Ashima. The novel opens with Ashima's uncertainty about living in the U.S. and particularly about the challenges concomitant with motherhood in a foreign land. It ends with her decisive departure from the domestic, suburban life to which she has assimilated, in her own way, over the course of three decades. Throughout the text, Ashima embodies some of the most pressing challenges facing the postcolonial female subject in diaspora: in a nation whose values and customs are alien to her, she must preserve the Bengali traditions that tenuously link her to her homeland while simultaneously ensuring a successful future for her American-born children. Although she preserves Bengali culture in many aspects of her domestic life, Ashima's Americanized children and the demands of suburban American life force her to adapt in unexpected ways. Unlike Jasmine, however, Ashima does not adopt an American identity, even if to change it; and unlike Sara Edgehill, she does not reject motherhood. Instead, as this chapter argues, the uncertain young woman we encounter in the novel's opening pages attempting unsuccessfully to recreate a favorite Indian snack in her Massachusetts kitchen is transformed through her role as an immigrant mother and wife into a transnational figure. Ashima steadily forges an identity that negotiates between the demands of both cultures and lives up to the meaning of her name, "she who is limitless, without borders" (*Namesake* 26).

This evocation of borders is particularly interesting given the way Ashima's transnationality is constructed, in "borderlands." Anzaldúa's important paradigm offers

the psychic space from which Ashima can negotiate between the various claims that her gender, culture, and national affiliation make on her identity. Borderland spaces facilitate the construction of identities that are self-determined; as Anzaldúa writes in the “Towards a New Consciousness” chapter of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, the individual is allowed to assess the identifications to which they have access and discard or alter them as she sees fit. Identity is a matter of choice, not geography or inheritance. Like Bhabha, who suggests that any discussion of identity should be approached from the interstices between categories such as nation, race, class, and gender to avoid the “fixity and fetishism of identities,” Anzaldúa also argues that borderland identities are fluid and dynamic (Bhabha *Location* 9). Moreover, Singh and Schmidt note that borders are “neither the site of assimilation nor the marking of an alien other,” but instead “a realm of exile, mobility, and survival strategies, and the emergence of alternative and multiple identities, mixing old and new” (13). While culture can be mobile, like immigrants themselves, it does not have to prevent them from participating in mainstream America to the extent that they choose and appropriating the aspects of American culture that are useful to them. As these definitions suggest, borderlands – or in Bhabha’s language, interstices – allow the immigrant to determine a space for herself in the U.S. that is limited by neither physical nor cultural boundaries or dictated by any particular national identity.

Although Bhabha is not primarily interested in the gender implications of domesticity in his formulation of the “unhomely,” this paradigm – which helps to describe the condition of inhabiting the interstices between cultures – is useful to the way that I am imagining the home as a potentially transnational space in Lahiri’s fiction.

Bhabha writes, “In the stirrings of the unhomely, another world becomes visible...the home does not remain the domain of domestic life, nor does the world simply become its social or historical counterpart. The unhomely is the shock of recognition of the world-in-the-home, the home-in-the-world” (“Home and the World” 141). Although Bhabha is using “home” in a more general sense, in reference to one’s place of comfort and belonging, the invocation of the domestic is not accidental, since the home is so often conceived of as a microcosm of the *homeland*. Moreover, he contends that “[a]lthough the ‘unhomely’ is a paradigmatic post-colonial experience, it has a resonance that can be heard...in fictions that negotiate the powers of cultural difference in a range of historical conditions and interactions” (142). The “unhomely” experience does not resolve the often uncomfortable experience of geographic and/or cultural displacement, but it represents the potential to use this discomfort to one’s advantage. In *The Namesake*, Ashima’s unhomeliness – her ability to negotiate the world in her home and ultimately be at home in the world – conflates the domestic space with her transnationality and her ability to navigate between cultures.

Ashima achieves this transnationality by translating the traditional gender roles she has inherited from her Bengali culture. In fact, many of the Indian and Indian-American women in Lahiri’s fiction are trying to live up to – with varying degrees of success – what Partha Chatterjee would describe as the “new woman” in *The Nation and Its Fragments*.<sup>57</sup> Chatterjee’s analysis of the “women’s question” and the manner in

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<sup>57</sup> I do not mean to use Bengali and Indian identifications interchangeably, for Lahiri specifies that Ashima is Bengali in the *Namesake*. However, most of the characters in her first book, *Interpreter of Maladies*, which I will discuss below, exhibit Bengali characteristics but are identified as Indians or Indian-Americans, as if when writing this first book Lahiri felt that these identifications would be more familiar to her American audience. What I am about to say about Chatterjee, however, is relevant to all of the characters that I will be discussing, particularly because he is specifically interested in Bengali women due

which it is resolved through the nationalist project highlights the political purposes of gender roles in colonial and postcolonial India and creates the opportunity to discuss how the roles assigned to Indian women in particular influence national and cultural identity. As Chatterjee points out, social reform movements in late 19<sup>th</sup> century India – particularly those dealing with practices that reinforce gender inequality and violence towards women – were all too often relegated to the domain of Western (colonial) “progress” to be contrasted with indigenous barbarism:

By assuming a position of sympathy with the unfree and oppressed womanhood of India, the colonial mind was able to transform this figure into a sign of the inherently and unfree nature of the entire cultural tradition of a country...Indeed, the practical implication of the criticism of Indian tradition was necessarily a project of “civilizing” the Indian people: the entire edifice of colonialist discourse was fundamentally constituted around this project. (118-119)

The attack on the treatment of women becomes indistinguishable from the attack on traditions in this civilizing discourse and consequently, in the nationalist mind, what is understood as progress for women gets conflated with colonial oppression. Chatterjee argues that the nationalist project in India was forced to resolve this problem by exploring options for reforming the condition of women without sacrificing traditions that distinguish Indian cultures from their colonizers’.

The distinction between the material and the spiritual in the domain of culture is essential to how nationalism attempts to resolve the women’s question. According to Chatterjee, nationalists conceded that the West’s success in material endeavors provided these forces with the skills and resources that facilitated their dominance of the colonized world. Therefore, in order to overcome such domination in the economic, technological,

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to Bengali participation in the Indian nationalist movement. Later in this chapter I will address how Ashima’s Bengali (not Indian) identity is related to her transnationality.

and industrial sectors, “the colonized peoples had to learn those superior techniques of organizing material life and incorporate them within their own cultures” (Chatterjee 120). But this imitation of the West should only occur in the domain of the material because “as Indian nationalists in the late nineteenth century argued, not only was it undesirable to imitate the West in anything other than the material aspects of life, it was even unnecessary to do so, because in the spiritual domain, the East was superior to the West” (120). This division between *ghar* – the home, an inherently spiritual and female space – and *bāhir* – the outside world, which is inherently male and dominated by material pursuits – determines not only the division of labor in terms of how the middle-class Indian home is run, but more importantly, it positions women as the guardians and propagators of Indian culture. In this manner, Indian nationalism elevates the condition of the middle class woman to a goddess-like status, and it came to be understood that “as long as India took care to retain the spiritual distinctiveness of its culture, it could make all the compromises and adjustments necessary to adapt itself to the requirements of a modern material world without losing its identity” (Chatterjee 120). The home becomes the site “where the battle would be waged for national independence” because while “[i]n the world, imitation of and adaptation to Western norms was a necessity; at home, they were tantamount to annihilation of one’s very identity;” gender roles are thus imbued with an essential status that is not easily cast off in the process of immigration. In fact, as my argument suggests, in Lahiri’s fiction, the process of settling in the United States reinforces the pervasiveness of these roles (Chatterjee 121).

In Ashima and Lahiri’s other first and second generation Indian immigrant women characters, these traditional gender roles are not a matter of anti-colonial

activism, but they do represent a conscious effort to preserve the culture that was left behind. Ashima, who I am arguing successfully translates these roles in establishing her identity in the United States, uses them to inhabit the transnational borderland she negotiates between American and Bengali cultures. However, even a second-generation character like Mina Das in Lahiri's short story "Interpreter of Maladies," who rejects this role, is still aware of this model of womanhood and her perceived failure to live up to it.

Indeed, before turning to *The Namesake*, it is useful to address the ways in which *Interpreter of Maladies* – Lahiri's debut short story collection, which has received significant popular and critical attention since its 1999 publication – frames the cross-cultural conditions that are central to my argument. Its nine stories focus mostly on the lives and relationships of first and second generation Indian immigrants living in New England, although a few stories take place in India, and they are all concerned with interpersonal connections and the various forces that act upon the human ability to forge ties across cultures and continents, and even within families.<sup>58</sup> I have already noted that at least one of *Interpreter's* protagonists fails to translate the role of Chatterjean "new woman" in the U.S. In the following section, I will discuss that story and three others, examining the ways Lahiri explores issues of gender, motherhood, and cultural identity through characters I read as precursors to *The Namesake's* Ashima Ganguli.

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<sup>58</sup> In "Reading Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* as a Short Story Cycle," which I will later discuss, Noelle Brada-Williams points out that most or what is written about the collection focuses on the stories with an American backdrop at the expense of the stories that are set in India and Indian and Indian-American characters at the expense of the few non-Indian protagonists in the stories. She attributes this pattern to the fact that most critics focus on themes related to "the sense of displacement attached to the immigrant experience" and relate the struggle to communicate in all of the stories to this particular context. My own brief reading of a few of the short stories might seem guilty of this charge, but due to the nature of my argument that postcolonial Indian culture is translated – albeit sometimes imperfectly – into a form of ethnic American identity, my analysis requires me to privilege stories about first and second generation immigrants while taking into account their particular national, cultural, and social roots, which are often in India.

### **Maternal Precursors in *Interpreter of Maladies***

One only has to look at the titles of the reviews of *Interpreter* that appeared in major American publications to note the theme of loss and isolation that critics highlight in the stories: *Newsweek*'s "The Maladies of Belonging," *The New York Times*' "Liking American, but Longing for India" and "Subcontinental Drift" are just a few. In "Immigrant Experience in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*," Ashutosh Dubey notes that although "exile plays a significant role in shaping Indian English sensibility," Lahiri's text "evinces that the racial and cultural memory is very much at work and 'feeling at home' remains a difficult task" (23). He traces the themes of cultural tradition and loss throughout the short stories, concluding that Lahiri is a part of the generation of Indian-Americans for whom "displacement and loss of one's cultural self still exerts a powerful pull on the imagination" (26).

Indeed, Lahiri has frequently reflected publicly on this aspect of her own upbringing, for in nearly all of her work – fiction and otherwise – she writes about the challenges facing the children of Indian immigrants in the United States. Born in England, Lahiri moved to the United States with her Bengali parents at the age of two. Although raised almost entirely in the U.S., interviews and personal essays indicate that even as a child growing up in New England she was aware of the cultural tug-of-war at work in her life. In an essay that appeared in a 2006 edition of *Newsweek*, aptly titled "My Two Lives," Lahiri writes, "When I was growing up in Rhode Island in the 1970s I felt neither Indian nor American. Like many immigrant offspring I felt intense pressure to be two things, loyal to the old world and fluent in the new, approved of on either side of the hyphen"(43). She also discusses the double edge of the immigrant condition in an



interview conducted by PBS after she won the Pulitzer. When asked whether or not she identifies with the longing and loss that is prevalent in the immigrant lives of characters in *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri answers, “I always say that I feel that I’ve inherited a sense of that loss from my parents because it was so palpable all the time while I was growing up, the sense of what my parents had sacrificed in moving to the United States, and in so many ways, and yet at the same time, remaining here and building a life and all that that entailed” (Farnsworth). For Lahiri, who is clearly well versed in the types of personal and cultural negotiations that immigrants are forced to make, this loss is not to be accepted as collateral damage but instead redirected.

In her own family, this redirection manifests itself in her parents’ success in raising a daughter who – despite an admittedly complicated relationship with her cultural identity – credits her parents with instilling in her a connection to their homeland: “[w]hile I am American by virtue of the fact that I was raised in this country, I am Indian thanks to the efforts of two individuals. I feel Indian not because of the time I’ve spent in India or because of my genetic composition but rather because of my parents’ steadfast presence in my life” (“My Two Lives” 43). But her cultural identity exhibits the self-conscious negotiations seen in many of her first and second-generation characters. Consider what Lahiri says in recent *New York Times* article on “India’s Post-Rushdie Generation”:

My connection with India is fundamental...But at the same time it is very slippery and confusing. It has been a cause of bewilderment and sometimes strife and frustration within me. It’s a messy thing. But it’s been a blessing for me and my writing. I would like to see myself as an American writer. When I was raised I was told not to think of myself as an American. It was very important to my mother to raise her children as Indian, thinking and doing things in an Indian way, whatever that means.

Even now it is hard for me to say I am an American.” (qtd. in Rothstein B1)

Lahiri’s words, and indeed her writing, reflect what Bhabha would call an unhomely perspective and what Anzaldúa argues regarding the potential of borderlands: a sincere exploration of such identity issue requires a destabilization of what constitutes home. Estrangement is not a handicap, but a virtue, particularly in how it is manifested in contemporary immigrant writing. Moreover, her admitted difficulty calling herself American despite her desire to be considered an American writer recalls Mukherjee’s unapologetic claim to that same identity. Even though Lahiri came to the U.S. at a much younger age than Mukherjee and spent almost all of her life here, what contributes to Lahiri’s hesitation is having been raised Indian *in* America. This fact helps explain the role of the family/home in Lahiri’s exploration of gendered unhomeliness, as Lahiri understands firsthand how the immigrant home becomes the interstice, the transnational space where identity is negotiated. Moreover, she implies that in this role of facilitation – in regards to both a connection to Indian culture and the opportunities afforded by life in the United States – the struggles of immigrant parents are justified by the success of their children. “The immigrant’s journey, no matter how ultimately rewarding, is founded on departure and deprivation,” Lahiri writes, “but it secures for the subsequent generation a sense of arrival and advantage” (“My Two Lives” 43). This second-generation sensibility informs the manner in which Lahiri explores the immigrant experience in her fiction.

Jennifer Bess and Brada-Williams take note of this sense of departure, longing, and ultimate arrival in *Interpreter of Maladies*. Bess asserts that “icons of alienation and loneliness” fill the collection, “expos[ing] the liminal situation unique to the first- and

second-generation immigrant characters” and “embody[ing] the author’s timely lament over the failure of global living to bridge the gaps between cultures and between individuals” (125). She suggests that navigating between the universal and the unique poses a threat to Lahiri’s characters, who are at the mercy of “the homogenizing forces of globalization, the chaos of mechanized living, and the silence of loneliness [that] threaten cultural identity instead of fostering a sense of community” (125). However, like Brada-Williams, who reads *Interpreter* as a short story cycle – and who reads the final story in the collection as one that “balanc[es] dialogue through a careful mirroring of their basic plots,” thereby reversing the loss and pain of the first with the “ ‘ordinary’ heroism” of the last – Bess also finds that the cycle ends with a gesture towards “a glimpse of unity that the other characters have not experienced” (Williams 453, Bess 127). Indeed, as I will show below, many of the stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* feature characters whose situations are plagued by unachieved potential, failed communication, and cultural and psychic displacement. However, I would argue that even when the characters seem unable to negotiate between cultures, the stories themselves inhabit the interstices between cultures. Moreover, they gesture towards the sense of opportunity afforded by these very conditions, taken up not only in Mala in the final story of the collection, but developed even more explicitly in *The Namesake*.

#### Unrealized Motherhood in “A Temporary Matter”

*Interpreter*’s opening story, “A Temporary Matter,” explores a failing marriage in the Indian American diaspora, the gulf between the characters having been caused by the stillbirth of the couple’s baby boy. The story is mediated through a third-person narrator

that often privileges the male character's perspective as he struggles to connect with his wife, but ultimately it is personal tragedy rather than cultural misunderstanding that comes between the young couple in their Boston apartment. Unlike Mina Das and Mrs. Sen, who I will discuss below, Shoba *had* seemingly successfully navigated between Indian and American expectations by marrying a man she loved and managing an Indian and American household while still pursuing a satisfying career outside the home. However, her inability to achieve the ultimate female success – motherhood – reveals how tenuous the cultural balance she had ostensibly achieved truly was, and reinforces the role that marriage and motherhood play in Lahiri's own navigation of cultural identities in her diasporic characters.

The occasion of power outages, which occur for an hour every night for a week so that repairmen can work on a downed line, provide the occasion for the distanced couple to reconnect by telling one another secrets in the dark. Night by night they revisit past indiscretions, revealing their individual vulnerabilities and forced to acknowledge how distant they have in fact become. The raw frankness with which they can express themselves in the darkness illuminates, for the reader, the series of painful events that led them to this situation. The weeklong ritual also reveals the manner in which their gender roles have been reversed by the unexpected loss of their first baby six months earlier.

Our first encounter with post-pregnancy Shoba reveals that she has stopped paying the careful attention to her appearance that one expects from a young woman her age, and more importantly, that she is aware of – but not overly concerned about – this neglect. The narrator observes that she looks, “at thirty-three, like the type of woman she'd once claimed she would never resemble” (“A Temporary Matter” 2). The narrator's

unforgiving eye notices cosmetic imperfections: her lipstick is “visible only on the outer reaches of her mouth, and her eyeliner had left charcoal patches beneath her lower lashes” (2). These markers of imperfect femininity foreshadow her alienation from the feminine roles she had once relished. Moreover, we become aware of the fact that she has undergone some fundamental change, one which has allowed her to redefine herself against her own personal expectations of the type of woman she should be. In fact, gender role reversal is evident from the story’s opening paragraphs: Shoba’s return home from her job at a busy downtown office with a leather satchel full of files is soon followed by the revelation that husband Shukumar stays home. Our first image of Shukumar is within a traditionally female space, putting the lid on a pot of lamb and chopping onions in the kitchen.

Because Lahiri’s fiction is otherwise full of women whose elaborate, almost feast-like Indian meals bring together friends and family, this aberration is telling in what it reveals about Shoba. As the narrative progresses, the readers learn more about the Shoba that Shukumar married, the confident young woman who argued down prices when shopping for food at the public market, and who used to “throw together meals that appeared to have taken half a day to prepare from things she had frozen and bottled, not cheap things in tins but peppers she had marinated herself with rosemary, and chutneys that she cooked on Sundays, stirring boiling pots of tomatoes and prunes” (Lahiri “A Temporary Matter” 7). She successfully navigates East and West, tradition and technology, in her ability to use and prepare fresh ingredients in bulk for use in Indian dishes and then freeze and store them for later use. These skills allow her to prepare elaborate dishes *and* accommodate her work schedule, which presumably would not have

otherwise permitted her to spend hours cooking each night. Shoba represents a second generation American revision of Chatterjee's 'new woman': she had achieved the success of both Indian matriarch and working American woman simultaneously and was able to transition between these ostensibly disparate roles seamlessly.

The Shoba we encounter in the story, however, no longer cares for her home the way that she used to, leaving cooking and housework to Shukumar and immersing herself in her work:

She used to put her coat on a hanger, her sneakers in the closet, and she paid bills as soon as they came. But now she treated the house as if it were a hotel. The fact that the yellow chintz armchair in the living room clashed with the blue-and-maroon Turkish carpet no longer bothered her. On the enclosed porch at the back of the house, a crisp white bag still sat on the wicker chaise, filled with lace she had once planned to turn into curtains. (6)

It is as though the stillbirth of her child, caused by a weakened placenta, changed her sense of what it means to be an Indian-American woman and the roles required of her as such; her physical inability to sustain motherhood results in a newfound antipathy towards navigating cultures in the ways that she used to, when she still imagined herself as both a working American woman and Indian matriarch. It seems easier for her to deal with the loss of her infant by denying the part of her that, "with hips that her obstetrician assured her were made for childbearing," had always been inherent to her; the childless matriarch lacks a reason to remain bound that culturally determined role (Lahiri 7). This detail about Shoba's hips recalls the scene in *Jasmine* in which an infertile professor at the obstetrician's office notes that Jasmine has "nice [wide] hips," as if that means that nature "meant" for her to have babies (Mukherjee 34). Both authors pointedly acknowledge the perception of "third world" women as inherently more fertile than

Western women, as if they are somehow closer to “nature” (code for instinctually reproductive, like animals). But because Shoba’s doctor’s comment implies that she is biologically predisposed to procreate, her loss is internalized as a personal failure, as if she somehow short-circuited her body’s ability to achieve what it was “meant” to do. Therefore, Shoba rejects the gender roles she previously relished altogether. Instead of taking part in the household, Shoba opts for the more traditionally masculine tendency to focus on work, spending hours with her files and her pencils, poring over the details of her editing work and ignoring the domestic space around her.

Shoba ultimately leaves Shukumar, opting to move out of their home and into an apartment closer to her job. In so doing, she opts out of the balancing act she had embodied in the years she spent married to Shukumar, planning for their lives as parents and living out both ideals: that of the Indian matriarch and of working American woman. Unlike Mina Das or Mrs. Sen, Shoba is comfortable navigating between the two ideals until she loses her child. This detail speaks to the manner in which gender roles determine Lahiri’s first and second generation immigrant characters’ ability to navigate between their Indian and American identities, and to the role of motherhood in particular in establishing an “unhomely” home in the United States. However, Lahiri is also acknowledging that for the second generation, these gender roles must be doubly translated. As in the case of Mina Das in the collection’s title story, motherhood alone is not sufficient in bridging cultures.

#### “Interpreter of Maladies” and the Failure of Translation

Mina Das is another second-generation mother who must straddle American and Indian cultures, whose position as the daughter of immigrants and American wife and

mother curiously alienates her from both Indian culture and her own family. While on vacation in India with her husband and children, Mina attempts to come to terms with her unhappiness by confessing her anxiety to the Indian guide her husband has hired to show the family India's most popular sights, only to find that her disdain for her family is (mis)interpreted as guilt.

Simon Lewis reads "Interpreter of Maladies" as a postcolonial rewrite of E.M. Forster's 1924 novel, *A Passage to India*. He argues that "both texts hinge on a misconceived tourist excursion," during which "the male guide's perceptions of the foreign visitor are at odds with those of the woman who, apparently prompted by her extraordinary and unfamiliar surroundings, tries to come to terms with pre-existing emotional dilemmas" (Lewis 219). What I find most useful about his reading is the central difference he observes between Forster's novel and Lahiri's short story: the misunderstanding between Mina Das and Mr. Kapasi is not a result of racial or cultural differences between them. Lewis observes, "the world of 'Interpreter of Maladies' is an exclusively Indian one, in which Indians define notions of self and other, in which Indians move freely among countries and cultures, and in which India itself is an object of scrutiny by Indian eyes" (219). However, my reading complicates Lewis's argument by pointing to the ways in which Mina's Americanization creates a significant layer of cultural difference that interferes with the Indianness she ostensibly shares with Mr. Kapasi. Mina's problem, her inability to be understood by Mr. Kapasi, stems from her inability to translate the social, political, and historical expectations he has of her because of her appearance and name, which in his eyes mark her as Indian.



The first scene in the story links Mina's lack of maternal interest with a corporeal sensuality that is foreign to Mr. Kapasi, a medical translator who works as a tour guide on weekends. He notes how, after arguing with her husband about who should take their little girl to the rest room, she "drag[s] her shaved, largely bare legs across the back seat" as she gets out of the car, and does not "hold the little girl's hand as they walked to the restroom" (Lahiri "Interpreter" 43). The bareness of her legs seems, according to Mr. Kapasi's sensibilities, to correlate with the reluctance and disinterest Mina exhibits towards her daughter; both are foreign to him. Mina's clothing and appearance catches his attention as well:

He observed her. She wore a red-and-white checkered skirt that stopped above her knees, slip-on shoes with a square wooden heel, and a close-fitting blouse styled like a man's undershirt. The blouse was decorated at chest-level with a calico appliqué in the shape of a strawberry. She was a short woman, with small hands like paws, her frosty pink fingernails painted to match her lips, and was slightly plump in her figure. Her hair, shorn only a little longer than her husband's, was parted far to one side. She was wearing large dark brown sunglasses with a pinkish tint to them, and carried a big straw bag, almost as big as her torso, shaped like a bowl, with a water bottle poking out of it. (46)

When read through Mr. Kapasi's gaze, Mina is strangely both hyper-feminized (her short skirt, the tight blouse with the strawberry drawing attention to her breasts, her pink nails, frosted lips, and voluptuous body) and masculinized (a shirt that to Mr. Kapasi is styled like a man's, hair short like her husband's); in addition, her look is accentuated by markers of Western consumerist excesses (stylish sunglasses, an oversized bag, the bottled water).<sup>59</sup> In his eyes, she is both foreign and familiar, and he initially finds this quality intriguing and attractive.

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<sup>59</sup> It is worth noting that Chatterjee specifically cites clothing in his argument regarding the postcolonial Indian "New Woman," claiming it is a "spiritual" sign of femininity along with eating habits, social demeanor, and religiosity: "The dress of the bhadramahila, for instance, went through a whole phase of

The third-person narration favors Mr. Kapasi's perspective, and as readers we become increasingly aware of how Mina's external gender and cultural markers are linked to her attitude towards her marriage, motherhood, and India. She shows little interest in the country of her parents' birth, which passes her by as she touches up her fingernail polish in the car, scolding her daughter, "Leave me alone," when she asks to have her nails painted, too (48). Mina impatiently fans herself with a folded English-language Bombay film magazine and complains about the heat; at one monument she is "lost behind her sunglasses, ignoring her husband's requests that she pose for another picture, walking past her children as if they were strangers" (58). Only once does she express any engagement with the sights they are visiting, with the single, almost flippant American expression, "Neat" (59). Later, when they arrive at the Sun Temple, she opts to stay in the car rather than walk to the sacred sight in her uncomfortable shoes, instructing her husband, "Pretend I'm there," when he complains that she will not appear in the family photograph he intends to take for their yearly holiday card (61). Her willing absence from the family structure, her apathy towards her children, her disdain for her husband, and her alienation from Indian culture are inextricable from one another, and are all addressed by her appearance, particularly the exaggerated femininity – represented by a self-absorbed superficiality that catches Mr. Kapasi's attention – and a lack of certain feminine qualities that parallel her lack of Indianness, reminding us that her roles of wife and mother are equally unstable.

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experimentation before what was known as the brahmika sari...became accepted as standard for middle-class women. Here too the necessary differences were signified in terms of national identity, social emancipation, and cultural refinement – differences, that is to say, with the memsahib, with women of earlier generations, and with women of lower classes" (130). Caricatures of the memsahib, or Western woman, often included criticism of "vulgar" items of clothing "such as the blouse, the petticoat, and shoes" (122).

Although Mina's marriage is only half-arranged (she marries – albeit by choice – the son of a family friend; her husband is therefore a childhood friend and first love), her choices seem predetermined by social and cultural obligations. Her life had become unexpectedly narrow as a result of her relationship with Raj: she admits that in college she had forgone friendships in order to be with him; she had married young and gotten pregnant quickly, isolated as a stay-at-home mom while her husband thrived in his career. Her college girlfriends had eventually “stopped calling her, so that she was left at home all day with the baby, surrounded by toys that made her trip when she walked or wince when she sat, always cross and tired” (64). When the opportunity arose, she cheated on Raj with his friend who was visiting, her second son conceived one afternoon while her husband worked and she was confined to her domestic space. Like Shoba, Mina's dissatisfaction and subsequent infidelity suggest that the “new woman” model is less tenable for second-generation Indian women in the U.S.

Despite her ostensible freedom as an American-born woman, she admits to Mr. Kapasi that she feels trapped by her husband and children, and that at certain moments she yearns to “throw everything I own out the window, the television, the children, everything” (65). She is caught between the cultural expectations that guided her into the role of matriarch and the promise of individual fulfillment available to American women her age. Unable to navigate the cultural contradictions that often persist in the lives of children of immigrants, she ultimately fails at both. Mr. Kapasi's reaction to her confession, the manner in which he translates her confession as an expression of her guilt, reminds us that for him, only a certain type of femininity and female agency are acceptable; he is disdainful of her self-indulgence. Although he is a worldly man, whose

study of other cultures and languages affords him success not only as a translator among his countrymen but also as a guide for Western tourists, his response to her desperate query, “don’t you have anything to say? I thought that was your job,” is to feel offended by her audacity. In some ways, then, despite his tailored suits, Mr. Kapasi represents the expectations of Indian patriarchy, balking at her claim that what she feels is anything more than guilt at her “common, trivial little secret” (65-6). His initial attraction to her becomes something much more like pity and disgust. The impossibility of translating her frustrated condition into a legitimate malady reflects the challenges Mina continues to face in translating cultural expectations into anything resembling personal fulfillment. However, the problem of cultural translation does not rest with Mr. Kapasi alone. Mina herself – in her lack of interest in India, its traditions, and its history – refuses to acknowledge the contexts from which Mr. Kapasi’s attitude, and perhaps some of her own internalized expectations of selfhood, emerge. She has conflated India with the cultural expectations that she blames for her conflicted situation without acknowledging the socio-political context from which they emerge. However, without a clear understanding of how the roles of wife and mother are culturally embedded into her psyche, and how they might need to be renegotiated in her life as an American, Mina seems destined to exist –uncomfortable and misunderstood – between cultures. Lahiri represents Mina’s inability to understand herself as the result of a particularly translated model of postcolonial womanhood as a lack of personal fulfillment in her daily life as a second-generation wife and mother.

Immobility and Unhomeliness at “Mrs. Sen’s”<sup>60</sup>

In my reading of Lahiri’s female protagonists, Mrs. Sen exemplifies the irreconcilability of particular cultural differences and reminds us that the assimilationist narratives propagated for over a century as the quintessential American dream for immigrants is unrealistic because it fails to take into account the cultural will of the modern immigrant. When we meet Mrs. Sen, the wife of a professor at an unnamed university in what seems to be a New England college town, she is wearing “a shimmering white sari patterned with orange paisleys, more suitable for an evening affair than for that quiet, faintly drizzling August afternoon” (Lahiri “Mrs. Sen’s” 112). In the eyes of Eliot, the young American boy she will be caring for every weekday afternoon, and his mother, Mrs. Sen stands out, exotic and foreign in her prosaic university apartment. She and her husband are different from Eliot and his mother in discernible ways: their lampshades are still wrapped in plastic; they do not wear shoes inside their home. Yet these material external cultural markers do not even begin to illustrate the differences Mrs. Sen experiences and internalizes, and which ultimately keep her from feeling at home in America.

Although Mrs. Sen attempts in various ways to bring India into her American home, it is through her contact with Eliot that the impossibility of assimilation is realized

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<sup>60</sup> At least one critic has argued that the title character in Lahiri’s short story “Mrs. Sen’s” is modeled after the author’s own mother. In “The Narrator as a Global Soul in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies*,” Geetha Ganapathy-Dore argues somewhat convincingly that Lahiri’s work provides globalization theorists with characters whose cultural negotiations take on a spiritual dimension. Although he mentions the connection between Mrs. Sen and Lahiri’s mother in passing, given what Lahiri has said in interviews about the loss and longing of her own immigrant parents, it is likely that Lahiri witnessed in her parents some of the same emotions and behaviors displayed by Mrs. Sen in the story. Moreover, the food preparation scenes in this short story are very reminiscent of the way Lahiri describes her mother’s cooking in “The Long Way Home,” a personal essay I cite in the following section. However, Lahiri has often said that while her characters are often composites of people she has known, they are never representative of particular friends or family members.

in the text. Eliot recognizes soon after he begins going to Mrs. Sen's after school – he must come to her house because she cannot drive – “that when Mrs. Sen said home, she meant India, not the apartment where she sat chopping vegetables” (116). It is through his eyes that we understand Mrs. Sen's behavior as foreign: her strangely curved chopping knife and the ritualistic manner in which she approaches the preparation of elaborate meals for just her husband and herself; the collection of saris that she laments remain unworn in her closet; the vermilion she wears on her part in her hair “like a wedding ring;” her child-like anticipation of receiving mail from “home;” the reverence with which she listens to audio tapes of Indian ragas and messages from her family recorded as a farewell present before she left (117). Each of these behaviors marks Mrs. Sen's difference from the women Eliot knows, all the while keeping her as safely as she can manage in the India of her mind.<sup>61</sup>

In his article “Interpreters of Cultural Difference: The Use of Children in Jhumpa Lahiri's Short Fiction,” Michael W. Cox notes Eliot's role, arguing that the young characters that appear in *Interpreter of Maladies* are significant “with regard to the act of translating or interpreting between cultures, serving as a focal point or catalyst for intercultural contact” and that through the perspective of these children the “quotidian aspects of North American culture are revealed as hardly universal” (120). According to Cox, the children in Lahiri's stories are used to provide readers with “a more probing insight, perhaps, than her adult characters might allow into cultural difference and cultural accommodation” (120). Given the importance I read into motherhood and

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<sup>61</sup> This term is borrowed from Salman Rushdie, who writes about the condition of exile: “But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge – which gives rise to profound uncertainties – that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind” (10).

gender roles in establishing ethnic identity in Lahiri's fiction, I am most interested in what he says about Eliot insofar as the way in which Eliot "defamiliarizes both [Indian and American] worlds" (121). I would argue that by doing so, Eliot provides Mrs. Sen the opportunity to experience pseudo-motherhood while caring for the American boy at her home.

When Eliot and his mother first meet Mrs. Sen, Eliot cannot help but compare the two women. As Cox points out, his observations defamiliarize both of them, particularly the description of the physical differences between them. Eliot's mother's cropped hair and bare legs cause her to stand out in the Sen's household just as Mrs. Sen's makeup and elaborate, unrevealing sari are unusual in their New England town. I would take his argument further and suggest that Eliot's comparison shows that difference is relative. Moreover, he recognizes Mrs. Sen as a different type of mother figure than what he is used to. As a result, in his early days at Mrs. Sen's, other distinctions make themselves apparent and highlight that Mrs. Sen adheres to particular gender roles in ways that his mother does not: she prepares elaborate meals while his mother is usually content to order a pizza; she is hyper vigilant, almost anxious, regarding his needs, while his mother practices a more hands-off style of parenting. At the same time, Eliot provides Mrs. Sen with a link to the outside American world in a way that is reminiscent of immigrant narratives in which foreign-born parents depend on their American-born children to navigate unfamiliar contexts and give them opportunities to engage with the foreign culture on their behalf.

In fact, it is because of her relationship with Eliot that Mrs. Sen makes her most valiant attempt at assimilation. For a period of time, Eliot accompanies Mrs. Sen while

she practices driving, a skill that – if mastered – holds the promise of a more comfortable American future. Eliot understands that mobility might make life in America easier for

Mrs. Sen:

“Mr. Sen says that once I receive my license, everything will improve. What do you think, Eliot? Will things improve?”  
 “You could go places,” Eliot suggested. “You could go anywhere.”  
 “Could I drive all the way to Calcutta? How long would that take, Eliot? Ten thousand miles, at fifty miles per hour?” (119)

This exchange is interesting for a number of reasons. First, the difference between Mr. Sen and Mrs. Sen in terms of their attitudes towards living in the U.S. is evident in Mr. Sen’s attempt to persuade his wife to leave the apartment and live more like an average American. For him, learning to drive is essential for a long-term stay in this new country – physical mobility represents the variety of freedoms touted in the popular conception of the American Dream – while for Mrs. Sen, learning to drive represents a concession that the U.S. is in fact her new home. Her resistance to anything that might make her life in the U.S. easier seems like a betrayal of her desire to return home. Second, although the promise of mobility is presented to Mrs. Sen as a way of making her life in America easier, allowing her to move between her home and the outside (American) world and to practice the necessary adjustments that come with such fluidity, she purposely misinterprets the possibilities offered by this mobility in order to reiterate her only desire – to return home. Thus, her rejection of physical mobility within the U.S. forces her cultural identity to remain static and unchanging because she can only imagine a mobility that will allow her to return to the imagined stability of her homeland.

What finally does inspire Mrs. Sen to take the wheel is the promise of fresh fish for one of her elaborate Indian dishes. On the day of her car accident, Mrs. Sen



announces to Eliot, “I am going to put these [eggplants] in a very tasty stew with fish and green bananas... Only I will have to do without the green bananas” (133). She has resigned herself to the impossibility of perfectly recreating the flavors of her homeland, but is invigorated by the prospect of coming close. For her, driving to the fish market does not represent assimilation; but, on the contrary, it allows her to symbolically drive “to Calcutta.” Although Mrs. Sen hesitates, driving around in circles around the apartment so many times that Eliot begins to think that perhaps she is just practicing her driving while waiting for her husband to come and drive them to the market, she finally pulls out onto the main road and loses control of the car after only a mile. The accident represents not only her failure to learn how to drive, but also more significantly, her inability to create a life in the U.S. that is both Indian *and* American. Her lack of mobility becomes symbolic of her lack of cultural fluidity; unable to move freely between her (Indian) apartment and the (American) outside world, Mrs. Sen is forced to accept not only the imperfection of her recreated India in America, but also the impossibility of her assimilation. Moreover, the accident marks the end of Eliot’s afternoons with Mrs. Sen, compelling his mother to decide that he is old enough to be given a key to his house so that he can go straight home after school. This detail speaks to the fact that Mrs. Sen does not have the legitimate connection to America that she might have had if Eliot really were her son.

Mrs. Sen’s inability to negotiate an ethnic American identity can be understood in her simple statement about India, “Everything is there” (113). With these three simple words, Mrs. Sen forecloses on the possibilities offered by a borderlands identity. It is as if all that Mrs. Sen desires is limited by geography, and her inability to bridge the

physical distance makes it impossible for her to live as an Indian in America. In terms of what Bhabha says about the extra-territorial nature of culture, the treatment of mobility in “Mrs. Sen’s” is indicative of Mrs. Sen’s inability to successfully move among cultures, to inhabit the interstices or borderlands between them. The defamiliarization that Cox argues Eliot engages in through his experiences at Mrs. Sen’s house, reminiscent of “the relocation of the home and the world – unhomeliness” that Bhabha describes, is out of Mrs. Sen’s reach (*Location 9*).

In “The Third and Final Continent,” *Interpreter’s* closing story, Lahiri seems to transition between Mrs. Sen’s cultural stasis and Ashima’s more productive cultural relocation by briefly acquainting readers with the protagonist’s wife, Mala. Although Mala is only present in the last six pages of a twenty-five-page story, and even then only through the perspective of the male narrator, she is worth mentioning as yet another precursor to Ashima’s gendered transnationality. When she arrives in Boston, Mala is practically invisible, her presence making itself known to the narrator in the smell of the steamed rice she cooks in the apartment, the wiped clean bathroom counter, and the extra toothbrush by the sink. However, she slowly begins to acclimate. Finding a place to buy fresh fish and another shop that sells Indian spices create in Mala a stake of ownership in her new surroundings. These seemingly minor triumphs are anything but, as is evident in “Mrs. Sen’s,” where access to such ingredients proves to be fundamental to accepting the U.S. as “home.” Furthermore, Mala’s husband reveals in the closing paragraphs of the story that he and Mala become U.S. citizens “so that [they] can collect social security when it is time,” a detail that foreshadows Ashima’s similar choice to officially inhabit American in order to reap the benefits of citizenship. They grow tomatoes in their

garden, travel regularly to India, and have a son they bring home from Harvard on the weekends so he can “eat rice...with his hands, and speak in Bengali” (197). Although the story is about the unnamed male narrator’s migration from Calcutta to London to Boston, his wife’s negotiated identity is central to the sense of success he alludes to in the closing paragraphs of his narrative.

Although thousands of miles and at least a generation removed from the nationalist struggle in India, Mala, Mrs. Sen and *The Namesake*’s Ashima are depicted by Lahiri as middle-class “new women” in the ways in which they negotiate their own and their families’ immigrant identities against the demands of assimilation in the U.S. Compelled by traditional university life to live in typical American college towns in mostly white neighborhoods, each of these women, in her own way, attempts to protect her *ghar* from Americanization just as the New Women in India protected theirs from colonial British influence. Each preserves Indian culture in her home through her attention to spiritual matters, food, dress, and raising Indian children. Like Mrs. Sen, Ashima is the wife of a professor who comes to the U.S. to further his academic career, while Mala is married to a university librarian. Although they live in a different political climate than the one described above by Chatterjee, in the white/male/Christian-dominated United States, the threat of the cultural “annihilation” presents itself in the demands placed on these immigrant women to assimilate. Like their mothers and grandmothers in India before them, all three of these characters take pains to preserve what they feel are essential cultural traditions while their husbands participate in one of America’s more competitive professional endeavors. In the context of immigration to the U.S., the pressure to assimilate replaces colonial authority. Like colonization, which

produced a justifiable preoccupation with national identity as people attempted to free themselves from their Western rulers, the immigrant condition demands that cultural identity be consciously negotiated and preserved against this appeal to become more “American.” Consequently, as we see in Lahiri’s first-generation protagonists, the role of women in this negotiation is paramount; while their husbands are outside the home, making professional gains in the American *bāhir*, Ashima, Mala, and Mrs. Sen strive to preserve the Indian identity of their respective households, even if the demands of their new nation complicate these endeavors.

The challenges of mainstream American life require that these immigrant women adjust their approach to their gender roles. While the division between home and the world is still essential in the sense that the home is still the sacred space in which to act on one’s cultural identity, the demands of life in the United States, particularly the ostensible independence of the modern American woman, make it necessary for immigrant women to move back and forth between their native cultural traditions and mainstream American society on their own terms. Mrs. Sen is unable to do so. Caring for Eliot does not provide the necessary impetus for her to learn how to drive; neither does the desire to obtain the proper ingredients for her favorite dishes because she recognizes the futility of her attempts. Her meals will never taste the way they do in India (an observation that Ashima also makes in the first pages of *The Namesake*), and yet not attempting to do so is viewed as a betrayal of her duties as an Indian woman. In Ashima, as with Mala, Lahiri revises the situation she created for Shoba, Mina Das, and Mrs. Sen and is able to create a character who more successfully navigates the cultural boundaries that separate her Indian home from the American world, and it is her role as a

mother that facilitates her doing so. The trajectory of Lahiri's fiction represents a critical revision of Chatterjee's argument, broadening it to consider what happens when the postcolonial female subject becomes an ethnic American subject.

**“Motherhood in a foreign land”: Gender and cultural identity in *The Namesake***

*The Namesake*'s Ashima Ganguli is compelled to engage with mainstream, middle-class America because of her children; simultaneously, her desire that they remain Bengali at their core compels her to preserve many cultural traditions at home. When we first encounter Ashima, she is experiencing both the physical discomfort of her first pregnancy and the psychological discomfort that accompanies alienation and culture shock. She discerns a difference between the two: “For the past eighteen months, ever since she's arrived in Cambridge, nothing has felt normal at all. It's not so much the pain, which she knows, somehow, she will survive. It's the consequence: motherhood in a foreign land” (Lahiri *Namesake* 6). The distinction she makes is worth noting because it posits her physical discomfort as a natural experience, one for which she feels inherently prepared. However, the distress she feels as a result of her foreignness, which predates her pregnancy, seems insurmountable. Ashima cannot imagine raising a child so far from her homeland, away from her family and friends; the very idea is alien to her despite its being the reality of her circumstances. Yet after Gogol is born, Ashima conflates pregnancy and her otherness, realizing that

Being a foreigner... is a sort of lifelong pregnancy – a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner, Ashima

believes, is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect. (50)

This realization draws a parallel not only between the sense of physical discomfort and emotional anxiety that accompanies pregnancy and the similar feelings that plague the immigrant, but more importantly, it also parallels the duties of motherhood with the demands inherent in each of these subject positions and recalls the burden placed on the Indian New Woman by the nationalist project in postcolonial India. In addition, this metaphor further demonstrates the manner in which Lahiri's fiction recognizes and explores the centrality of gender roles in ethnic American identity by feminizing the condition of the "foreigner," illustrating once again that Chatterjee's analysis of nationalist-inspired gender roles can and should be translated in the Indian-American immigrant context.

In *The Namesake*, Lahiri chooses to be specific about Ashima's Bengali identity, and it is important to distinguish that from her designation as Indian immigrant. In *Interpreter of Maladies*, however, with the exception of Mala, Lahiri identifies her characters as "Indians" and only hints at their Bengali origins. Similarly, in personal interviews and prose she refers to her own "Indian" culture and identity. As I speculated earlier, it might be that Lahiri felt being too specific about Indian regional identities would alienate her audience and that classifying her characters as Indians would make them more familiar to her American readers. But in the novel she makes a choice to note the Ganguli family's Bengali origins. Unlike Mukherjee, who is also Bengali, Lahiri not only writes from the Bengali perspective, but in *The Namesake* she is also reflexive about it. Moreover, situating the narrative in relation to this more local context has historical and political implications given the centrality of Bengal to Indian Independence and

Partition. But doing so also suggests that in some ways, Ashima was predisposed to transnationality before coming to the United States. Although Bengali participation in the Indian nationalist movement was critical to its success, Lahiri's reflexive use of Bengali identification reminds readers that in India, national identity is a much newer addition than any of its many ethnic identities. In the United States, identifying herself as Bengali rather than Indian allows Ashima links her to a certain left-of-center interpretation of nationalism and identity.

In their first years in the U.S., Ashoke, Ashima's husband, dresses like a westerner and goes to the university where he is earning a graduate degree and working as a T.A. She, on the other hand, wears saris and carries out the duties of a good Bengali wife, preparing familiar dishes, and maintaining an orderly household. Although some might read her behavior as carrying out a burden of sorts, it also indicates a sense of potential and cultural agency unavailable to her male counterpart, who is compelled to assimilate in order to succeed in his American academic endeavors. Ashima's ability to retain particular traditions can be read as a privilege afforded to her by the birth of her son, unlike Shoba, for whom the stillbirth of her son marks the end of her ability to perform the cross-cultural navigation at which she had previously been successful. For Shoba, who excitedly prepared for the arrival of her baby with the anticipation that he would bring nothing but happiness, her tragic labor produces quite the opposite effect. For Ashima, on the other hand, the anticipation of being in a mother in America is fraught with anxiety and fear, but the event itself marks the beginning of her ownership of her identity in America. It is in the first weeks of motherhood that she begins to

assimilate in minor ways, to carve out a routine in which she engages with the world outside of her apartment. On her first trip out of the house with baby Gogol,

she pushes him through the balmy streets of Cambridge, to Purity Supreme, to buy a bag of white long-grain rice. The errand takes longer than usual; for now she is repeatedly stopped on the street, and in the aisles of the supermarket, by perfect strangers, all Americans, suddenly taking notice of her, smiling, congratulating her for what she's done. They look curiously, appreciatively, into the pram. "How old?" they ask. "Boy or girl?" "What's his name?" (34)

Previously invisible on these very streets due to her foreignness, Ashima is humanized by the addition of Gogol; furthermore, she is emboldened by this new sense of acceptance. While her husband is occupied with his dissertation and teaching at MIT, she develops a routine around her new role, taking Gogol out shopping or out for walks around Harvard Yard and the MIT campus daily. Unlike Mina Das's isolation during her early days of motherhood and Mrs. Sen's alienation from the American world outside her apartment, Ashima engages with her American surroundings. Although she continues to sing Gogol to sleep with Bengali songs, she also discovers a yarn store and learns to knit in preparation of the coming winter. Motherhood thus offers Ashima the occasion to assimilate in ways that she chooses, allowing her to preserve Indian traditions while moving in and out of the American mainstream at will.

One of the most significant ways that Ashima preserves her family's cultural identity throughout the novel is by hosting elaborate parties for the Bengali friends that she and Ashoke accumulate in New England. These gatherings – the first of which is hosted when Gogol turns six months old in honor of his *annaprasan*, a ceremony that celebrates an infant's consumption of solid food – grow larger each year as this circle of friends grows. When newly arrived wives from India, whose husbands "are teachers,



researchers, doctors, engineers,” come to Ashima feeling “homesick and bewildered...for recipes and advice,” she tells them where to go to buy the best fresh fish and which American ingredients serve best as substitutes for items that are impossible to find at the supermarket, like using Cream of Wheat to make halwa (38). As with Mrs. Sen and Mala, this gendered knowledge, represented in all three narratives by the substitution of ingredients, is symbolic of Ashima’s ability to move between cultures. When Ashima and Ashoke visit with these friends, “[t]hey drink tea with sugar and evaporated milk and eat shrimp cutlets fried in saucepans. They sit in circles on the floor, singing songs by Nazrul and Tagore, passing a thick yellow clothbound book of lyrics among them as Dilip Nandi plays the harmonium” (38). Hosting these more recently arrived Indian immigrants makes Ashima feel more secure in her place in the U.S. and simultaneously affords her the opportunity to reinforce her cultural identity. Their friends come to act as a surrogate family and a microcosm of the India that was left behind, and Ashima takes great pride in hosting these feasts over the course of her life as Indian-American matriarch. By the time Gogol’s younger sister is born, there is rarely a Saturday that is not spent with Bengali friends, and Ashima cooks an excessive number of dishes, starting preparations a week or more in advance.<sup>62</sup> Although these gatherings become more

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<sup>62</sup> In “The Long Way Home; Bengal by way of Julia Child,” Lahiri highlights the significance that gender-prescribed roles held in how Bengali Indian culture was transmitted within her own family. In a passage that resonates with food preparation scenes in both her short stories and *The Namesake*, Lahiri describes her mother’s passionate cooking:

Saturdays, when I was growing up, I would often be woken by the powerful, almost meaty stench of powdered asafetida hitting a pan, or the insistent dron of my mother’s blender, pulverizing whole roots of ginger or a dozen heads of garlic. I would come downstairs and find her at the stove, all four burners going, the sink crammed with colanders, the spices she stored in large brown Cremora jars pulled down from the cupboards. She would have been up since four, preparing for a dinner party for a crowd of fifty or more. There was always, simultaneously, lamb and fish and shrimp, and a minimum of four vegetable dishes, and dal and chutney, and two or three selections for dessert...She had learned to cook by watching and helping her mother in Calcutta, and

Americanized – the children watching T.V. in the basement and eating pizza or Chinese food while their parents socialize – they stand in for the lack of family and extended family that would have constantly surrounded the Gangulis had they remained in India.<sup>63</sup>

Moving to the suburbs and becoming a homeowner creates new challenges for Ashima, who must learn to drive in order to get to the supermarket or the mall. Unlike Mrs. Sen, she is compelled to do so in order to keep pace with suburban life. Yet as her children grow up and attend public school, where they are constantly exposed to mainstream American culture, she makes only certain concessions: a turkey is roasted on Thanksgiving, but it is seasoned with cumin and cayenne; snowmen and wreathes decorate their lawn on Christmas, but the entire family attends Hindu pujos twice a year; Ashima “continues to wear nothing but saris and sandals from Bata,” but at her son’s request she cooks an American dinner once a week “as a treat” (64-5). At the supermarket, Gogol and his sister are allowed to fill the shopping cart with American foods like tuna, mayonnaise, and bologna even though Ashima and Ashoke do not consume these items (65). Similarly, Gogol has two birthday parties: one with his American friends with pizza and cake, and the other one a Bengali celebration with curries and other Indian dishes prepared by Ashima (72). Each of these concessions is a careful choice, a delicately negotiated balance that allows Ashima to fulfill her

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she insisted on undertaking the labor-intensive dishes that most of my parents’ Bengal-immigrant friends no longer bothered to attempt. (83)

Here Lahiri suggests that cooking was solely her mother’s jurisdiction, and also her secret, implying that it was also a source of control in an immigrant situation that was likely fraught with uncertainty and negotiations.

<sup>63</sup> Although these gatherings might at first glance seem to be characterizing the Ganguli family’s ethnic American experience as pluralistic in how they function to help them preserve and reinforce their Indian culture, the presence of American-born children undermines such a reading. Instead, their insistence on American foods and popular culture indicates that ethnic pluralism is not a viable model and has given way to a more transnational way of understanding contemporary immigrant experience in the novel.

obligations to both old homeland and new, which affords her the agency to define herself without regard to borders or fixed cultural obligations. Motherhood gives Ashima the opportunity to take advantage of the opportunity that Shoba is denied, that Mina Das does not recognize, and that Mrs. Sen is unwilling to take.

By the time she reaches the age of forty-eight, Ashima has lived in the U.S. far longer than she had lived in India before emigrating, yet she remains in so many ways a traditional Bengali mother and wife. She has never given up wearing a sari, and when her husband leaves for Ohio to conduct research on a prestigious fellowship she lives alone for the very first time. Her husband must return home once a month to pay the bills and fill the car with gas, two tasks she has never mastered; and yet the fact that she remained behind rather than traveling to Ohio with him amazes both of her children, who are shocked at their mother's display of such American-like independence. She does so because despite having retained so many of her Indian traditions, she has also adapted to her suburban American life in a few significant ways; she holds a part-time job at the local library and spends time with American women she has grown to consider friends. In fact, when friends recommend that she return to India to spend time with her brother after Ashoke unexpectedly passes away in Ohio, "for the first time in her life, Ashima has no desire to escape to Calcutta...She refuses to be so far from the place where her husband made his life, the country in which he died" (183). Ashima's conception of what constitutes *homeland* has been altered to take into account the role the United States has played in shaping her family's identity, and by definition, her own. She might say, as Anzaldúa does, that home is not a particular geographic location, but that after so many years living between cultures, she carries it on her back (43). This manner of identifying

herself demonstrates that as a result of being an immigrant wife and mother for so many years, Ashima's identity is fluid and negotiable.

After careful deliberation, the widowed Ashima decides to divide her time between the United States, where she will stay with her children, and Calcutta, where she will stay with other family members. Lahiri writes, "True to the meaning of her name, [Ashima] will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere" (275-276). This rootless and nomadic existence is approached not as something alienating or empty, but instead as an opportunity to enjoy both the life she left behind long ago and the one she strived to create over the course of over thirty years. Neither the U.S. nor India can claim her; yet she claims both as her own:

For the first time since her flight to meet her husband in Cambridge, in the winter of 1967, she will make the journey entirely on her own. The prospect no longer terrifies her. She has learned to do things on her own, and though she still wears saris, still puts her long hair in a bun, she is not the same Ashima who had once lived in Calcutta. She will return to India with an American passport. In her wallet will remain her Massachusetts driver's license, her social security card.

Ashima's agency is quiet but determined, and it is facilitated by a confident independence unimaginable to Mrs. Sen, who is unable to imagine that identity is anything but fixed.

Moreover, it allows her access to the privileges afforded by her U.S. citizenship, evidenced by her passport, license, and social security card.

But Ashima has grown to care for far much more than the privileges of nation-state membership in the U.S., despite her fierce preservation of so many Bengali traditions in her personal life:

For thirty-three years she missed her life in India. Now she will miss her job at the library, the women with whom she's worked. She will miss throwing parties...She will miss the opportunity to drive, as she sometimes does on her way home from the library, to the university, past

the engineering building where her husband once worked...And though she still does not feel fully at home within these walls on Pemberton Road she knows that this is home nevertheless – the world for which she is responsible, which she has created, which is everywhere around her ... (279-280)

Lahiri makes a point of mentioning driving, a skill that Mrs. Sen refuses and that Ashima had been reluctant to learn upon moving to the suburbs. This detail reminds readers of the significance of mobility in Lahiri's fiction, as it is linked to the ability to permeate cultural borders and transcend national identity. More importantly, this passage reinforces the scope of Ashima's cultural agency, facilitated by this transnationality, which has allowed her to create a space in which to raise and nurture the family by which she identifies herself. For Ashima, home is the borderland place in which one carries out the traditions and practices that make up one's identity; the gender roles prescribed in part by nationalism in India become an unexpected source of cultural agency in the U.S. immigrant context.

From a Western feminist standpoint, it may seem contradictory that it is through the roles of wife and mother that Ashima asserts her cultural will and transcends the prescription of any fixed national identity. As I noted in the introduction to this dissertation, the roles that anti- and postcolonial nationalisms confer upon women, such as Chatterjee's "new woman," often seem restrictive or oppressive to Western observers from nations in which female emancipation is defined by the emergence of individualistic female subject-positions. But as transnational feminists like Heng, McClintock, and Mohanty suggest, this standpoint derives from an already privileged "first world" position that does not address the complicated relationships between gender, ethnicity, class, and the nation in former European empires.

Indeed, to treat a character like Ashima fairly, she cannot be read as an oppressed “third world woman,” but as an individual whose local context, including class status, affords her the privilege of both physical and cultural mobility. Although Lahiri acknowledges the sense of loss and alienation that women like Ashima, Mrs. Sen, Mina Das, Mala, Shoba, and others might experience as first and second-generation immigrant Americans, she never insinuates that they are victims of their complicated postcolonial histories. Her fiction suggests, however, that the postcolonial nation’s attitude towards women has lasting consequences on the perception of women’s roles, even on women who immigrate to the U.S. Through these gender roles, Ashima is empowered with a transnational status that allows her to partake at will of both American and her Bengali Indian cultures, without idealizing either one or glossing over the negotiations that she has to make. At the same time, the scope of her cultural agency should be interpreted in the context of her particular immigrant status. She cannot be the Chatterjean “new woman” in America because of the various demands placed on women in the United States to be mobile and individualistic. Instead, she must occupy this transcendent borderlands space that allows for her feminist potential to be read with regard to her cultural, socio-political, geographic, and historical origins.

Throughout this dissertation, I have argued for interpretations of contemporary immigrant women’s writing that take into account the complicated relationships Bharati Mukherjee, Elizabeth Nunez, and Jhumpa Lahiri have with their native and adopted homelands. More significantly, however, I am suggesting that the way each of these writers situates herself in regard to the power dynamic between the U.S. and the postcolonial world and the potential each of them recognizes in the ability to move

between nations, cultures, and histories influences how they represent the immigrant experience. All of the authors addressed by this project engage with the complicated implications of postcolonialism on gender and identity in their fiction. But what makes them important to analyze together is their common investment in the way narratives of immigration to the United States represent these concerns. Just as Mohanty calls for discursive practices that situate the “third world woman” within her particular context before claiming any sort of feminism on her behalf, the immigrant woman from the so-called third world requires a similarly nuanced analysis. This poses a significant challenge and promising opportunities in ethnic American literary studies as contemporary immigrant writers adopt increasingly transnational perspectives in their translations of postcolonial pasts.

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