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“SUSPENDED BETWEEN WORLDS”: JASMINE’S LIBERAL FEMINISM

Mariana Chaves Petersen*

RESUMO: *Este trabalho analisa as possibilidades de um discurso feminista em Jasmine (1989), de Bharati Mukherjee, tentando compreender como o espírito de empoderamento feminino, presente em momentos como o assassinato de seu estuproador pela própria Jasmine, parece desaparecer ao longo da narrativa, tendo em mente que Jasmine está entre Oriente e Ocidente. Para isso, retomo abordagens feminista-marxista e cultural do romance, discutindo as possibilidades de um feminismo não-ocidental e mostrando como o feminismo de Jasmine é liberal, alicerçado em escolhas. Examinando então o ideal hindu do desapego presente na narrativa, relacionando-o a passagens como o assassinato mencionado. Por fim, discuto as implicações de se considerar Jasmine uma fábula, como Mukherjee chamou a obra, e, por conseguinte, de considerá-la uma fábula feminista.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Bharati Mukherjee; Feminismo; Liberalismo; Desapego.*

ABSTRACT: *This work analyses the possibilities of a feminist discourse in Bharati Mukherjee’s Jasmine (1989). It tries to understand how the spirit of female empowerment present in moments such as the killing of her rapist by Jasmine herself seems to vanish throughout the narrative, having in mind that Jasmine is between East and West. Therefore, I recapture Marxist-feminist and cultural approaches of the novel, discussing possibilities of a non-Western feminism and showing how Jasmine’s feminism is liberal, based on choice. I then examine Jasmine’s Hindu ideal of nonattachment, relating it to passages such as the killing aforementioned. Finally, I discuss the implications of considering Jasmine a fable, as Mukherjee has called it, and thus of considering it a feminist fable.*

KEYWORDS: *Bharati Mukherjee; Feminism; Liberalism; Nonattachment.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* (1989) tells the story of the shuttling-identities protagonist (Jyoti/Jasmine/Kali/Jazzy/Jase/Jane). Jyoti is born in Hasnapur, Punjab, to a poor Hindu family, but in spite of that she is educated in English. When she is a child, a fortune teller foretells her widowhood and exile. She marries the man she chooses, Prakash, an engineer. Though an Indian couple, they have a marriage based on Western values, according to Prakash’s wish. She calls him by his first name, and he gives her a new name, “Jasmine.” They plan their life in America, where he is expected to go study, but he dies in a terrorist attack. Tired of widowhood in Punjab, which to her equals death, Jasmine decides to go to America to commit *sati* at the university in which Prakash would study. She obtains the money required and travels by boat with other illegal immigrants. When she finally gets there, she is chosen by Half-Face to be supposedly helped by him, but is raped. She decides to kill herself but ends up killing him and running away. She is found by Lillian Gordon, a woman who helps illegal immigrants: she teaches Jasmine to walk, look and talk like an American – she calls her “Jazzy.” Jasmine looks for Professor Vadhera, who encouraged Prakash to go to

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America. She moves to his house, living with his family, but gets tired of being treated as a widow and of living in a ghetto. She arranges a job as the *au pair* of Duff, daughter of Taylor and Wylie, and enters the life of academic New Yorkers. Wylie leaves Taylor, and he and Jasmine fall in love – he calls her “Jase” –, but she leaves him after supposedly seeing Sukhwinder, the one responsible for Prakash’s death, in New York. She goes to Baden, Iowa, where she gets a job with Bud Ripplemeyer, a city banker, who falls in love with her and leaves his wife for her – he calls her “Jane.” He is shot and thus paralyzed from the waist down. They adopt a Vietnamese boy, Du, and Jasmine gets pregnant by artificial insemination. Du leaves them to live with his sister in California, and Jasmine feels out of place. Taylor appears at her home in Iowa with Duff, and the three of them leave towards California.

In this paper, I discuss the possibilities of a feminist discourse in *Jasmine*. In fact, the novel presents passages of female empowerment, such as the one in which Jasmine kills her rapist and also when she kills a rabid dog that is coming after her. In the first case, Jasmine calls herself “Kali,”¹ after the Hindu goddess of destruction, and makes sure the rapist sees her with blood dropping from her tongue – as the goddess’ image – before being killed. Stuck in a room with Half-Face, Jasmine considers: “I had faced death twice before, and cheated it” (MUKHERJEE, 1989, p. 116), referring to the incident with the mad dog and the attack that killed Prakash. The traumatizing experience leads Jasmine to think: “I [...] prayed for the strength to survive, long enough to kill myself” (MUKHERJEE, 1989, p. 116). While Half-Face sleeps, she bathes and deliberates, finally deciding to live. By doing this, she refuses to be the victim; she cuts her tongue, dresses, and prepares to kill him:

I began to shiver. [...] His eyes fluttered open even before I felt the metal touch his throat, and his smile and panic were nearly instantaneous. I wanted that moment when he saw me above him as he had last seen me, naked, but now with my mouth opened, pouring blood, my red tongue out. I wanted him to open his mouth and start to reach, I wanted that extra hundredth of a second when the blade bit deeper than any insect, when I jumped back as he jerked forward, slapping at his neck while blood, ribbons of bright blood, rushed between his fingers.

He got his legs over the side of the bed, he stood and staggered, and with each stagger new spatter marks gushed against the walls. [...] finally he felt to his knees at the foot of the bed. [...] He tried to rise and couldn’t. I pulled the bedspread off the bed and threw it over him and then began stabbing wildly through the cloth, as the human form beneath it grew smaller and stiller. (MUKHERJEE, 1989, p. 118)

Concerning the other killing, young Jyoti, still in Punjab, manages to kill, with a staff, a wild dog that is coming after her while other people – including male bidi smokers that stayed there to bully women while they defecated – do nothing to help her:

The men in our village weren’t saints. We had our incidents. Rape, ruin, shame. The women’s strategy was to stick together. Stragglers, beware. That morning I thought, Let it come. Let him pounce. I had the staff. But that morning the enemy wasn’t human. First I saw only the head. A pink-skinned, nearly hairless, twitching animal head. The head thrust itself through the bush, brambles stuck deep into its bleeding jowls.
[...]

¹ This is the only name given to Jasmine not by a man, but by herself.

‘Cowards!’ I aimed my cry at the line of the bidi smokers. ‘We know you are there! Please help us!’

The animal whipped its head back; the head was bloodied monstrous. Then it started to drag itself noisily to the trash pit. [...]

The dog stopped twenty feet from me. It looked straight at me out of those red eyes. Then it spun on its front legs and squared off. Tremors raised pink ridges on its hairless sides. It stopped so close to me I could see flies stuck in the viscous drool. I knew it had come for me, not for the other women. It had picked me as its enemy. I wasn’t ready to die. [...]

[...] Blood plumed its raw sides. I’d never seen that much blood. (MUKHERJEE, 1989, p. 55)

Even before *Half-Face*, Jasmine had the courage to protect herself; she already refused the role of victim. In fact, this killing is like a preparation for what is to come.

After reading such passages, I expected a similar path for the rest of the narrative, but I was surprised not to find it. Taking the novel as a whole, and its narrator’s changes, it is important to consider its name: although Jasmine ends up assimilated in the United States, the narrative is named “Jasmine.” This is the name Prakash gives Jyoti, the name he wanted her to have as his wife, as the modern (and Western) woman he wanted her to be. The novel could be called “Jase” or “Jane”, the way different Western men called her, but it is named by an Indian man who had a positive view of the Western world, and who was part of Jasmine’s Eastern life: the name functions as her bridge between two worlds – “For Prakash, love was letting go. Independence, self-reliance: I learned the litany by heart. But I felt suspended between worlds” (MUKHERJEE, 1989, p. 76). It is after Prakash’s dream that Jasmine leaves India towards *his* America, which is the America of liberal democracy, based on equality and on choice – which we know, and Jasmine comes to know later, is not necessarily true. The book is thus named more after an image of America than after America itself.

While in New York, Jasmine sees herself as an American, the place of her change being Taylor and Wylie’s house: “I became an American in an apartment on Claremont Avenue across the street from a Barnard College dormitory” (MUKHERJEE, 1989, p. 165). Her identification process is similar to that of the novel’s author, Mukherjee, who also calls herself “American.” In a 1997 interview, she stated:

If you insist, [...], that I describe myself in terms of ethno-nationality, I’d say I’m an American writer of Bengali-Indian origin. In other words, the writer/political activist in me is more obsessed with addressing the issues of minority discourse in the U.S. and Canada, the two countries I have lived and worked in over the last thirty odd years. (CHEN; GOUDIE, 1997, n/p)

However, in spite of Jasmine’s “becoming American,” the character presents both Western and non-Western values: she is between two worlds. We cannot judge her only with Western eyes or only with Eastern eyes, since she aggregates values of both, in a combination that is singular as all such combinations are. Jasmine’s intentions to stay with Bud and to leave with Taylor may be taken after men – even though she says they are not –, but they are her own decisions. Prakash, for instance, imposes a few decision on her, decisions a Western woman would probably take, but that were not *her own*. In this sense, Prakash’s imposing Western values on her does not give her much of a choice, which she has – among her few immigrant possibilities – in America. There she can be a mother if she wants to – she has more docile partners –, while Prakash

convinces her otherwise.² Therefore, in *Jasmine*, there are feminist ideas based on *choice*, on Jasmine making her own decisions.

I want to discuss the possibility of a feminist approach of *Jasmine* without the Western mistake of thinking my Western conceptions of women's empowerment match Jasmine's. To write about the novel, as one of Bharati Mukherjee's works of fiction, is not an easy and simple territory. As Chen and Goudie (1997, n/p) pointed, "she has broken boundaries and refused to limit herself to easy categories." Similarly, Dascălu (2011, p. 273) says "She attacks all stable monolithic discourses. [...] through her ethnically diverse characters, especially her women heroes, Bharati Mukherjee purposely deconstructs the structures of domination in contemporary society." I hope, in this essay, to do justice to this complexity by avoiding a simplistic reading of the novel.

2. MARXIST-FEMINIST AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

In accordance with Khuê Ninh (2013, p. 146), in a Marxist-feminist reading of *Jasmine*, the novel does not present a "useful feminism" extracted from its cultural nationalism, being "convenient to patriarchal and Western anxieties." She sees Jasmine, and the romantic clichés of the novel, as out of context: "the crossing of racially other with nationally foreign [...] visually codes her female body as that of a sex worker, semiotically fusing her lovemaking with her employment" (KHUÊ NINH, 2013, p. 147-148). She exemplifies it with Jasmine's relationship with Bud: his ex-wife, Karin, calls Jasmine a "gold-digger," and the way the narrator tries to prove herself as not a gold-digger is not convincing enough; she cannot deny the material motivation of her relationship with Bud. Still to Khuê Ninh (2013, p. 148), the racial difference marks Jasmine as the wage worker, "one whose even intimate labors are motivated by money"; the character attempts to euphemize her situation by calling herself "caregiver" (while taking care of Duff and later of the paralyzed Bud) and perceives it as both familial and professional, which emphasizes the continuum between worker and wife. Khuê Ninh mentions the procedure Jasmine has to follow to give Bud sexual pleasure, raising the question of how she benefits from it. Thus, to Khuê Ninh, there is dichotomy: Jasmine is between a victim and an opportunist. She does not consider Jasmine's trajectory incidental: the character has exploited successfully the continuum domestic worker/wife towards self-advancement. Still according to Khuê Ninh, the presence of Jasmine's conflict after seeing Sukhwinder in the United States is a link between terrorism and illegal immigration that anticipates the anxieties of 9/11, but, concerning Jasmine (as it happens with mail order brides), what the state believes to be a matter of national security ends on romance, not on ideological effects. Khuê Ninh (2013, p. 155) still argues that "the narrative reassures an ambivalent mainstream public that, although a racially and nationally aberrant subject, Jasmine is ultimately inert: non-threatening to the nuclear family, the patriarchal order, and the white nation."

² Jasmine wants to get pregnant, and Prakash is against it: "We aren't going to *spawn*! We aren't ignorant peasants!" (MUKHERJEE, 1989, p. 77, author's emphasis); Jasmine resists: "Just because you're good engineering student you think you know everything, [...] What does hi-tech says about a woman's need to be a mother?" (MUKHERJEE, 1989, p. 78) He answers that she is very young and that they should not do something they did not both agree.

Khuê Ninh's (2013) point is convincing, but has its problems. Jasmine does benefit from her relation to Bud, as she is the docile wife to him as well as the loving foreigner caregiver to him and to Duff (which makes Taylor fall in love with her). However, I can only partially agree with Khuê Ninh: leaving Bud to live with another man while carrying their baby is probably not the best way to serve patriarchal needs. Khuê Ninh seems to forget Jasmine's killing of Half-Face while already in the United States, which does not sound very convenient to Western anxieties, and is a way of refusing to be a victim. Even though Jasmine lives as Bud's wife, she refuses to marry him: if she was willing to pass through the continuum between worker and wife, she might have accepted his proposal; the only man to whom she is married throughout the narrative is an Indian one, Prakash. There is a lot of violence in *Jasmine*, but the narrator unveils and then veils it; however, one must not forget passages such as the one when Jasmine's mother tries to kill her soon after she is born, in order to save her from her destiny of a dowryless bride:

When the midwife carried me out, my sisters tell me, I had a ruby-red choker of bruise around my throat and sapphire fingerprints on my collarbone. [...] My mother was as sniper. She wanted to spare me the pain of a dowryless bride. My mother wanted a happy life for me. I survived the snapping. My grandmother may have named me Jyoti, Light, but in surviving I was already Jane, a fighter and adapter. (MUKHERJEE, 1989, p. 40)

This passage also reveals an important characteristic of Jasmine: her native instinct for adapting, which will be important in the United States. There, Jasmine is a survivor; she is somehow struggling to live.

Mukherjee (n/d apud KUMAR, 2013, p. 121) relates this ability to adapt to her condition as an Indian wife: "The kind of women I write about ... are those who are adaptable. We've all been raised to please, been trained to be adaptable as wives, and that adaptability is working to the women's advantage when we come over as immigrants." To Kumar (2013), who reads Mukherjee's works from what he calls a "cultural perspective," there is an Indian sensibility in her novels; even in the warmth of living with Taylor and Wylie and thus "becoming American," Jasmine's Indian values appear sometimes (as when she comes to know Duff is an adopted child, which is awkward to her). A reason for Jasmine to play the role of Bud's wife may be due to the fact that she has an ideal of the Indian wife, "who is by nature self-sacrificing" (KUMAR, 2013, p. 120), though she also protests against the rigors of Indian culture, against Indian attitude towards widows, against the *sati* system: "She rebukes the male dominating Indian society which discourages self-reliance in women. [...] However, her native values determine substantially the quality of her life" (KUMAR, 2013, p. 121). Thus, while in Iowa, Jasmine has been faithful to Bud, "At Iowa she is the perfect wife who tries to please her husband by all means. [...] Here [with Bud] she is very much like Indian women, bound to the 'old world dutifulness [...]" (KUMAR, 2013, pp. 117-118) Nevertheless, after deciding to leave Bud for Taylor, Jasmine quits the perfect Indian-wife role: "the woman who walks out at last with Taylor [...] is positively an entirely different woman. This is a woman who is ready to see ahead, to ingratiate the best that future holds in store for her" (KUMAR, 2013, p. 118). Before Taylor's arrival in Iowa, Jasmine seems to finally realize that she is not happy with Bud after his accident – and thus realizes she does *not* benefit from the relationship anymore, which Khuê Ninh (2013) does not mention –: "Had things worked out differently [...]" Du

would have had the father of any boy's dream [...] like the American lover I had for only one year. I would have had a husband, a place to call home. / This, I realize, is not it" (MUKHERJEE, 1989, p. 224). The woman who leaves Bud is in doubt, but of what she might want, not of her decision to follow her wishes: "there is nothing I can do. Time will tell if I am a tornado, rubble-maker, arising from nowhere and disappearing into cloud. I am out the door and in the potholed and rutted driveway, scrambling ahead of Taylor, greedy with wants and reckless from hope" (MUKHERJEE, 1989, p. 241). She makes a choice following her own wishes; she does not care about leaving Bud while pregnant of their baby; in the end, she puts her choices over patriarchal – and even caregiving – values.

One can say that Jasmine's decision to leave with Taylor is a choice between men, in spite of the narrator's claim: "I am not choosing between men. I am caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness" (MUKHERJEE, 1989, p. 240). Taylor comes with the "promise of America," while staying with Bud would be to be stuck with the "old-world dutifulness" of being an Indian wife. In this sense, her decision matches Kumar's view concerning the decided woman she appears to be at the end of the novel. One can also question the implications of Jasmine's being always named by men. To Dascălu (2011, pp. 262-263), the names are far from arbitrarily imposed: "They are names that not only inscribe the exchange of selfhood that has occurred; they also inscribe the narrator securely into the Symbolic Order of the culture she is entering." Every name is given by a different man, "the man both names her and brings her into the world in which he is already a native" (DASCĂLU, 2011, p. 263). This reinforces my point of *Jasmine* being a novel between two worlds, since it is a name given to the character while in India, but forecasting a westernized marriage, and Prakash's dream of America. Dascălu also raises the question of whether a patriarchal system of control – one that transcends culture and race – surpasses the cultural differences between Jasmine's different namings by different men. This, to her, would be to fall in the trap of producing the "Third World Woman" as a monolithic subject, which she says, "according to post-colonial theory, many recent feminists (*sic*) texts have done" (DASCĂLU, 2011, p. 263). Dascălu (2011, p. 263) thus questions: "has Mukherjee used the female's subjection by masculinity as a transcendental signified and by doing so homogenized the cultural differences that separate 'Western' and 'Indian' women?" She concludes negatively because this would be a reduction of patriarchy and of the different influences the different men in the novel have on Jasmine, and also because this reduction would center Jasmine's shuttling identities only on men, while she plays an important role in them. Therefore, the differences between the men who name Jasmine ought not to be ignored, since they are related to the different relationships she establishes with them. Furthermore, even though men are responsible for the names, we cannot ignore Jasmine's role in her changes of identity, since most of them happened because she wanted them to happen, as she emphasizes: "Taylor didn't want to change me. He didn't want to scour and sanitize the foreignness. [...] I changed because I wanted to" (MUKHERJEE, 1989, p. 185). Prakash may seem, at first, to impose changes on Jasmine; even so, a closer reading reveals that a seed of them might have been in her already. When Jyoti asks her brothers whether Prakash – at this point, the man whose voice and discourse she had fallen in love with – spoke English, she thinks: "I couldn't marry a man who didn't speak English. To want English was to want more than you had been given at birth, it was to want the world" (MUKHERJEE, 1989, p. 68).

3. NON-WESTERN AND TRANSNATIONAL-CULTURAL-STUDIES FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES

Narayan (1992), who calls herself a non-Western, Indian feminist, examines feminist epistemology in order to reflect on the possible relations non-Western women and non-Western feminists can establish with it, discussing at what point culture superimposes itself. She starts by arguing that feminist epistemology poses political problems for non-Western feminists that it does not pose for Western feminists. According to her, feminism in non-Western countries is primarily significant to educated, middle-class women – relatively westernized women, a group in which she includes herself. She analyses the subject based on the Hindu culture, with which she is familiar, a culture she says oppresses women at the same time it confers a high value on their place in the scheme of things (which generates claims that they should maintain it): “In cultures that have a pervasive religious component, like the Hindu culture [...], everything seems assigned a place and value as long as it keeps to its place” (NARAYAN, 1992, p. 259). Still, she assumes that feminists in non-Western countries should emphasize the negative aspects of the female experience within their cultures. She considers an important opposition faced by non-Western feminists the fact that they want to think about the oppression of women in their culture and at the same time value their culture in relation to Western values, and not simply accept that Western feminism is the answer, which might lead to the thought that Western values are superior to non-Western ones. Thus, she sees a way out, one that, according to her, does not make incomparable comparisons and that tries to understand the complexities involved when dealing with different settings, with its different histories and cultures.

She states that feminists have valued emotion and experience, as well as the views that those who lived under different forms of oppression had on their own situation. However, to her,

Western feminists, despite their critical understanding of their own culture, often tend to be more a part of it than they realize. If they fail to see the contexts of their theories and assume that their perspective has universal validity for all feminists, they tend to participate in the dominance that western culture has exercised over nonwestern cultures. (NARAYAN, 1992, p. 263)

In this case, Mukherjee apparently shares Narayan’s point of view: “The feminists let us [people of color] down as they obtained their goals regarding women’s rights” (CHEN; GOUDIE, 1997, n/p). The generalization – “feminists” – and the use of “their,” clearly refers to Western feminists, excluding non-Western women and, by extension, non-Western feminists. In accordance with Narayan (1992, p. 264), “‘Nonanalytic’ and ‘nonrational’ forms of discourse, like fiction or poetry, may be better able than other forms to convey the complex life experiences of one group to members of another.” Concerning this, Mukherjee apparently has a more individualistic view than Narayan’s; as I have mentioned before, the first seems to escape all easy definitions. She opposes postcolonial studies’ by stating:

as a writer, my job is to open up, to discover and say “we are all individuals.” In fiction we are writing about individuals; none of them is meant to be a

crude spokesperson for whole groups, whether those groups are based on gender or race or class. If the story of one individual reveals something about the way in which human nature works, great, if it doesn't, then it has failed as art. (CHEN; GOUDIE, 1997, n/p)

Mukherjee does mention that the story of one individual has to say something about "human nature," otherwise it is not art, but she refuses the need of a character being perceived as a representation of a whole group.³

Narayan (1992) defends that sympathetic members of a dominant group must keep in mind the difficulties to fully understand the nondominant's concerns, the latter being able to deny the possibility of a complete understanding of their situation by the dominant group. She continues: "This and the very important need for dominated groups to control the means of discourse about their own situations are important reasons for taking seriously the claim that oppressed groups have an 'epistemic advantage'" (NARAYAN, 1992, p. 265). She calls this an insight of feminist epistemology: the view that oppressed groups have an advantage for having knowledge of both the practices of their own and of their oppressors, being able to operate in two different contexts. She then discusses the disadvantages of inhabiting these incompatible frameworks on social reality:

First, the person may be tempted to dichotomize her life and reserve the framework of a different context for each part. The middle class of nonwestern countries supplies numerous examples of people who are very westernized in public life but who return to a very traditional lifestyle in the realm of the family. [...] The pressures of jumping between two different lifestyles may be mitigated by justifications of how each pattern of behavior is appropriate to its particular context and of how it enables them to "get the best of both worlds." (NARAYAN, 1992, p. 266)

Jasmine, as we have seen, feels "suspended between worlds." She exemplifies this dichotomy of being westernized as well as traditional. Jasmine goes to America to commit *sati*, but she "kills" Jyoti, she renounces tradition to be able to live: "Jyoti was now a *sati*-goddess; she had burned herself in a trash-can-funeral pyre behind a boarded motel in Florida. Jasmine lived for the future, for Vijn & Wife. Jase went to movies and lived for today" (MUKHERJEE, 1989, p. 176). "Jase" is the name Jasmine has while living in New York, while becoming American; even so, after that, she goes to Iowa and, being "Jane," even though laughing about it, she plays the role of the Indian wife: "I'll wait supper for you [Bud]. Indian wives never eat before their husbands.' I add a laugh to lighten what I've just said" (MUKHERJEE, 1989, p. 213).

The second disadvantage of inhabiting these two worlds, to Narayan (1992, p. 266), is that "the individual may try to reject the practices of her own context and try to be as much as possible like members of the dominant group"; westernized intellectuals in non-Western contexts may lose knowledge of their cultures and be ashamed of them. The other possibility, according to Narayan (1992, p. 266), is that "the individual could try to reject entirely the framework of the dominant group and assert the virtues of her own despite the risks of being marginalized from the power structures of the society," women who seek security in traditional roles being an example of this case. She defends the choice of inhabiting the two contexts critically; however, this position may lead to a sense of totally lacking roots and of being an outsider in both contexts. This is precisely

³ This relates to criticism of Mukherjee's works by postcolonial scholars (CHEN; GOUDIE, 1997).

how Jasmine feels while living with Prakash, lacking her Indian roots. “The individual subject,” Narayan (1992, p. 267) continues, “is seldom in a position to carry out a perfect ‘dialectical synthesis’ that preserves all the advantages of both contexts and transcends all their problems.” She thus concludes her essay against restricting the “double vision” to metaphysics, and against the “buying” of oppression or the romanticizing of it. I must remark that *Jasmine* seems to fit the idea of “the individual subject”: its main character uses two traditions to take the advantages of both. She can be the independent woman who does what she pleases in New York while she is also the docile caregiver of Bud in Iowa. Mukherjee has said about Jasmine:

It’s very hard for critics in the U.S. and in India to understand who Jasmine is, or where she’s coming from, because she’s not a familiar American or Indian character. To resist and remain the way you were in India is to perpetuate, and more disturbingly, is to valorize, an awful lot of cultural vices such as sexism, patriarchy, castism, classism. [...] The immigrant writer decides what to let go and what to retain. It’s always a two-way transformation. To resist cultural and ideological mutation simply because one want (*sic*) to retain racial/cultural/religious/caste “purity”? is, in my opinion, evil. (CHEN; GOUDIE, 1997, n/p)

Each non-Western feminist has her own path between West and non-West, has her own way to use her “double vision.” Though denying limiting definitions and without necessarily defining herself as a non-Western feminist, Mukherjee has her specific journey between West and East, her own “double vision,” which she similarly calls a “two-way transformation.” Thus, as I have discussed, she defends her narrative as representing Jasmine’s particular path and not a path for all Indian-immigrant women in the United States, since each one of them decides “what to let go and what to retain.” Like Narayan, Mukherjee cannot close her eyes to what she sees as problematic in her original culture; she also denies the “buying” or romanticizing of oppression.

Framed within a “transnational feminist cultural studies perspective,” Grewal’s *Transnational America* (2005) uses Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* as part of its corpus. Grewal’s (2005, p. 28) arguments are based on the concept of “choice,” which is a key discourse to neoliberal feminism: since it is “essential to participation in democracy as well as to consumer culture, feminism was engaged in a struggle with neoliberalism but also dependent on it for its existence.” Ways of conceptualizing progressive feminisms that focus on “international and ‘global’ issues used the idea of ‘having choices’ as the opposed of ‘being oppressed’” (GREWAL, 2005, p. 28). She shows the connections between feminism, liberal democracy, consumer culture and human rights, discussing Malcolm Waters’s suggestion that, through a globalizing consumer culture, political issues and work can become items of consumption, and the only political system possible to it would be a liberal-democratic one where there is a culture of consumption, because it offers the possibility of election; of choice. According to Grewal, late capitalism increasingly brings its discourse of consumer culture to other areas of the world, this being enabled by neoliberal democratic regimes: “the current phase of capitalism in India is producing a new kind of popular, cosmopolitan feminism that seems to operate differently than the feminism that many have come to associate with women’s movements in India” (GREWAL, 2005, p. 31). This new feminism, to her, constructs women as working professionals as well as consumers of beauty and fashion culture.

Discussing transnational connectivities, Grewal (2005) points that subjects were produced through three discourses of identity (which somehow match Narayan's): the universal or global, the national or local as separate and different, and the hybrid. While the first believed to be outside a culture and to live in a world without borders, the second believed to rely on borders to produce an identity, and the latter was between the two other formations: sometimes offering resistance to or sometimes assimilated by the nation-state. Grewal (2005, p. 37) thus focuses on the mobile subject she calls the "cosmopolitan," who "emerged in relation to specific nationalisms as well as to discourses of universalism." To her, a cosmopolitan discourse is present in Bharati Mukherjee's work, the latter seeing herself as a nationalist, in an American and Bengali nationalist identity; she also sees Mukherjee as connected to neoliberal nationalist discourses. In *Jasmine*, the national subject can be perceived, since Mukherjee, Grewal argues, reconstituted it in the text as she did in her own practices of identification. Grewal calls attention to the fact that Mukherjee, among other authors, is able to participate in the late-twentieth-century cosmopolitanism mainly due to British colonial policies implemented in the nineteenth-century India: she is Bengali, part of the English-educated middle class, for whom it was much easier to move into the West than to those in India who did not receive this education. Concerning it, Mukherjee has said about her education in India: "Though India was a sovereign nation when I first encountered Keats, my convent-school campus remained a very 'English' spot" (CHEN; GOUDIE, 1997, n/p). Though not middle-class, *Jasmine* apparently shares the basis of its author's education: as I have quoted before, she thinks "To want English [...] was to want the world" (MUKHERJEE, 1989, p. 68). In *Jasmine*'s case, while still in India, this can be related to having other options outside marriage: her mother and her teacher, Masterji, try to convince her father to let her keep studying, and *Jasmine* is able to use her education as an excuse to refuse a husband. However, it is also English that links her to marriage, to Prakash: it is because of her ways and of speaking the language that she marries him even without a dowry. It is also important to point out that she already had, while still *Jyoti*, the possibility of choice: being an educated girl gave her the option of choosing her husband. Again, it is possible to see her inside a cosmopolitan formation, which she got by studying English, despite being poor.

To Grewal (2005), the link between feminism and modernity – the origin of modern feminism in India – is central to the binary tradition/modernity, which is the main trope for the production of the "free modern woman." Similarly to Narayan, Grewal sees feminist narratives of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as concerning the saving of nonwhite women – seen as victims – by white women and men. Still to Grewal, in relation to their non-Western "traditional" sisters, white women constituted themselves as modern and free liberal subjects, who would embody what she calls "global feminists" in the late twentieth century. Mukherjee was one of the first writers of South-Asian descent to gain wider audience in North America, and the reason for her success, in accordance with Grewal (2005, p. 62) "was that she was able to articulate the trope of the Asian woman within the context of a liberal idea of America." Kumar (2013, p. 23) makes a similar point: "Mukherjee has made up a formula which apparently works – Indian characters in search of American citizenship retain sufficient Indianness to be exotic but float gleefully into American materialism." Grewal defends that it is particular to narratives produced in the United States to have the movement from "tradition" to "modernity" within the discourse of "choice," equated with "freedom": "The particular 'freedom' of 'America' thus became the ability to have the

'choices' denied to those in 'traditional' societies and 'cultures'" (GREWAL, 2005, p. 65). Still to Grewal (2005, p. 66), *Jasmine's* "narrative frame [...] remains the journey from oppression and misery and conflict (religious, for the most part) in India to a closure of 'hope' as the protagonist becomes an American in the United States." Here, I assume some counterpoints are important, due to *Jasmine's* complexity. The novel does end with a prospect of "hope" in her new country, but it is there that Jasmine experiences the most traumatizing moment of the novel: being raped by Half-Face and later killing him. Furthermore, Bud, a small-town American banker, is almost killed because of his profession; Jasmine and Du watch on a television program the conditions of work that Mexicans have in the United States, which are followed by interviews that show racist and very narrow-minded American opinions about Mexican immigrants. Moreover, the American Bud is in opposition to Du and Jasmine's sensibility; she asks herself: "I wonder if Bud sees the America I do" (MUKHERJEE, 2005, p. 109). Therefore, I think it is important to give *Jasmine* its credit for acknowledging that there is not hope for everyone in the United States.

According to Grewal (2005), in *Jasmine*, Punjabi women are shown as oppressed by husbands and culture, except for Jasmine, who felt American from the beginning: America thus becomes the place for her to develop her individuality, based on desires and "choices." "In articulating the dominant discourse of American consumer culture as one that creates individuality and provides choices," Grewal (2005, p. 67) continues, "*Jasmine* suggests that freedom as a form of empowerment comes from participating in the dominant power structure of the nation-state." I must agree with Grewal regarding the general frame of the novel, especially concerning consumer culture: when Jasmine is living in New York, she gets so addicted to buying that Taylor has to help her return the things she has acquired. Nevertheless, one has to admit that there are also other ways of empowerment in *Jasmine*, such as the killings of the mad dog and of Half-Face, the latter being far from belonging to the dominant power structure of the United States. Grewal sees the novel as opposing Punjabi violence to America safety, where "ordinary" life is possible: Jasmine migrates from the third world perceived as a combat zone to the peace of life in America, whose liberal discourse of migration is shown as providing freedom. This is true if we have in mind the reasons that maintain Jasmine in Baden, since living with Bud appears to be a choice taken by her, as a luxury she is able to give herself: "Dullness is a kind of luxury" (MUKHERJEE, 1989, p. 6). However, her new country is also a violent place: there is the violence inflicted on Bud as well as fear of a bombing attack; though Mukherjee's representation of a Sikh, Sukhwinder, as a terrorist is questionable, it anticipates violent events such as 9/11. In accordance with Grewal (2005, p. 69), though Mukherjee "argued for an America that accepted all kinds of migrants, she argued that the terms of acceptance were participation in the dominant culture of the American nation." She sees *Jasmine* as endorsing "American nationalism as a neoliberal political vision of democracy in which ethnic identities are produced and racism overcome through choice and individual will and acts" (GREWAL, 2005, p. 69). Still to Grewal, Mukherjee's view on United States migrants as able to change identities in opposition to India, where identities remain frozen, is present in *Jasmine*, which reinforces India as part of the binary tradition/modernity, when comparing its immutability to the United States' speed. Yet, it is not true that *Jasmine* shows identities as frozen in India; though it happens after a man's westernized concepts (after American influence), it is in India that Jyoti becomes Jasmine: "Later, I thought We *had* created a life. Prakash had taken

Jyoti and created Jasmine, and Jasmine would complete the mission of Prakash” (MUKHERJEE, 1989, p. 97, author’s emphasis).

Grewal (2005) shows us in what kind of feminism *Jasmine* is framed, which is certainly not a Marxist one. It is because of that that Khuê Ninh’s (2013) criticism, in spite of its problems, is valid. *Jasmine*’s feminism is a liberal one, based on choice, which produces women who believe themselves “free,” but that are actually inside a consumer culture that makes them commonalities as the products they have the choice to purchase. However, one must not forget that Mukherjee seems to evade monolithic discourses: *Jasmine* escapes from some of Grewal’s critics. Finally, though I agree with most of Grewal’s argument, I must admit that it does not give us any way out. Contrary, Narayan (1992) apparently sees a path for non-Western feminism; she seems to believe in alternatives that join East and West, and thus she provides us a few possible escapes.

4. NONCONFORMISM AND NONATTACHMENT

Concerning Jasmine’s life in the United States, Mukherjee has been questioned in an interview about the passivity of her heroines. According to scholars that the interviewer mentions, there is a romanticizing of domestication in her books; these critics would like to see more resistance to assimilation in her immigrant characters (CHEN; GOUDIE, 1997). Mukherjee denies their passivity, calling attention to violence, which is present in her heroines’ stories: “Jasmine or Hannah Easton⁴ aren’t passive women, by anyone’s measure. They quite literally cross oceans, transform their worlds, and in the process leave behind a heap of bruised hearts and bleeding bodies!” (CHEN; GOUDIE, 1997, n/p) The impression that the scholars mentioned by the interviewer had is similar to the first impact *Jasmine* had on me: its second part, with the main character settled in the United States, certainly gives this idea. But instead of passivity, violence and choice are there; what happens sometimes is that they are somehow veiled. Kumar (2013) perceives Jasmine as a nonconformist, a rebel who questions harshly the prophecies that the astrologer gives her while still a child in India.⁵ To him, her first encounter with America, her killing of Half-Face, is a kind of self-assertion: “Her decision to kill herself first, (*sic*) is a decision of a woman who lives for her deceased husband but the woman who kills Half-Face is prompted by her will to live to continue her life” (KUMAR, 2013, p. 110). She is certainly not a passive heroine when put in those terms. Nevertheless, the life Jasmine leads in Baden sometimes seems to contribute to this view of passivity, which, as I have discussed, may be linked to her living with Bud as an Indian wife. Kumar sees Jasmine’s renaming in Iowa as “Jane” as indicating a “slow but steady immersion into the mainstream American culture”:

Here we encounter a changed Jasmine – one who had murdered Half-Face for violating her chastity, now not only willingly embraces the company of an American without marriage but also is carrying his child in her womb. We are simply surprised at her act since every idea revolts at this form of an Indian widow. *But one should never forget that she is a rebel who revolts at*

⁴ Hannah Easton is the main character of Mukherjee’s *The Holder of The World* (1993).

⁵ This is the first time we witness Jyoti’s force, when she listens to her fate and answers to the astrologer: “No! [...] You’re a crazy old man. You don’t know what my future holds!” (MUKHERJEE, 1989, p. 3); she then falls: “My teeth cut into my tongue” (MUKHERJEE, 1989, p. 3) – it is almost a premonition of what would happen with Half-Face, when she puts herself in the role of goddess Kali.

every step against the path drawn for her. She is an adapter, a survivor.
(KUMAR, 2013, p. 115, emphasis added)

He calls attention to how the way she is living in Iowa is an act of rebelling against her condition of an Indian wife; he emphasizes that she is an adapter, a survivor. Therefore, what may be seen as passivity can also be a means to live; in fact, when she decides she is not happy there with Bud, she leaves him.

One of the things I consider problematic in some readings of *Jasmine* is that scholars do not want its main character to assimilate the American ways, but they want her to assimilate the American values of what it is to be a “free” American woman, which do not necessary match her values as an Indian-born woman and as a Hindu. In accordance with Kumar (2013, p. 122), though Jasmine tries to resolve her identity crisis by changing names, she is very much the same as in the beginning of the book: “The movement without cannot necessarily mean transformation within in respect of one with the inherited Indian ethos.” Even though she seems assimilated in American culture and calls herself “American,” she still has an Indian origin and is still a Hindu. Kumar refers to her relation with feminism regarding her “Indianness”:

Mukherjee started her creative work at a time when the Feminist movement was at its peak in the West and she was expected to articulate gender conflicts in an unequivocal way. [...] it can be observed that an ingrained Indianness weights very highly on Mukherjee’s psyche and she avoids grappling with this controversial issue. (KUMAR, 2013, pp. 148-149)

Though a cosmopolitan, and thus able to assimilate some Western values more easily than Indian people that were not educated in English, Mukherjee sometimes shows herself very Indian when it comes to feminism. Each Eastern finds her way when dealing with influence from the West; these are Mukherjee’s and Jasmine’s paths. As the author has said, *Jasmine* must be taken as a representative of the story of one Indian immigrant and not all of them, with her specific choices to let go or to maintain; she changes in some ways, but in others she is still the same. The fact that she is “suspended between worlds” may be interesting here as well; when she first comes to Taylor and Wylie’s, she reflects upon her differences with fellow Americans: “Truly there was no concept of shame in this society. I’d die before a Sob Sister asked me about Half-Face” (MUKHERJEE, 1989, p. 171).

As I have said before, passages of empowerment such as the killings of the mad dog and of Half-Face, though not forgotten, seem to be put behind throughout the novel; Jasmine has no intention of discussing them with anybody, except from briefly mentioning it to Du. Somehow, while first reading the novel, I expected her relation to these facts to be different. The answer to this was given by Mukherjee herself in an interview, in a question motivated by a supposed lack of scars in Jasmine from traumatic experiences such as Half-Face’s (among other examples from her other books). When asked whether her use of violence was somehow less than “real,” Mukherjee invites the interviewer to go to her kitchen and look at her image of the goddess Kali as destroyer:

The Godhead as Kali is what I worship. Most Hindu Bengalis in Calcutta do. Most Hindu Bengali families have an altar to Her in their homes. I do; in my bedroom. You can see for yourself that Kali isn’t one bit passive. She has strung Herself a garland of severed heads, and She’s hefting Her blood-stained weapons to decapitate more evil men. Kali is what Jasmine was

mythologizing herself into when she killed her rapist, Half-Face. [...] in Hinduism, all creatures *are* manifestations of the Godhead. Why doesn't Jasmine agonize more over having killed the man who brutalized her? Why is her reaction 'benign'? Her goal is the Hindu ideal of non-attachment. To allow oneself to be utterly destroyed by the violence done to her and done by her would be to fall victim to *maya*. [...] The difficult feat for the Hindu American writer is to dramatize the benignity of non-attachment without making characters appear uncaring or grimly stoic. (CHEN; GOUDIE, 1997, n/p, emphasis in the original)

Thus, nonattachment is the reason why the spirit of this empowerment scene, so powerful, seems to vanish throughout the novel; in spite of Jasmine's acquired Americanness, nonattachment is her goal. Though *Jasmine* was written to the American public, to whom Mukherjee's works are directed,⁶ one of the difficulties she has as an author to this audience is to pass the idea of nonattachment. And what is nonattachment? It can also be called "*Anasakti*":

Anasakti is an indigenous psychological construct of the East. Roughly, the English equivalent of *Anasakti* is non-attachment [...] Of all the teachings of Lord Krishna [...], one that is of special importance is his emphasis on liberation and attaining equanimity of mind as the ultimate goal of humanity and *Anasakti* or the dispassionate attitude as the key to liberation. [...] Vedic literature describes *Anasakti* as a state of mind that is continuously observing the nature of events and remains unaffected. [...] The literature suggests that practicing non-attachment has many benefits. Non-attachment produces equanimity. It has long been referred to by the Vedantists as the attitude of 'being in the world but not being of it.' In Eastern psychology, *Anasakti* is *dharma* and recognized as a process of transformation. [...] '*Anasakti*' is the key to 'authentic happiness' in the real sense of the word. Such happiness is not dependent on the animate and the inanimate in the world outside. (BANTH; TALWAR, 2010, p. 935)

Having Jasmine's goal of nonattachment in mind, it is easier to understand her supposedly passive behavior. The kind of dispassionate attitude she undertakes after killing Half-Face is a key to her liberation of the fact itself. Her goal is to observe the nature of the events but to remain unaffected by them and therefore to pursue authentic happiness. As a Hindu, she tries to be in a state of equanimity, generated by "being in the world but not being in it"; by having killed a man and not having done it. Thus, by nonattachment, Jasmine wants to put the killing behind, and in this sense she is different from Americans: "For them [Taylor's friends in New York], experience leads to knowledge, or else it is wasted. For me, experience must be forgotten, or else it will kill" (MUKHERJEE, 1989, p. 33). She does not want to be destroyed by the violence done to her and by her; she refuses to be a victim. So, for non-Hindus to understand Jasmine's way of behaving, transposing this first image of passivity, it is important to remember her Indian and Hindu ideals, since her values, even though she thinks of herself as an American, do not match completely the American values.

5. JASMINE AS A (FEMINIST) FABLE

⁶ Mukherjee has stated in an interview: "My task as an author is to make my intricate and unknown world comprehensible to mainstream American readers" (CARB, 1988-89 apud KUMAR, 2013, p. 21).

The general comprehension of *Jasmine* can change if we consider it something other than a novel. In another interview, when asked if she saw violence as necessary to a transformation of character, Mukherjee answers affirmatively, saying that “Jasmine actually encountered it [violence that physically scars], because it’s not a realistic novel. It’s meant to be a fable” (CONNELL; GREARSON; GRIMES, 1990, p. 37). In fact, there are moments in *Jasmine* in which we have hints of its nonrealistic foundations. Jasmine narrates: “Iowa was a state where miracles still happened” (MUKHERJEE, 1989, p. 197). Kumar (2013, p. 114) comments on Mukherjee’s narrative strategies, considering that life in Iowa begins by chance: “It seems that Bharati Mukherjee uses fate and chance as a ‘problem-solving-device.’ In her use of this device there is something like a ‘fairytale.’” The way fate works for Jasmine resembles this genre: the help she gets from Mother Ripplemeyer, Bud’s mother, and from him, is similar to how heroines are helped in fairy tales. This comparison is made by Jasmine herself: “Karin stayed. Du and I are different. [...] Du and I have seen death up close. [...] We’ve seen the worst and survived. Like creatures in fairy tales, we’ve shrunk and we’ve swallowed the cosmos whole” (MUKHERJEE, 1989, p. 240). Mukherjee believes the use of violence to be attenuated in fables, and thus the relation Jasmine and Du have with death is paralleled by that of fairy-tale creatures: they have seen the worst and survived; they have “swallowed the cosmos whole.” Therefore, apart from nonattachment, *Jasmine*’s fairy-tale features can also be a reason for the apparent forgetting of violence later in the narrative.

In *Feminist Fables* (1981), Suniti Namjoshi reworks mythology by retelling stories – fables, fairy tales and myths – through a feminist perspective, in a way that women do not have to make allowances while reading it. One of its fables, “Svayamvara,” tells the story of an Indian princess who was good at whistling. When it was her time to marry, her father proposes to offer half of his “kingdom and the princess in marriage to any man who could beat her at whistling” (NAMJOSHI, 1984, p. 105). Lots of suitors show up, but the princess beats them easily. She decides to set a test, proposing to the men that they acknowledge they were “beaten fairly”; all of them deny it, except for one man, who admits it. The princess thus turns to her father, points to the man and says: “If he will have me, [...] I will marry him” (NAMJOSHI, 1984, p. 105). The moral of the fable is clear, since, below it, there is a definition of its title: “Svayamvarah – the choosing of a husband by the bride herself (Sanskrit Dictionary)” (NAMJOSHI, 1984, p. 105). Though this does not apply to all stories in Namjoshi’s *Feminist Fables*, “Svayamvarah” is particularly feminist by having women’s choice as its main change when compared to original fables.⁷ Thereby, one can say it is aligned with *Jasmine*’s liberal feminism, also based on choice. If “Svayamvarah” is a feminist fable by allowing its heroine to choose a husband – and thus without necessarily questioning what comes after the marriage ceremony –, *Jasmine*, if we look at it as a fable, can be also considered a feminist one. Even while Jasmine was still Jyoti in India, she is the one who chooses Prakash as a husband, anticipating what would happen in the

⁷ “The Tale of Two Brothers” tells the story of a man “who thought he could do anything, even be a woman” (NAMJOHSI, 1984, p. 34). He acquires a baby and does the housework, ending up “worn out,” while his brother, Jack Cleverfellow, “hired a wife, and got it all done” (NAMJOSHI, 1984, p. 34). Thus, we see that *Feminist Fables* have different ways to make its stories feminist. While “Svayamvarah” is based mainly on the liberal concept of choice, “The Tale of Two Brothers” shows a materialistic criticism of being a wife; of how she is “hired” and explored.

United States: her choice to go to New York, to Iowa, and her choosing of Bud and later of Taylor.

Thinking of *Jasmine* as a fable allows us to see it as using fate and chance as “problem-solving-devices,” as Kumar states; we tend to be more permissive when it comes to fables or fairy tales than with supposedly realistic novels. If one element is broken in comparison with a conservative fable, for instance, choice, the new one can be called feminist in spite of its lack of questioning the institution of marriage itself. Of course Namjoshi’s criticism surpasses “Svayamvarah” by dealing with different problems in other stories of her book, but, inside each story, we do not ask too much: one rupture at a time seems enough. Thus, considering *Jasmine* a fable gives it a magical surrounding and shows enough ruptures to the genre, which may not necessarily be the same case when we suppose it is a novel.

6. CONCLUSION

Jasmine is between worlds: it presents a liberal feminist discourse based on choice while it maintains Indian and Hindu values. Its main character says she became an American, but she can still be an Indian wife. Though she kills her rapist in what a Western feminist might see as an empowerment scene, as a Hindu her goal is nonattachment, or *Anasakti*, which preaches that she observes the nature of events while remaining unaffected by them. Thus, Jasmine changes in America, but she still has an Indian ethos: this might be the reason why the novel is called “Jasmine,” after her Indian husband, even though Taylor, the man she supposedly stays with at the end, calls her “Jase.”

Mukherjee denies all kinds of monolithic discourses, and *Jasmine*, for sure, provides more than one discourse. As an Eastern woman that has gone West, Mukherjee has her own way of dealing with values from both worlds, and so does Jasmine. It would be too much to ask of the novel to criticize beyond what it already does, having in mind Western concepts; we have to study Jasmine’s particular case of immigration from East to West. Besides, wanting an Eastern woman to have Western conceptions of empowerment does not seem necessarily fair; though she is immersed in American culture, she keeps some of her Eastern values – which sometimes match the ones Western feminists would want her to lose. Moreover, being a cosmopolitan, Jasmine has advantages since the beginning: because of her education in English and of late capitalism bringing consumer culture discourse to other areas of the world, her becoming American in the United States is easier, as well as her acceptance of the liberal discourses she is connected with there. Thus, a Marxist reading may correctly highlight problems in *Jasmine*, but they are problems the novel does not necessarily compromise to discuss.

Finally, by thinking of *Jasmine* as a fable, the roles of fate and chance appear to be a bit magical; we no longer ask for such realistic answers when facing a fable or a fairy tale. Still, in a nonconservative fable, one change might be enough for us to accept it as creating rupture and even to speculate it is, in this case, a feminist representative of the genre. In this way, if we have in mind the choices Jasmine has at the end, even though they are more a discourse than reality since she is an illegal immigrant, the story seems to create the rupture it needs to be considered a feminist fable.

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