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Realism in Mukherjee's *Jasmine* and Divakaruni's *The Mistress Of Spices*: Two Renderings of Contemporary Asian American Immigrant Experience

The two novels chosen for analysis in this paper, *Jasmine* by Bharati Mukherjee and *The Mistress of Spices* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, are narratives of South Asian American immigrant experience and they both defy the rules of literary realism, albeit in a different manner. *The Mistress of Spices* has been said to conform to the convention of magical realism whereas *Jasmine*, according to Mukherjee herself, is not realistic but is rather "meant to be a fable" (Fakrul 1996: 117). The latter novel has been attacked by some critics for misrepresenting the problems induced by immigration and has generated a discussion about the relationship between how reality is perceived by an average person and how it is construed in a work of literature. This paper is intended to compare the two novels in terms of their realism, and to examine in the light of the above mentioned discussion the artistic purposes which the departures from the conventionally understood realism serve in both authors' designs.

Mukherjee's *Jasmine* relates in a series of flashbacks the eponymous heroine's search for identity. Successive stages of that

process are, conventionally enough, presented through her movement in space and acquisition of new names, which, significantly, she is given by others rather than chooses herself. When she is born in Hasnapur, India, as the fifth daughter in a family impoverished due to the partition of Punjab, her grandmother names her Jyoti, Light. In this first of her “incarnations” (for this is the way in which Jasmine thinks of her identities) she is expected to comply with the rules of the Indian society that offers women little schooling and expects them to become dutiful wives and caring mothers as soon as they turn ten. Unlike her sisters, “slow, happy girls,” Jyoti is adamant about staying at school and rebels against the limitations imposed on women (Mukherjee 1989: 2). She defies for instance the village astrologer who foretells her widowhood and exile, and the swim she subsequently takes in a nearby river is a demonstration of her independence harking back to Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*.

In her next “incarnation,” the protagonist is given the name of Jasmine by her husband, Prakash, the groom she has selected herself, which bespeaks of her growing independence and defiance of the Indian tradition of arranged marriages. Later, when she is an adult living in the States, Jasmine comes to think of her husband’s role as that of Professor Higgins in *Pygmalion*: he tries to transform a village girl into a modern woman. Prakash “wanted to break down the Jyoti I’d been in Hasnapur and make me a new kind of city woman. To break off the past, he gave me a new name: Jasmine” (Mukherjee 1989: 70). This period, however, ends when Prakash is killed by a bomb planted by Sikh terrorists and 17-year-old Jasmine, unwilling to accept the joyless life of an Indian widow, resolves to commit *sati* and thus to follow in the footsteps of many women in similar circumstances before her. For centuries, Indian widows used to be blamed for their husbands’ deaths and forced to immolate themselves on their funeral pyres (Daly 1978: 115). Jasmine insists on performing the ritual at the American university campus that her husband has been accepted to study at. She plans to burn Prakash’s suit and herself and thus, in a bizarre way, to fulfill their dreams of emigrating to the United States.

Jasmine's illegal immigration to America gives rise to a succession of further identities. For a brief period she becomes the Hindu goddess of destruction, Kali, when she murders her rapist, "a half-faced monster" (Mukherjee 1989: 114). This short-lived incarnation explains why Jasmine/Kali forsakes her intention of committing *sati*. According to *Mitologia indyjska (Hindu Mythology)* Kali "in the shape of death kills and absorbs her own offspring so that she may give birth again" (Jakimowicz-Shah, Jakimowicz 1982: 288, translation mine). Having become Kali, Jasmine can give up her plan of staging the *sati* ritual and can instead "give birth to" a number of her new identities. First, she becomes Jazzy, named so by Lillian Gordon, a white woman who helps her by teaching her how to behave like an American and sends her to New York. There Jazzy turns into Jase, a baby-sitter for the daughter of Manhattan professionals, to eventually become Jane in Iowa, an adoptive mother of a Vietnamese teenager and a common law wife of a middle-aged crippled banker. The parallel between the goddess and the heroine, who is continuously assuming new identities, is communicated also on the visual level. Kali is usually portrayed as having the third eye in the middle of her forehead. Mukherjee's protagonist repeatedly refers to the star-shaped scar she has on her forehead - a result of the fight with the astrologer - as her "third eye" that enables her to "peer ... out into invisible worlds" (Mukherjee 1989: 2).

Critical reception of *Jasmine* has been rather equivocal: some reviewers, including those representing quality papers such as *The New York Times* or *The Los Angeles Times*, applauded the novel as Mukherjee's best and most mature work to date, whereas others complained about the book's unrealistic and stereotypical representation of India and Indian-ness. Some even accused the author of a kind of a racial betrayal. For instance, Inderpal Grewal claims that Mukherjee's novel fails to create "affiliations among ... those who are not in privileged positions ... [I]t also prevents any coalitions on the basis of ... immigration to America," and goes on to say that "this text does not participate in any formation of Asian American communities struggling against racism, sexism and stereotypes of Asians as

backward and barbaric” (Grewal 1993: 231). Instead Grewal perceives Mukherjee’s heroine as a Westernized feminist acquiring her independence at the expense of other people of color, especially women.

Although it is undoubtedly true that *Jasmine* is a story of an *individual* seeking empowerment and voice, her private crusade does not necessarily exclude “coalitions,” to use Grewal’s term, based on sex or race. Admittedly, Jasmine distances herself from the powerless women of Punjab or the Vadheras with whom she stays in New York, yet she does so not only because she cannot understand those people’s passivity, but also because they fail to comprehend her desires. The Vadheras, for example, have circumscribed their world to the “Little Punjab” of the New York district of Flushing: they socialize only with other Indian families, watch Bollywood B-movies every night and expect of Jasmine, who is barely 19 at the time, to follow the traditional pattern of an Indian widow’s life. Jasmine, who has once managed to escape a similar trap through her emigration to the United States, expresses her disappointment with the kind of life they live, employing the metaphor of a ghetto wall:

Flushing was a neighborhood in Jullundhar [an Indian town where she lived with Prakash]. I was spiraling into depression behind the fortress of Punjabiness. . . . In Flushing I felt immured. An imaginary brick wall topped with barbed wire cut me off from the past and kept me from breaking into the future. I was a prisoner doing unreal time (Mukherjee 1989: 131-132).

On the other hand, however, she feels attached to, and forms coalitions with, people who share her discontent with powerlessness. While still in India, even though she feels she has little in common with her sisters, she admires the terrifying strength of her mother, who first tried to strangle her at birth to save her from “the pain of a dowryless bride” only to later fight with her husband against marrying Jyoti off at the age of 11 to an older widower, and for keeping her in school (Mukherjee 1989: 35). Later on, Jasmine/Jazzy learns to form cross-racial relationships based on gender with the female immigrants from Guatemala with whom she gets acquainted during her stay with Lillian Gordon in Florida. Out of necessity, the contact is limited to

mere cooking together as the Kanjobal women cannot speak English. Moreover, as an adoptive mother of Du, Jasmine/Jane proves that she can relate to another Asian immigrant who shares with her a similar history of oppression and violence. She sympathizes with Du as he has to learn the history of America written from the white man's perspective. She is also shocked to find out that his white history teacher tried speaking Vietnamese to him and imagines confronting the teacher: "How *dare* you? What must he have thought? His history teacher in Baden, Iowa, just happens to know a little street Vietnamese? Now where would he have picked it up?" (Mukherjee 1989: 25). It is therefore evident that Jasmine's relationship with Du is much more profound than her relationship with Bud, a white middle-class American. It is Jasmine's and Du's racial background and immigrant status that enables them to understand each other even though they differ considerably in their responses to Americanization; "[her] transformation has been genetic; Du's was hyphenated" (Mukherjee 1989: 198).

Patricia Chu in her book *Assimilating Asians: Gendered Strategies of Authorship in Asian America* offers a more balanced analysis of the novel than Grewal's. She shares the opinion of several other critics that the book's treatment of immigrant life and Jasmine's rapid rise in the American society is unrealistic and simplistic. She attributes these failings of the novel to Mukherjee's writing an immigrant version of a Horatio Alger myth of upward social mobility while deploying the tropes of the English domestic novel, the two of which she finds rather incompatible. Chu believes, however, that Mukherjee succeeds, whether consciously or not, in pinpointing the inconsistencies of American "from rags to riches" mythology and she contends that *Jasmine* "raises some usefully obstinate questions about the immigrant success myth it seems at first to celebrate" (Chu 2000: 136).

Granted, Mukherjee's representation of her heroine is not free from contradictions. On the one hand, from her early childhood, Jasmine resists traditional women roles, which fact about her is later pointed out by Lilian Gordon, who notes: "Jazzy, you don't strike me as a picker or a domestic" (Mukherjee 1989: 120). On the other hand, her

American identities of Jase and Jane are inextricably linked to the domestic sphere. Moreover, as a person lacking formal schooling and legal status, she is forced to resort to her *Oriental* femininity as a means of moving upwards. She insists on her independence yet it is always other people who name her and thus shape her identity (with the exception of the Kali incarnation). The name Jasmine itself, which is supposed to be a symbol of her independence, is very feminine and lacks any obvious associations with power or liberation; it merely indicates her attractiveness.

Even if Jasmine fails to be a plausible character, she nevertheless enables the reader to enter the world of immigrants that is presented in a realistic fashion. The novel, for instance, depicts the plight of those who cannot assimilate and make it in America, as in the case of Professorji Vadhera, who despite having an Indian university degree and a green card cannot find an occupation commensurate with his qualifications, and so is forced to work as a sorter and trader of human hair. Furthermore, the horrors of illegal immigration are presented through Jasmine's turbulent passage from India to America and the unexpressed sorrow of the Kanjobal Indian women from Guatemala. All these poignant images show what it means to be an immigrant of color in contemporary United States and question the myth of a model minority.

Addressing the issue of *Jasmine's* authenticity, Bharati Mukherjee observed in a 1996 interview that those postcolonial critics who dismiss Jasmine's voice as inauthentic reduce "art to sociological statement" (Chen 1997). In the same interview she clarified her own vision of literature: "[N]o fine fiction, no good literature, is anchored in verisimilitude. Fiction must be metaphor. It is not inscription of real life but it's a distillation and pitching at higher intensification of life. It's always a distortion" (Chen 1997). Indeed, one can hardly expect of a literary work the accuracy of a sociological or historical study. Instead, as some scholars would claim, "literature [should] mediate ... between the real and the imaginary" rather than depict perfectly true-to-life characters and recognizable events (Loomba 1998: 70).

Like Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni also deploys the motif of a journey in her novel *The Mistress of Spices*, but she relies on magic to transport her heroine through space, time and identities. As is the case with *Jasmine*, the story is told by the eponymous protagonist herself who, from the perspective of her most recent identity, looks back at her previous lives. When her identity changes, so do her name and (sometimes) her body. She is born “Nayan Tara, Star of the Eye,” which is an ironic name to give to an unwanted, unattractive girl child. She soon discovers she possesses the ability to foretell the future and heal all kinds of wounds (Divakaruni 1997: 8). This gift makes her a revered member of the community, and as a result, a powerful and proud woman. Even so, her existence is marked by boredom and an unspecified longing, which she refers to as “a calling thought” (Divakaruni 1997: 18). When Nayan Tara’s desire is “intercepted” by the pirates, they come to ransack the village she lives in, slaughter her relatives and kidnap her to turn her into “Bhagyavati, Bringer of Luck,” as they wish her to aid them in their wicked pursuits (Divakaruni 1997: 19). She, however, uses her superhuman powers for a different purpose: to overthrow the leader of the pirates and to take dominion over them. Yet her anguish does not disappear once the revenge has been taken. She is saved from her dreary existence by the sea snakes who tell her about a magic island, the embodiment of her unnamed yearnings. On the island, young women learn from their spiritual leader, the Old One, how to handle magical spices and prepare for their future task of delivering help to Indian people in distress all over the world. After a period of apprenticeship to the Old One, the heroine is assigned to be the Mistress of Spices in a tiny store in Oakland, California. Before her magical journey through the Shampati fire to her destination, the protagonist insists on selecting her own name. She calls herself Tilo, which sets her apart from all the other Mistresses since all of them have names that are chosen by the Old One. The name Tilo derives from the Indian word for the sesame seed and hence is to indicate her role as a “life-giver, restorer of health and hope” (Divakaruni 1997: 44). In Hindu mythology it is also the name of the most graceful dancer at god Indra’s court, whose life

foreshadows what is going to happen to the heroine. Ironically, the body that Tilo is given as she reaches California is that of an old woman.

Serving her customers in America, Tilo begins to feel the need to break the rigid rules that the Mistresses are obliged to adhere to. She violates the principle of treating all that seek her help with equal detached care when she befriends a number of Indian people and develops an intimate relationship with Raven, a Native American. She ventures outside the boundaries of her store, which is strictly forbidden as well. The ultimate transgression is perpetrated when she uses the spices for her own benefit: to acquire a flawless young body for the one night she is to spend with Raven. Although she is ready to face a severe punishment she believes will be administered by the spices, the terrible death in the Shampati fire that she expects does not materialize. Instead, the city is ravaged by an earthquake, for which she holds herself responsible. When she is rescued from under the rubble by Raven, she realizes that in the meantime she has received an ordinary, fragile body of a mortal woman. This change is reflected by her adopting a new name, Maya, which, as she explains to Raven, “spans my land and yours, India and America, for I belong to both now” (Divakaruni 1997: 337).

The novel, which up to a point reads like a fairytale, transforms into a realistic story once Tilo moves to America. Within the framework of magical realism, the novel juxtaposes the magic of the heroine’s power to read people’s minds and to use spices as antidotes for their predicaments with the reality of an immigrant life in contemporary California; or, to use the author’s own expression, it “bring[s] together the old myths of India and the harsh realities of inner-city America” (Johnson 2004: 58). The customers who visit Tilo’s grocery do so not only to purchase everyday commodities but also, if not primarily, to connect with their safe Indian past that the place signifies for them. The narrative focuses on those Indian people who face some problems negotiating their double heritage whereas the “happy” Indians occupy the margins of the text; as Tilo puts it, she pays more attention to the troubled, “the ones whom [she] need[s]

because they need [her]" (Divakaruni 1997: 82). The latter group consists of Lalita, a battered wife who cannot think of herself in other terms than Ahuja's spouse; Jagjit, a recent immigrant bullied at school because of his turban and poor English, who becomes a gang member to combat discrimination; Geeta's grandfather, a traditional Hindu who strives to understand his granddaughter, a second-generation Indian, after his indignation at her refusal to agree to an arranged marriage almost brings about the dissolution of the family; and, finally, Haroun, a young idealist determined to fulfill the American Dream who only after falling victim to physical violence realizes that personal relationships are of greater importance to him than material success. For all of these people Tilo is a traditional Indian woman healer and a link to their native culture that they still cherish.

Commenting on the way in which she achieves a degree of realism in her works, Divakaruni has observed that it is a result of "the use of very specific sensory details" (Johnson 2004: 58). In *The Mistress of Spices* the author takes pains to accurately describe herbs, focusing on their colors, smells, textures and healing properties, the knowledge she derives from her thorough research into contemporary Ayurvedic medicine and the use of spices in ancient Indian communities. Her portraits of the characters are drawn with considerable attention to detail concerning their physical appearance and clothing. Her representation of the city maelstrom also relies on concrete visual, auditory and tactile images.

Jasmine and *The Mistress of Spices* are accounts of their female protagonists' journeys from powerlessness through violence to self-definition. Notwithstanding the fact that the two novels differ in terms of their levels of realism, they are both unconventional in their presentations of the protagonists who do not easily fit into the mould of stereotypical minority characters. Both works pose questions about authenticity and agency. Even though other characters shape the heroines' identities, or at least attempt to do so by giving them names, they finally take control of the (re) naming process, realizing that whoever has voice, has power. Is it not after all them who decide whether to accept a particular identity or not? Do they not have the

right to shuttle between identities and to agree to the names given by others to mark those transitions? And do they not, as narrators, take control of their images that are conveyed to the reader? Even when the two novels seem to fall short of realism, for instance when they perpetuate stereotypes of *Oriental* beauty or end on excessively optimistic notes of the heroines' starting anew and heading towards brighter futures, are these not the autonomous choices the authors are entitled to make? Those departures from, or slips in, realism can hardly be viewed as a drawback. Tilo's remark on the issue seems an appropriate conclusion: "Sometimes I wonder if there is such a thing as reality, an objective and untouched nature of being. Or if all that we encounter has already been changed by what we had imagined it to be. If we have dreamed it into being" (Divakaruni 1997: 17).

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