

Becoming a “British Hindoo”: Errant Subjectivities in Bharati Mukherjee’s Fiction

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I believe it was Faulkner who said the past isn't past. The past isn't even dead.
Bharati Mukherjee, *The Tree Bride*

The challenge is to reconceptualize the present.
Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*

The dynamic of loss and gain experienced by nomadic subjectivities constitutes the body of Bharati Mukherjee’s fiction. Her works tell the stories of mongrelized immigrants who suffer multiple mutilations and humiliations, survive violence, and compete for the opportunities that their new homeland offers them. They live (often unbeknownst to them) several traditionally conflicting selves simultaneously.¹ The peculiar but not unfamiliar existentiality of her characters marks Mukherjee’s own life as well, as someone who considers herself an American and a “proud Indian-born, Bengali-speaking Hindu” (“Imagining Homelands” 71, 78). As her oeuvre demonstrates, being Bengali Hindus, observing unique Bengali culture, she and her characters can at the same time live with the modern conceptions of progress, citizenship, gender relations, sociality, and so on. These two positions, therefore, are not necessarily incommensurable, even though they are often interpreted that way.

In this essay, I read Mukherjee’s works against the grain of existing scholarship by underscoring the necessarily errant mode of life that characterizes her immigrant characters. This, however, is not an attempt to exonerate them (or Mukherjee) of their problematic attitude, as some critics have pointed out, toward other immigrants, such as the Sikhs (Alam 9; Ruppel 182). To put it differently, I am interested here not in determining the identitarian affiliations of Mukherjee and her characters, but in shedding light on the antinomical dynamics they inhabit between tradition and modernity, and between the errant and sedentary modes of existence.

I submit this alternative reading of Mukherjee against a critical backdrop that either labels her as a “right wing”² basher of her old tradition or lauds her as a proponent of liberal humanist narratives. In her essay, “*Jasmine*, the Sweet Scent of Exile,” the critic Anu Aneja, for instance, argues that Mukherjee’s portrayal of the eponymous character in *Jasmine* abets the Western liberal humanist discourse that renders women

in the “Third World” as the passive victims of patriarchal domination and domestic violence (76). She further contends, “Defined against male figures, Jasmine remains the object of male violence, desire, and lust, and is unable at the end to break the circle that restrains her from coming into her own” (77). Aneja implies that Mukherjee’s novel reinforces the (mis)understanding that the West has about “Third World” cultures and societies.

The critic Alpana Sharma Knippling goes along similar lines when she argues that Mukherjee corroborates the West’s project to essentialize non-Western cultures and peoples in order to domesticate them: “[...] Mukherjee tends to *uncritically* reproduce the imperialist project of ‘serving the Other’ [...]” (147, emphasis added). She invokes the notion of the “wholly other,” as opposed to the West’s Other, maintaining that being the West’s Other herself—Knippling puts forward Mukherjee’s bourgeois social and educational background to adduce this point—Mukherjee cannot speak for the subalterns (“the wholly other”) even though she (Mukherjee) claims to do so. Knippling writes, “No wholly other is susceptible to representation; when it is represented, it immediately ceases its transgressive function and becomes the domesticated other (which I am referring to, in this case, as the West’s Other)” (146). Taking Mukherjee to task for homogenizing the experiences of different ethnic minorities, Knippling contends that such an attempt not only corroborates the imperialist project, but also smacks of the writer’s will-to-power (152). That which Knippling perceives as a homogenizing will-to-power in Mukherjee, I read as an attempt to build an affective community among peoples (and animals) of disparate backgrounds. I will return to this point toward the end of the essay.

Reading Mukherjee’s narratives in a more positive light, Jennifer Drake discerningly points out that “Mukherjee’s multifocal and multicultural American writing struggles for, and leads us toward, multiple models of comprehensibility” (“Looting American Culture” 82). She, like Aneja and Knippling, however, falls back on the old American/non-American opposition, in which she places Mukherjee’s characters on the American side: “Her immigrant characters are settlers, *Americans*—not sojourners, tourists, guest workers, foreigners” (61). Drake, in other words, infers that Mukherjee’s settler characters leave behind the “anachronistic,” “backward,” and “stagnant” past to take on the challenges and opportunities that America, the new “home,” offers them.

John K. Hoppe argues in a similar vein about Mukherjee’s work and her depiction of immigrant characters when he contends, “It is the willingness of Jasmine [in *Jasmine*] and others of Mukherjee’s ethnic characters to murder their past selves that enables them to actively advance into unknown but promising futures” (“The Technological Hybrid” 138), even though he contradicts his own assertion on the very next page when he correctly points out that “dead selves and cultures do not vanish, but are always present” (139). He returns to his earlier claim toward the conclusion, however, by stating that “[t]he farm is the site of

the past, the unhealthy space of repetition and stasis” (152).³ Mukherjee’s critics, on both sides of the praise/disapproval divide, reach the same conclusion as regards her stand on the tradition/modernity debate: she and her characters cast off the past of tradition for the adventurous and purposeful present of modernity.

I argue, drawing on Dipesh Chakrabarty, that Mukherjee’s characters do not forsake the traditional modes of understanding regarding god, sociality, family, friendship, and so on even when they strategically adopt the notions of citizenship, public and private, the rule of law, science and technology. In other words, Mukherjee upholds the figures of America and technology *not uncritically*, as critics, referred to above, insinuate, but, as Sharmani Patricia Gabriel, Ruth Maxey and others have argued, takes them to task for their amnesia regarding the physical and epistemic violence inflicted in their names on everything that escapes the co-ordinates of their scientific approach. As Gabriel discerningly notes, Mukherjee’s approach to cultural identity is *not* “an uncritical acceptance or endorsement of the hegemonic ideology of assimilation,” but rather a readiness to adapt relentlessly to the transformative tension between identity and difference. As F. Timothy Ruppel reminds us, a critical approach to national and cultural identity refers to “a different relationship between former colonial partners, a resituating of history that involves a thematizing of prior myths of enforced identity and a breaking into a new space, provisional and based on affinity, not [on an uncontaminated] identity” (188). These difficult but inescapable dynamics between identity and difference, and tradition and modernity, that constantly shape who we are at a particular moment in history become conspicuous in her “most celebrated novel” (Nelson xvi): *Jasmine*.

The novel tells the story of Jasmine who migrates from India to the U.S. to escape the oppression of tradition. Born into a traditional Hindu family that survives Partition violence and flees Pakistan into India, Jasmine has to fight for her early education since her family (with the exception of her mother) argues against it as she is a girl. She marries a “modern” man, Prakash, who, however, does not tolerate her plan to earn some extra money by selling goods from door to door. Prakash’s dream is to come to Tampa, Florida to gain an education but he is killed by a Sikh fundamentalist named Sukhwinder one day before his departure. Playing the role of a dutiful wife, Jasmine decides to complete Prakash’s journey by coming to the U.S. and by cremating herself on the pyre of his suit, but when she finally reaches the shore of Florida with forged travel documents, she is violated by her smuggler, Half-Face; this changes her forever. She kills her violator then and there, but instead of cremating herself afterwards, she decides to move on and arrives at the house of Ms. Lillian Gordon, a lady who helps and shelters illegal immigrants. Having spent a few days with her while her tongue heals (she had cut it when performing Kali, the goddess of death, on Half-Face), she comes to Flushing, New York, where she first works as a domestic helper to the Vadheras and then as a day-care provider to Taylor and Wylie’s adopted

daughter, Duff. After the encounter with Sukhwinder, her husband's murderer, in New York, she decides to move to Iowa where she meets Bud Ripplemeyer, a banker and stays with him for many years before heading out once again to California with Duff and Taylor, who is recently divorced.

One very striking instance in which we see Jasmine work through her attachments with the past is when she cooks Indian food that is not quite Indian, and shares it with people in Baden, Iowa. She remarks, "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" (9). She prepares *gobi aloo*, a popular Indian curry, for example, in her kitchen: "I stick the pot roast back in the oven. Pot roast and gobi aloo: sacrilegious smells fill my kitchen" (213). A little later, when she goes to visit Darrel, she smells oriental food there too, but the impact of tradition in the form of food becomes even more pronounced as she reflects, "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). The kitchen functions here as a site of cultural convergence, where traditionally incompatible ingredients, matar panir and pork, mix to produce an alternative taste.⁴

A tornado of counter-memory, as Karin, Bud's ex-wife calls her (205), Jasmine creatively subverts truths about women as *grihalakshmis* (goddesses of the household) prevalent in India, and as a self-reliant individual in the West, letting her subjectivities move back and forth. By undertaking a risky and tortuous journey from Hasnapur, India to Tampa, Florida, she challenges the traditional understanding about woman as a dependent subject. She, in other words, fights against "the limiting boundaries that seek to confine her in traditional and specific gendered roles, both in India and America" (Ruppel 184). Having survived violence at the hands of Half-Face, and later rescued by Lillian Gordon (who herself breaches government decrees by sheltering illegal immigrants), Jasmine moves on with renewed determination. In New York City, she, once again, escapes from the suffocating cocoon provided her by an immigrant community in search of freedom, which she finds temporarily in the household of Taylor and Wylie Hayes. *Carpe diem* is the principle of her life there: "Jasmine [of Jullundhar] lived for the future, for Vijn & Wife. Jase [of New York] went to movies and lived for today" (176). Her modern husband in India, Prakash, used to talk about a future that "will be," asking her to help him become a better man. It does not cross her mind until later that the future Prakash referred to ("will be") may never materialize, and the existential temporalities including the past and the future are, in fact, co-existent with the present. This recently acquired knowledge makes palpable the tug of opposing temporalities within her: "For every Jasmine the reliable caregiver [the past], there is a Jase the prowling adventurer [the present]. I thrilled to the tug of opposing forces" (176-177). Her temporality is anything but teleologically determined, thus

promising that each new day will be a better one. The Jane of Iowa certainly is not as happy and modern as the Jase of New York City, even though the Jane self within her surfaces later in a linear conception of temporality than the Jase self. In other words, in real life, the future not only brings possibilities, but can repeat the past with a difference. In order to further illuminate the tension that underpins Mukherjee's body of work, I briefly invoke Dipesh Chakrabarty and his exposition of the relation between tradition and modernity.

In *Provincializing Europe*, when underscoring the inescapability and predominance of modernity, Chakrabarty also argues that modernity can change its function and intensity based on those cultures in and through which it is realized. Putting two poles of historical traditions side by side, Marxist and hermeneutic, he contends that one of the dominant historical traditions in the West has been Marxist, which is acultural and ahistorical in its universalization of the concepts that originated within a specific socio-cultural context in Europe, and may not be helpful to other peoples and cultures without undergoing fundamental transformations. One of the assumptions of the Marxist/historicist model of history, Chakrabarty explains for us, is that all narratives of society are headed toward the same finish line in the race of "progress;" even if some will get there sooner than others. However, all narratives, according to this line of argument, are destined to pass through the milestones of progress such as "citizenship, the state, civil society, public sphere, human rights, equality before the law, the individual, distinctions between public and private, the idea of the subject, democracy, popular sovereignty, social justice, scientific rationality, and so on" (Chakrabarty 4). There are roughly two problems that disturb this approach to history, according to Chakrabarty: first, the Marxist perspective of history stems from specific background understandings in Europe, and, therefore, may only fit well into that particular context—which, of course, does not imply that every single idea in Marxism is irrelevant to other historical and cultural contexts. Secondly, this mode of historiography always locates Europe or the West ahead of other cultures and civilizations in its configuration of the idea of progress. Therefore, the peasant class (a "Third World" phenomenon) is perceived to be anachronistic in relation with the industrial workers even though they are coeval. Historicism, to put it another way, jettisons everything that defies the Western conception of progress into the category of anachronism. The hermeneutic pole (Charles Taylor's "cultural"), according to Chakrabarty, takes up a different approach to history by exhuming the "past" (of birth and death rituals, "superstition," beliefs in reincarnation, and so on) from the forgetful historicist memory, and placing it side by side with the dominant narratives of progress, civil society, work ethics, citizenship and democracy.

Mukherjee's fiction dramatizes heterogeneous temporalities constituting heterogeneous but coeval modernities in her work in consort with Chakrabarty's exposition of the hermeneutic mode of historiography. Her narratives depict a blending of conventionally disparate things in the

manner of miniature paintings (of which Mukherjee is an aficionado⁵). “The appeal of miniature painting,” reflects artist Shahzia Sikandar, “[is] that it [embodies] both the past and the present” (“Miniaturizing Modernity” 165). In a similar vein, Mukherjee asserts, “There is no clear-cut, permanent division between good and evil but just different ways of looking at things” (*Conversations* 114). Her character, Jasmine enacts a form of Kali (a Hindu goddess of ferocity) on her violator, Half-Face, upon landing in the “New World.”⁶ Jasmine as a Kali is thrilled by the titillating modernity that reaches down to her in the form of the hot water shower. To put it differently, she works through the tradition of the past (the performance of Kali) and the modernity of the present (the hot water shower), uncannily blending the simplistic separations between the West and the East. Mukherjee herself compares *Jasmine* with a miniature painting: “As in Akbari miniatures, my novel compresses the immigration histories of many minor characters. Professorji, his wife, his elderly parents, the Caribbean housekeepers in Manhattan, the Guatemalans in Florida, Du and his Asian American friend in Iowa: even within an ethnic group, each minor character has a distinct response [to the experience of dislocation and relocation]” (*Conversations* 78). She delineates her multi-ethnic characters dabbling in traditional beliefs (so to speak, the “anachronistic” remnants in the historicist notion of time) and adorns them with scientific and technological devices, creating a hybrid situation.

One important issue that is consistently overlooked in *Jasmine* is the issue of reincarnation. A professor of sociology, Mary Webb, confides to Jasmine at a university club (a public space) that she was an Australian black man, an Aborigine, in one of her previous lives (124). Jasmine, who theoretically believes in reincarnation, then notes, “It seems that her lives have jumped a groove, like a record arm that gets bumped, and she’s landed up there at the dawn of her immortal soul’s mutable, genetic journey, with no knowledge of the thousands of other lives she must have led in between. The other lives are just fragmentary” (125). Note that Jasmine uses a technological trope (“like a record arm that gets bumped”) to describe the gap between Mary’s present life and the one she lived as a black man. Mary’s confession might sound “irrational” and “delusional” to a scientific worldview but it, nevertheless, haunts our everyday lives. Moreover, as Jack D. Forbes has tellingly shown, relations between whites and other races are more complicated than the classificatory theory of race suggests. Forbes persuasively argues that a large number of Afro- and Euro- Americans have descended from the miscegenation between the (Native) Americans and other peoples who arrived in the “New World” later (*passim*);⁷ racial separations are truly catachrestic—that is, to use Michel Foucault’s terms, “impure and confused” (“Nietzsche” 157)—at the origin. It is plausible to assume, therefore, that Mary could have descended from an Australian Aborigine, even if her claim that she was a black man in one of her previous lives sounds delusional. (This is not to deny the truthfulness of her claim, however.) In any event, the past visits

the present in Mukherjee's work not only in the form of the hallucinatory moments, but also as an important aspect of everyday reality.

Mukherjee continues to problematize the categorical identity grounded on classificatory knowledge in *The Middleman and Other Stories*. In "Fathering," Jason, a Vietnam vet, tracks down and brings his Vietnamese daughter over to the U.S. after several years of forced amnesia. For more than ten years, he had tried to forget his past, believing that the Vietnam War did not happen, that he never went out there as an errand boy (running, as it were, the American errand in the "Third World" wilderness) and never met Eng's mother, "the honeyest-skinned bar girl with the tiniest feet in Saigon" (117). However, after several years of life lived according to the normative social expectations (raising a family and working at a school) things start falling apart, prompting him to revisit his past and to come to terms with it. Eng, as Jason's past action coming home to roost, does not turn out to be a containable girl to the dismay of Sharon, Jason's soon-to-be wife, who had hoped that Eng would be more manageable (given her "Third World" background) than Jason's twin American daughters from his ex-wife. Like Mary in *Jasmine*, Eng talks to voices, prefers old methods of healing mental and physical wounds to the easy fixes that modern medical science enjoins, and does not act like a "normal kid" (118). Family, in Sharon's understanding, is a homogeneous, well-regulated unit. As she observes, "Everything was fine until she [Eng] got here. Send her back, Jase. If you love me, send her back" (123). Sharon would rather consign Eng, Jason's past, to forgetfulness ("Send her back") than welcome an alternative interpretation of family, that is, as Drake has it, "the impossibility of possessing yourself, your child, your nation" (77). Eng, however, declines to be immured within Sharon's arborescent present, and refuses to be forgotten.

If, for Jason and Sharon, the specter of the past returns to unsettle their present, for Maya Sanyal in the story, "The Tenant," the past in the form of Ashoke Mehta delivers her from a dreary present. Like Jasmine in the novel *Jasmine*, Maya comes to the U.S. from India, and, like the former, has American lovers. She has recently moved to Iowa from New Jersey to teach at a local university. There she is exposed to the Chatterji family; the husband confides to her the destitution brought about by his married life (108). Maya, who had never had an Indian lover before, is now set frantically to find an Indian suitor and lands in Ashoke Mehta's advertisement for an Indian bride in a periodical.

Maya's dilemma toward tradition and modernity manifests in two parallel expressions: "She was an American citizen. But" (100) and "She has broken with the past. But" (102). Even though the first statement (*énoncé*)⁸ in each expression suggests her fixed identity, the negating conjunctive "but" that follows acts as a counter-memory that instantly renders the finality implied in the first sentence untenable. To put it differently, if the first sentence of each expression represents modernity's designation of Maya's identity, which corresponds with Drake's and Hoppe's argument that "the past" and American citizenship are

incompatible with each other, the “but” stands for a differential, contrapuntal or interruptive moment that calls the finality suggested in the statement into question. The accompanying “but” is a “negating activity” that Homi Bhabha, by way of Frantz Fanon, talks about, which works as “a bridge, where ‘presencing’ begins because it captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world—the unhomeliness—that is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations” (9). Paradoxically, the “but” not only disturbs the seeming order in the preceding sentence, but also, as Bhabha suggests, acts as a conjunctive bridge to reach out to everything that the statement forecloses. It is what makes the emergence of the repressed possible.

Mukherjee further complicates the traditional polarities between modernity and tradition, and colonizers and the colonized, in her latest work *The Tree Bride* (2004), where she discloses overlapping instances and interruptive moments, the “buts,” so to speak, within Manichean logics. The book tells the story of Tara Bhattacharjee’s life in the intersection of heterogeneous temporalities, and overlapping and contradictory truths underwritten by hegemonic rulers and “subaltern citizens,”¹⁰ the technological modernity and the spirits of “roots,” the East and the West. The narrative form (as in *Jasmine*) deliberately lacks any coherent temporal flow, shuttling between cultural rituals and modernity, the India of the past and the California of the present, mirroring Tara’s everyday life.

Among the multiple narrative threads that interweave in the novel, three stand out most prominently. The first revolves around Tara Bhattacharjee, the narrator who is married to Bish Chatterjee, a Silicon Valley mogul (“the Raja of Silicon Valley” [19]). They have recently got back together after a divorce. Following this reunion, her house is bombed; the suspect, Abbas Sattar Hai, turns out to be a descendent of Rafeek Hai, who, back in Bangladesh, was a close friend of Tara’s great-great grandfather, Jai Krishna Gangooly. As this overview suggests, things are inextricably interconnected. The reason behind the bombing leads readers to Tara’s ancestors and their property in Bangladesh, including her great-great aunt, Tara Lata Gangooly, who owned the Mist Mahal. After the death of Tara Lata in 1943, and the partition of India, her property was occupied by Sattar Hai’s family. In an attempt to unravel her ancestral link, Tara the narrator has visited the property a couple of times, and has retrieved a chronicle of Mishtigunj (*Mist-nama*), from which she learns the story of a British runaway, John Mist.

John Mist, after whom Mishtigunj is named, is central to the second narrative thread. As his story unfolds, we learn that after having been left outside an orphanage called the Orphans and Foundlings Trust located in east London in the year 1820, Mist spent his childhood “sweeping animal waste and gutter slime” (75). At the age of eleven, he is rescued from the drudgery by Tom Crabbe, a sailor of the Indiaman *Malabar Queen*, and heads out to India as a cabin boy. On the ship, he meets Miss Olivia Todd, the only lady passenger, en route to meet her husband-to-be, Mr.

Humphery Todd-Nugent (an East India Company official). When the ship is besieged off the coast of Madagascar, the pirates take Miss Todd with them, but not before she is able to stash Master Snow (the name given to John Mist aboard the ship) in the chest at the foot of her bed and save his life (103). When she subsequently reappears in Calcutta, he refuses to identify her as the real Miss Olivia Todd, as, prior to her reappearance, he had falsely testified in the court that she had died while saving his life from the pirates (121). This was necessary in order to prevent Mr. Todd-Nugent from putting Tom Crabbe and the other surviving sailors on death row as they faced accusations of fabricating the piracy story in order, Mr. Todd-Nugent claimed, to hide their mutinous act against the captain, and to cover up what they did to the only lady on board (114). To atone for the wrong he inflicted on Miss Todd, he kills Mr. Todd-Nugent (who was intent on saving his public face rather than trying to find out the truth of the story) and his acolytes. With the help of Rafeek Hai (Abbas Sattar Hai's great-great grandfather), Mist disappears into the jungle ("Shoonder Bon"), vowing never to speak the English language and wear English clothes again (144). He later finds Mishtigunj along with Jai Krishna Gangooly (Tara's great-great grandfather) and Rafeek Hai.

The third narrative strand in the novel pertains to Virgil Treadwell ("Vertie"), grandfather to Victoria Treadwell Khanna, Tara the narrator's ob-gyn in California. Born in India in 1874, he grows up with his two uncles in Brynnsmere, England, where he is sent after the death of his mother. His father, an officer in the Indian Army, also dies in 1884 in Sudan, when fighting the Mahdi. Vertie joins the Indian Civil Service in 1896 in order to "get away from England and never return" (228). During his long service to the Raj, he works in different places and capacities. In 1930, he is promoted to the post of District Commissioner for the Sunderbans (or Shoonder Bon). In his unfinished autobiography, he writes: "[My paternal uncles] were town constables, and as a result of that early training, I grew to manhood respecting social order above all other human benefits. I might even say I am loath to embrace the slightest deviance from what I consider the norms of an ordered society" (189).

On his deathbed in 1948, Tara Lata's soul (the living past) haunts Vertie for her violent death at his hands when he was a district commissioner in Bengal (202, 213). She appears in his delirium after he has finished confiding the innermost secrets of his past to Winston Churchill, whom he calls "the prophet in the wilderness" (173). He hallucinates about hearing Tara Lata's voice, now dead for five years, and says: "I knew she would come back" (213). To her, he justifies his past acts, including her arrest and subsequent death. As he confesses, "My aim was always the preservation of British rule through the cooperation of enlightened native elites. Win over the elites and the rabble will follow" (215-216). George Orwell, whose works Tara Lata read and possessed, was a Bolshie to Vertie as Orwell exposed in *Burmese Days* and "A Hanging" the depredation of the colonial administration in Upper Burma (216, 218). Vertie is bitter about his inability to contain India under British

rule, and for finding himself back in Britain (the country to which he had vowed never to return): “And what did the future hold for him, unhoused by India, told he had no right to a plot of Indian soil?” (195). For this very reason, and because he could not tame it, India now becomes for him what Africa is for Joseph Conrad’s Marlow (“one of the dark places of the earth”): “A giant hole in the dark that could swallow him and every valuable thing he’d ever done, without warning” (*Tree Bride* 220). The real test of Vertie’s sanity in 1948 is the presence of the erstwhile colonized subjects, who have now not only “sneaked in around back,” but also “voyaged in” the Western metropolis via the front door. Explaining the notion of “the voyage in,” Said writes:

The voyage in, then, constitutes an especially interesting variety of hybrid cultural work. And that it exists at all is a sign of adversarial internationalization in an age of continued imperial structures. No longer does the logos dwell exclusively, as it were, in London and Paris. No longer does history run unilaterally, as Hegel believed, from the east to west, or from south to north, becoming more sophisticated and developed, less primitive and backward as it goes. (*Culture* 244-45)

The off-putting presence of the Indians [the “little looters,” as he calls them (176)], whose arrival is facilitated by the “adversarial internationalization,” playing cricket in his own East Anglian village of Brynnsmere ultimately kills Vertie.

Mukherjee’s work demonstrates that no domination is immune to resistance, and that for every settled truth, there is an alternative one functioning as an unsettling “but.” As Said tellingly puts it, “Opposition to a dominant structure arises out of a perceived, perhaps even militant awareness on the part of individuals and groups outside and inside it that, for example, certain of its policies are wrong” (*Culture* 240). A dominant history, in other words, bears within itself the necessity of its own opposition. *The Tree Bride* chronicles not only the stories of the Crown’s stewards like Vertie, who were intent on grafting the norms of an “ordered society” onto the Indian “wilderness,” but also of oppositional voices like those of John Mist’s and Nigel Coughlin’s (another character in the novel who supports the *Tree Bride*’s cause) that originated not outside but within the West, and yet rebelled against its injustices by forging alliances with peoples from disparate races, classes, genders, religions, and nationalities.

Unlike his colonial compatriots, John Mist comes to the east not with a “textual attitude”¹¹—a quixotic understanding that the world must conform to the reality as it is outlined in cultural texts—but approaches it, in Fredric Jameson’s words, with a “situational consciousness” (85). Born in 1820 to unknown parents, Mist “voyages out” to India on the Indiaman *Malabar Queen*. On the ship, where he works as a cabin boy, he meets Miss Olivia Todd, and quickly becomes friends with her: “She took out a long braid that she sometimes wore on top of her head and chased him about her cabin, more like another kid or a sister, threatening to turn him into a pigtailed Chinaman, and he finally let her” (95).

In return, Mist, being the only free person to know her in Calcutta, declines to help Miss Todd after she reappears: “God had answered his prayers, and he’d swatted God in the face” (131). Later, true to his vow, he turns into a “British Hindoo,” a bearded man in a turban, and founds a village called George’s Bight (subsequently called Mishtigunj and Razakpur) on the bank of the river, George (145). In the interregnum, he “visit[s] Benares and [sleeps] in the alleyways with beggars; he pray[s] in mosques and honor[s] the burial sites of every pir; he tramp[s] the length and breadth of India, surviving on the generosity of strangers” (148). In 1870, while founding Mishtigunj, a post-imperialist, hybrid village, he forges an unlikely alliance between himself, Jai Krishna Gangooly (a Hindu) and Rafeek Hai (a Muslim) (149). Before being hanged by imperial Britain in 1880, Mist had started an “inauthentic” or “impure” beginning (bringing together “British Hindoos,” Hindus, and Muslims) that never got the chance to fully mature in the wake of nationalist thought. Importantly, however, it never totally vanished either; their alliance was the type of “affective” sociality that Leela Gandhi expounds so astutely in her book, *Affective Community*.

When Western hegemony was intent on consolidating its reign in the East, Gandhi argues in her book, there were “outsiders” within the West who were launching an anti-colonial war in collusion with the rebelling natives. Drawing on the notion of “compearance” to suggest an insurgent spirit in the Victorian subcultures, Gandhi contends that “in so far as power exercises itself as the violence of unbinding, compearing community foment its nonviolent resistance through an anarchist politics of immediate conjunction, conjuncture, coalition, and collaboration ‘between’ the most unlikely associates” (20). Her point is that while, at one level, Western (acultural) modernity was leveling out everything that appeared eccentric in its mission to disenchant the “Third World,” there also surfaced simultaneously oppositional subcultures in a rhizomatic fashion within the metropolitan West and “voyaged out” to the colonial spaces, building alliances with anti-colonial groups and individuals. Elaborating on her argument, she recounts the story of Charles Freer Andrews (1871-1940), after whom the town Andrewsgunj is named in India. Andrews (much like John Mist in *The Tree Bride*) assisted in the anti-imperial movement of Mahatma Gandhi (13-15). She uncovers a diaphanous yet crucial link between this late Victorian radicalism and recent social movements such as the demonstrations against the World Trade Organization in Seattle during December 1999 (185), corroborating Said’s assertion that no domination goes without an accompanying challenge.

The Tree Bride (suggested by the narrative form itself, which is nonlinear and inextricably intertwined) dramatizes a similar “compearance” of disparate personal, communitarian, and (counter)nationalist histories converging in and diverging from each other relentlessly. It demonstrates how, alongside Vertie’s subsuming imperialist notion of time (that is, the notion that time always moves

linearly), there existed the kind of subversive temporalities represented by John Mist, giving energy to “History 2s” (in Chakrabarty’s terms [66])¹² both within and outside the West.

“Nothing was rooted anymore. Everything was in motion,” Jasmine in *Jasmine* remarks (152). In lieu of a fixed identity, nomadism defines the subjectivity of Mukherjee’s immigrant characters. The world, for them, becomes a makeshift shelter, where different identities (both within and outside) enter and exit, while incessantly talking about future possibilities. “For a man who no longer has a homeland,” Theodor Adorno reflects, “writing becomes a place to live. [...] In the end, the writer is not even allowed to live in his writing” (87). Mukherjee and her characters problematize (and become problematic to) the dominant narratives that build on the vision of homogeneous human identities. Their lived experiences often meet fractals that unhinge any fixity in daily existentiality. As one of Mukherjee’s errant subjectivities, Mr. Venkatesan in the story “Buried Lives” muses: “Fractals claimed to predict, mathematically, chaos and randomness. Such an endeavor [of recognizing fractals] if possible, struck Mr. Venkatesan as a virtually holy quest, closer to the spirit of religion than of science” (153). Despite the inherent fractals and fault lines that mark their individual identities, Mukherjee’s characters—Lillian Gordon, Du, Darrel and Jasmine in *Jasmine*, for example—foment an affective community to cope with their contingency. Their “compearance” is inclusive of not only different peoples and cultures, but also of animals like Sam, Kate’s pet. Jasmine notes: “Sam, I thought, we’re both a long way from home, aren’t we? [...] He started thumping his tail against my shins, hard and painfully. Kate called it his kick of contentment, he was happy with me” (164). Despite all the travails they go through in their itineraries, Mukherjee’s mongrel characters find happiness in their new home. Crucially, however, they do not forget where they come from.

Notes

1. Aijaz Ahmad takes issue with this idea of a migrant’s double vision, especially with reference to Homi Bhabha’s assertion in *The Location of Culture* that “the truest eye may now belong to the migrant’s double vision” (5). See Ahmad’s article “The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality” in *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Padmini Mongia.

2. See Aijaz Ahmad’s *In Theory: Nations, Classes, Literatures*, where Ahmad characterizes Mukherjee as exemplary of immigrant writers who “turn out to be right-wing people” (208).

3. The skepticism, perhaps even repulsion, toward the past manifested in Drake’s and Hoppe’s interpretations of Mukherjee’s work is deeply

informed by the myth of American Adam in the wilderness. The American Adam, as R. W. B. Lewis observes in his *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (1955), alludes to a figure “emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources” (5).

4. Like Muslims, upper-caste Hindus (from which Mukherjee and Jasmine hail) do not cook and eat pork in the kitchen. On the other side, the Americans in Iowa have no knowledge of a concoction such as “matar panir.” Jasmine notes, “‘Pilaf,’ he [Darrel] boasts, ‘and motor pan. Did I say that right?’ [...] ‘Then it’s matar panir,’ I say. ‘Matar for peas and panir for cheese.’ These errors I feel I can correct” (216).

5. “Each of the Akbari [miniature] paintings that I’m mesmerized by,” Mukherjee reflects, “is so crowded with narrative, sub-narratives, sometimes meta-narratives, so taut with passion and at the same time so crisp with irony” (*Conversations* 77).

6. The “New World,” according to Stuart Hall, “is not so much power, as ground, place, territory. It is the juncture-point where many cultural tributaries meet, [...] where the fateful/fatal encounter was staged between Africa and the West. It also has to be understood as the place of many, continuous displacements” (243).

7. For a fuller discussion of Forbes’s contention of race in America, see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Race before Racism: The Disappearance of the American” *boundary 2* Vol. 25.2 (1998): 35-53.

8. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Translated by Dana Polan (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P., 1986), p. 17.

9. Critics have denounced this novel for its, in Michiko Kakutani’s words, “swollen, ungainly” story line. If we read it as a miniature painting of sorts, an amalgam of heterogeneous stories, the seeming imperfections in the novel illuminate a different take on reality.

10. The phrase “subaltern citizen,” Gyanendra Pandey explains, is “not primarily intended to suggest the subordinate status of citizens, [...] [n]or is it used to describe a historical process of moving from a status of subalternity to one of citizenship, [...] [but has] to do with the potential that the subaltern possesses (or the threat s/he poses) of becoming a full member of the community, the village, the ward and the polis” (275). Also see Mary E. Odem, “Subaltern Immigrants: Undocumented Workers and

National Belonging in the United States,” *Interventions* 10(3) (2008): 359-380.

11. I use the term in the sense that Said employs it. See *Orientalism* (85).

12. In *Provincializing Europe*, Chakrabarty argues that History 1 has the urge to universalize truths that have specific cultural and national origins. History 1’s goal is geared toward subsuming into itself narratives that pose themselves as oppositional vis-à-vis the official versions. Chakrabarty calls these oppositional historical narratives “History 2s.”

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