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Cocooning a Cosmos: Mapping Transcultural Becoming in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

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Abstract: This study offers a transcultural interpretation of Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* using Wolfgang Welsch's notion of transculturality. Welsch views culture as fluid, interconnected, and hybrid, going beyond multicultural and intercultural perspectives. Through the protagonist's numerous identity changes—Jyoti, Jasmine, Jazzy, Jase, and Jane—caused by migration, trauma, and adaptation, *Jasmine* serves as an excellent example of this framework. The story presents identity as a dynamic process of integration across cultural boundaries rather than assimilation or cultural loss. Welsch's transcultural subject—complex, self-reinventing, and influenced by a variety of cultural experiences—is personified by Jasmine. According to this perspective, Jasmine embodies a post-national, global identity paradigm that defies essentialism and captures the state of cultural hybridity in the modern world.

Keywords: Transculturality, Cultural Hybridity, Diaspora, Migration, Identity transformation

Introduction

Wolfgang Welsch provides a thorough analysis of dominant cultural paradigms in "Transculturality – The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today" and presents transculturality as a more suitable and essential framework for comprehending culture in the modern world. The essay, published in Spaces of Culture: City, Nation, World (1999), challenges traditional, multicultural, and intercultural ideas of culture and makes the case for a paradigm change that recognizes cultural interpenetration, hybridity, and interconnection on a global scale.

Welsch begins by questioning the traditional Herderian model of culture described by philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder, which emphasizes "social homogenization," "ethnic consolidation," and "intercultural delimitation." This model views culture as a self-contained, homogeneous entity rooted in a

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specific "folk" and territory. Welsch emphasizes its persistent ideological hold, notwithstanding its empirical shortcomings, as "modern societies are differentiated within themselves to such a high degree that uniformity is no longer constitutive to, or achievable for them" (Welsch 195). He contends that, due to the internal complexity of modern cultures, this concept is neither descriptively valid nor normatively justifiable, as it fosters exclusion and, ultimately, what he refers to as "a sort of cultural racism." He uses Herder's own words to demonstrate the inherent exclusionism: "beyond this, kind nature has armed me with insensibility, coldness and blindness; it can even become contempt and disgust" (Herder quoted in Welsch 195). This argument culminates in the claim that such models are politically harmful, fuelling nationalism and violence.

Although intercultural and multicultural frameworks attempt to alleviate the rigidity of the classical paradigm, Welsch claims that they are unsatisfactory since they maintain the basic concept of cultures as separate entities. "The deficiency in this conception originates in that it drags along with it unchanged the premiss of the traditional conception of culture" (Welsch 196). Interculturalism, despite its intention to promote dialogue, fails because it assumes cultures are separate entities that must "clash" (Herder 1967a: 46, quoted in Welsch). Multiculturalism, despite appearing more open, maintains internal barriers and increases the possibility of cultural fundamentalism or ghettoization. "Its all-too-traditional understanding of cultures threatens to engender regressive tendencies which … lead to ghettoization or cultural fundamentalism" (Welsch 196). Welsch presents transculturality as a conceptual alternative that more accurately reflects the current situation of cultures. Cultures are becoming more hybrid, interconnected, and dynamic at both the macro (societal) and micro (individual) levels. "Cultural conditions today are largely characterised by mixes and permeations" (Welsch 196). He outlines three main features: Inner Differentiation emphasises that modern societies are internally numerous, with various lifestyles and identities. External Networking focuses on migration, economic interdependence, and media contributions to the globalisation of cultures. Hybridisation points out that cultural borders have grown porous; what was formerly considered 'foreign' is now accessible and absorbed into the local. This approach creates new types of diversity, not through discrete cultural spheres but through distinct transcultural networks. "Today, in a culture's internal relations among its different ways of life, there exists as much foreignness as in its external relations with other cultures" (Welsch 198). Individually, Welsch emphasises that cultural identity is no longer defined by nationality or ethnicity.

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Individuals today embody "multiple attachments and identities" (Bell 243), becoming cultural hybrids. Cultural identity becomes a matter of integration and construction rather than inheritance.

Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* has provoked a range of critical inquiries that remain contentious within diasporic and postcolonial discourse. Questions concerning the plausibility of Jasmine's trajectory, the feasibility of complete assimilation for immigrants—particularly those from the Global South—and the role of romantic liaisons with white American men in facilitating such assimilation continue to animate scholarly debate. Published in 1989, *Jasmine* marks a significant departure from the thematic concerns of Mukherjee's earlier work, particularly the short story *Darkness* (1985), which chronicles the traumatic experiences of racial prejudice encountered during her tenure in Canada as an expatriate.

It is noted in "Darkness", that in her earlier fiction, Mukherjee adopted what she herself described as "a mordant and self-protective irony in describing … character's pain," as irony allows "both detachment from and superiority over those well-bred postcolonials … adrift in the new world, wondering if they would ever belong" (Mukherjee 2). This formulation reveals that an expatriate identity rooted in nostalgia and bound by the souvenirs of a lost homeland will never achieve a genuine sense of belonging. *Jasmine* signifies a paradigmatic shift in Mukherjee's ideological orientation, moving from a melancholic expatriate identity to one that embraces "Indianness" not as a fragile essence in need of preservation but as "a set of fluid identities to be celebrated" (Mukherjee, *Darkness* 3). This novel inaugurates Mukherjee's preoccupation with the immigrant's "will to bond … to a new community, against the ever- present fear of failure and betrayal" (Mukherjee, *Darkness* 3). This change departs from static, nostalgia-bound concepts of belonging and is consistent with Wolfgang Welsch's concept of transculturality, which holds that cultural identity is not fixed but rather created via continuous interaction and hybridity.

According to Welsch, transculturality is not a novel concept. He uses Carl Zuckmayer's vivid genealogy of European intermixing to demonstrate historical transculturation. Similarly, European art and intellectual history are rich with cross-cultural influences. Philosophically, Welsch agrees with Wittgenstein, who characterised culture pragmatically as common practices, emphasising interaction rather than hermeneutics. "Understanding may be helpful, but it never is sufficient alone; it has to enhance progress in interaction." Welsch also references Nietzsche, who predicted the breakdown of national identities and the

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emergence of a "supranational and nomadic" individual. Nietzsche recognised the conflicts and possibilities of mixed identities: "A mixed race … has to originate out of all of them, as the result of continual crossbreeding" (Nietzsche quoted in Welsch 228).

From Illicit Migration to Transcultural Self-Fashioning

A precursor to the novel can be found in Mukherjee's short story "Jasmine" from *The Middleman and Other Stories*, where the titular character negotiates an illicit passage from Trinidad to Michigan by arranging a "smooth bargain-priced emigration" (*Middleman* 133). Upon arrival, Jasmine initially labors under exploitative conditions for the Daboos family at the Plantations Motel. Recognizing her subjugation, she transitions into a more privileged role as an au pair in the household of Bill, a molecular biology professor, and his wife Lara, a performance artist. In this new environment, Jasmine enjoys access to a private room, a television, equitable wages, and prospects for further education. It is through her sexual

relationship with Bill, initiated during Lara's absence, that Jasmine asserts agency and gains the power to rush "wildly into the future" (Mukherjee, *Middleman* 138). In this capacity,

Jasmine becomes emblematic of "all immigrant women who are freewheeling spirits ready to shape their own destiny" (Crane 1). Welsch asserts that cultural identity is an ongoing process of incorporation and synthesis rather than inheritance. This proactive transformation bolsters his argument, especially for transcultural individuals who refuse to stay trapped inside hereditary bounds.

Breaking Cultural Determinism and the Emergence of Transcultural Agency

Welsch discusses the false dichotomy of globalisation and particularisation. The globalisation thesis emphasises homogenisation, whereas the particular reaction values ethnic and cultural specificity, often in a backward manner. Welsch argues that transculturality mediates both, as "transcultural identities comprehend a cosmopolitan side, but also a side of local affiliation" (Hannerz 205). He contends that transcultural networks promote diversity not by isolating difference but by interweaving it.

The novel's epigraph, "The new geometry mirrors a universe that is rough, not rounded, scabrous, not smooth. It is geometry of the pitted, pocked and broken up, the twisted and intertwined" (Mukherjee, *Jasmine* 1), aptly forecasts the novel's narrative arc, wherein the immigrant's fate is not linear or serene but chaotic and

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fractured. Jasmine undergoes distinct transformations, each of which marks a moment of radical redefinition. Her journey commences in Hasnapur, a small village in Punjab, where Jyoti, a precocious seven-year-old, challenges the deterministic pronouncement of an astrologer who predicts her widowhood and exile. Her defiance, referring to the injury inflicted on her head as a "third eye," signals a nascent but unyielding belief in personal agency. From an early age, Jyoti repudiates superstitions and rituals that curtail female autonomy. Her act of killing a mad dog becomes emblematic of her innate resistance to forces that threaten her liberty.

The formative influence of her mother and the local schoolmaster, Masterji, instils in Jyoti the desire for an education, a luxury seldom extended to girls in her community. Masterji introduces her to English and encourages her "to want the world" (68), describing her as "a lotus blooming in cow dung" (16). Her grandmother's condemnation, "This girl is mad… her mother is mad, the whole country is mad. Kali Yuga has already come" (52), highlights the social constraints she must transcend. Welsch's criticism of "cultural essentialism" is particularly pertinent in this context, since Jyoti engages in a dynamic reconstruction of identity rather than accepting the Herderian idea of a fixed cultural destiny.

Transcultural Transformations of the Self

According to Welsch, this renaming turns into a transcultural act, a literal and symbolic 'hybridisation' that is crucial to the development of modern identities. Jyoti's transformation intensifies following the death of her father and the ensuing economic hardship. It is through a chance encounter with Prakash, a modern and progressive young man from Amritsar, that she gains access to urban life and new gender dynamic. Their civil marriage liberates her from traditional expectations, prompting a shift from Jyoti, meaning light, to Jasmine, named after the fragrant flower, "small, sweet and heady," who will "quicken the world with your perfume" (77). Prakash enables Jasmine to break societal norms, such as calling her husband by name and envisioning a shared future in Florida. This future is cut short by the eruption of sectarian violence in Punjab, where Prakash is killed in a terrorist bombing orchestrated by Sukhwinder Singh. Jasmine, now a widow, is subjected to dehumanizing rituals: her ornaments are removed, her head shaved, and she is forced into the white attire – all designed to symbolically efface her subjectivity. Refusing to submit, she resolves to honour Prakash's dream by migrating to the United States. Her passage, however is fraught with trauma. Raped by Half- Face, the captain of the boat Gulf Shuttle, Jasmine exacts vengeance by killing him with a knife given to her by another

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illegal immigrant. Rejecting the Hindu custom of sati, she instead burns her white sari and Prakash's suit in a trash can—an act that symbolically incinerates the shackles of her past. By renouncing widowhood and the ideal of ceremonial purity after Prakash's death, Jasmine liberates herself from the patriarchal conventions that seek to confine her. Her defiance exemplifies Welsch's concept of "inner differentiation," which asserts that modern societies are no longer internally homogeneous but marked by multiplicity and transformation.

Her subsequent rebirths take place across various American landscapes. In Florida, she is sheltered by Lillian Gordon, a 70-year-old Quaker who mentors her in the art of American social codes. Under Lillian's tutelage, she becomes "Jazzy". Her next transformation occurs in Flushing, New York, where she reunites with Professor Vadhera, only to discover the illusion of immigrant success; he is no longer a professor but a sorter of imported human hair. With the help of Kate Feldstein, Jasmine becomes an au pair for Taylor, a professor at Columbia University, and his wife, Wylie. Immersed in this cosmopolitan environment, she transforms into "Jase," adopting the polish, confidence, and intellect characteristic of an urbane elite. Her romantic relationship with Taylor—intensified by Wylie's infidelity—ushers in yet another stage of self-reinvention and emotional awakening.

Fearing recognition by her past (upon spotting Sukhwinder), Jasmine flees to Iowa, where she encounters her fourth incarnation, "Jane Ripplemeyer". Here she cohabits with Bud Ripplemeyer, a banker estranged from his wife Karin. As Jane, Jasmine assumes the role of a bank teller and a nurturing presence within Bud's multi-ethnic household, which includes Du, a Vietnamese refugee adopted by Bud as an act of belated moral atonement. Yet this semblance of stability is shattered when Bud is left paraplegic after a shooting incident. The unexpected return of Taylor and his daughter, Duff, rekindles Jasmine's restless yearning for renewal. Once again, she chooses motion over stagnation, "scrambling ahead of Taylor, greedy with wants and reckless from hope" (Mukherjee 41), leaving Bud in Karin's care—even as she carries his child.

For Mukherjee, immigration is crucible for continual self-reinvention. To assimilate into American society, the immigrant must repeatedly shed past identities and attachments. This contrasts starkly with the expatriate, who seeks solace in nostalgic reconstructions of a homeland. Jasmine's evolution thus becomes paradigmatic of this transformative journey. She articulates the collective condition of immigrants:

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> "But we are refugees and mercenaries and guestworkers; you see us sleeping in airport lounges; you watch us unwrapping the last of our native foods, unrolling our prayer rugs, reading our holy books, taking out for the hundredth time an aerogramme promising a job or space to sleep, a newspaper in our language, a photo of happier times, a passport, a visa, laissez-passer. We are the outcasts and deportees, strange pilgrims visiting outlandish shrines". (Mukherjee 100-101)

Welsch's thesis that identity is a 'network like structure' produced by cultural interaction and adaptation rather than an essence is reflected in each transition. Jasmine has evolved through transcultural discussion rather than assimilation. Together with Bud, Du and other people, she creates a new kind of family that combines moral, generational and ethnic elements. This supports Welsch's contention that identity is co-constructed in "distinct networks", not "sealed communities" that are created by transculturation.

Typologies of the Immigrant: Refugee, Hyphenated, Transcultural

This process of transformation is often metaphorized as reincarnation, a concept rooted in Hindu philosophy, wherein the soul is reborn multiple times based on accumulated Karma. Virginia D. Lively categorizes three types of immigrants in *Jasmine:*

1. The category of refugee, as delineated in the novel encompasses characters such as Jasmine's father displaced during the Partition and forced to flee Lahore; and Professor Vadhera and his wife Nirmala, who remain emotionally tethered to their homeland. Jasmine recalls Lahore as both "magic" and "chaos", a place where her family had once enjoyed social and economic stability: "a big stucco house with porticoes and gardens. They had owned farmlands, shops…" (Mukherjee 41). This lost world endures as a nostalgic locus within the family's collective memory. Jasmine's father clings to the remnants of this bygone identity through performative acts— maintaining a facade of dignity by dressing with propriety despite their poverty—yet remains passive, lying all day on the charpoy beneath the jasmine tree instead of engaging in any form of productive labour. Similarly, the Vadheras embody a mode of diasporic stasis. Residing in a building shared with thirty-two other Indian families, surrounded by ethnic stores, Punjabi-language newspapers, and Bollywood films, they stimulate the cultural environment of their homeland within an American urban enclave. Their domestic dynamics reflect traditional Indian patriarchal values: the Professor embodies "silence, order, and authority,"

while his wife, Nirmala, represents "submission, beauty, and innocence" (Mukherjee 151).This form of cultural ghettoization reflects a reluctance to engage with the host society and signifies an expatriate sensibility rooted in preservation rather than transformation, a sensibility that the author herself critiques through Jasmine's own trajectory. According to Welsch, this model resembles a multicultural view that maintains internal barriers and risks cultural ghettoization.

2. The novel also presents the figure of the hyphenated immigrant through the character of Du, a Vietnamese refugee who skilfully navigates the demands of American life while balancing integration with cultural retention. Jasmine expresses a mixture of surprise and admiration at Du's ability to straddle both worlds, "I am amazed and a little proud that Du had made a life for himself among the Vietnamese in Baden and I hadn't had a clue. Aside from my Dr. Jaswani and from Dr. Patel in Infertility, I haven't spoken to an Indian since my months in Flushing. My transformation has been genetic: Du's was hyphenated" (Mukherjee 222). This supports Welsch's emphasis on "external networking" where individuals navigate multiple cultural systems in parallel.
3. Virginia D. Lively identifies Jasmine as a "chameleon" immigrant, a figure who repeatedly reinvents herself to adapt to changing social and cultural contexts. Yet, despite her many transformations, Jasmine's Indianness continues to exert a gravitational pull on those around her. While she discards certain cultural residues to embrace the future, her rejection is selective. Jasmine resists the oppressive dimensions of Indian patriarchy that constrict women's autonomy, just as she detests the commodification and moral decay she encounters in certain facets of American life. She does not denigrate Indian culture entirely, instead she retains core values such as familial commitment and emotional responsibility.

In Taylor's household, when the family begins to unravel, it is Jasmine who restores balance by cultivating a nurturing and harmonious environment. Likewise, in Baden, she embraces her role as Bud's caregiver with steadfast warmth and devotion. In this way she becomes a cultural interlocutor, a nodal point at which Indian and American sensibilities converge. Her transformation is not one of abandonment but inclusion. Jasmine articulates "for every Jasmine, the reliable caregiver, there is a Jase, the profligate adventurer" (Mukherjee 176-77). This resonates with Welsch's view that transcultural identities contain contradictions and tensions,

but also immense generative capacity. She not only traverses geographical borders but undergoes a profound metaphysical shift from expatriation to immigration, from external journey to internal awakening. As Sumita Roy insightfully observes, "out of the journey that she undertakes to America to fulfil her mission emerges her inward quest, a process of unfolding of the self" (Roy 205). Welsch's transcultural subject is not passively moulded by culture but actively constructs identity—forming not mere halves, but a new whole, a synthesis that creates something entirely original.

Conclusion

Critics have also read *Jasmine* as a definitive postcolonial description. As Boire observes, the novel "tells Euro-American centricity back into itself by reversing […] readerly expectation, by including all that is usually excluded, by bringing inside what is usually left outside" (Boire 160). Mukherjee deliberately alludes to canonical British texts such as *Great Expectations* and *Jane Eyre,* only to subvert them. Bud Ripplemeyer echoes the crippled Rochester and Taylor mirrors St. John Rivers. Yet Jasmine chooses Taylor, thereby rejecting imperial narratives of domesticity and duty. Her choice affirms Welsch's ideal of a cosmopolitan subject who refuses to be contained within national or civilizational borders. As Faymonville argues, "The West liberates her inner self so that a chaotic unconscious can be calmed, consequently, she is able to find a new morality that enables her to leave behind those things that limit her personal freedom. This newfound freedom also requires her to relinquish her ethnic roots and cast her lot with other seekers and wanderers. In the end, Jasmine accepts the irrational as human and tries to integrate reality and fantasy" (Faymonville 53-54). Ultimately, Jasmine emerges not as a national subject but as a global one as she "cocoons a cosmos" (Mukherjee 240). "Differences no longer come about through a juxtaposition of clearly delineated cultures … but result between transcultural networks, which have some things in common while differing in others" (Welsch 203). Thus, transculturality provides a method for preserving cultural identity without essentializing or isolating it. Welsch comes to the conclusion that cultural conceptions are active, meaning that cultural reality is shaped by thoughts about culture. Promoting separatist or monocultural models is unethical in addition to being descriptively incorrect. On the other hand, transculturality provides a forward-looking framework that encourages coexistence, complexity and integration. "The concept of transculturality sketches a different picture if the relation between cultures. Not one of isolation and of conflict, but one of

entanglement, intermixing and commonness" (ibid. 205). Welsch makes a strong case for rethinking cultural theory and practice in light of the world's increasing globalisation and plurality. Rejecting cultural essentialism and embracing hybridity makes transculturality a normative project as well as an analytical tool that promotes understanding between two people, identity transformation and long-term cohabitation. "Only the ability to transculturally cross over will guarantee us identity and competence in the long run" (Welsch 199). In conclusion, transculturality is an encouragement to reframe culture as an open, dialogical and changing process both within civilisations and within individuals rather than a submission to cultural relativism or global homogeneity.

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