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The Migrant Hero’s Incredible Speed in Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*

Bharati Mukherjee’s novel *Jasmine* opens with an epigraph by James Gleick which sets the tone of the novel’s general theme and projection of the world:

The new geometry mirrors a universe that is rough, not rounded, scabrous, not smooth. It is a geometry of the pitted, pocked, and broken up, the twisted, tangled, and intertwined. (*Jasmine*, 1)

This is the geometry of our contemporary migratory world in which ‘nothing [is] rooted anymore. Everything [is] in motion’, as Jasmine, the narrator and main character, expresses it (*Jasmine*, 152). And it is the philosophical underpinning of Mukherjee’s novel, which appears to be very much in tune with Deleuze’s nomadology. The novel evokes international immigration as a nomadic war machine against the rigid, hierarchised, classificatory organisation of space and movement in State science which has overcoded the entire surface of the Earth with ‘a whole counterhydraulic of channels and conduits’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980, 387). However, through their massive movements immigrants deterritorialise the grid-squared space of the Static, returning the surface of the globe to the turbulent diversity, multiplicity and metamorphosing irregularity of a nomadic space. National identity is ‘out of season’, says Jasmine, ‘shredded’ and replaced by ‘the wilted plumage of international vagabondage’ (*Jasmine*, 101–2). On the whole, Mukherjee’s novel seems to diagnose the ills of civilisation as those of sameness, conformism, rootedness and proceeds to prescribe a substantial dose of Deleuzian Difference and nomadism: hidden in her purse

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Jasmine keeps a ‘sandalwood Ganpati’, ‘a god with an elephant trunk to uproot anything in [her] path’ (Jasmine, 101–2, emphasis added).

Symptomatically, the mood of contemporary mass migration and disjunction, as captured throughout the novel and in the introductory quote has already imprinted itself on Jasmine's body at the beginning of the novel. Only seven years old, she is ‘fast and venturesome’ and ‘scabrous-armed’ in contrast to her soft-skinned sisters (Jasmine, 3, 4). We first meet Jasmine as she is given the forecast of her future by an uncanny village astrologer who destines her to a life of widowhood and exile. From this point Jasmine's life becomes one of continual movement and transmutation. At the age of fourteen, she elopes with a free-thinking young man, Prakash, a ‘city man’, who plans to make a career in electric engineering in America (Jasmine, 76). With Prakash Jasmine escapes the confines of tradition and gender roles in her native village, Hasnapur. Prakash changes Jasmine’s original name Jyoti to Jasmine, they move to the city of Jullundhar where they marry. But the forces of intolerance and traditionalism soon catch up with them, this time in the form of Sikh nationalists who terrorise people with their visions of cultural and religious purity. Before Jasmine and Prakash manage to emigrate to America, Prakash is killed by the Sikhs. Subsequently, Jasmine decides to make the journey on her own to perform the ritual of sati (the Indian widow’s self-immolation) at their planned destination.

She is smuggled into America onboard a trawler. The captain of the trawler, Half-Face, exploits her exposed position and rapes her in a motel. Desperate about her situation, Jasmine metamorphoses into Kali, the black Hindu goddess of destruction, stabs Half-Face to death and starts roaming around the American countryside until she is found by Lillian, a charitable woman who teaches Jasmine how to blend in in America and renames her Jazzy.

Jasmine makes her way to New York where she abandons the idea of self-sacrifice and decides instead to kill her old self by shedding what she has now discovered to be the self-effacing codes of her Indian background. She seeks out the professor who was meant to help her late husband getting started on his American career, but the Professorji has created a copy of home within a small Indian community in Flushing, an ‘artificially maintained Indianness’, as Jasmine puts it, which jeopardises her ambition to escape ‘everything Indian, everything Jyoti-like’ (Jasmine, 145).

After half a year in Flushing, she manages to get out, finds a job as the nanny of the adopted child of a successful academic couple at Columbia University, Taylor and Wylie Hayes. She falls in love with Taylor and