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*From Essentialism to Choice: American Cultural Identities and Their Literary Representations*

**Iwona Filipczak**
University of Zielona Góra

# "I CHANGED BECAUSE I WANTED TO" – IDENTITY PERFORMANCE IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S SELECTED WORKS

**Abstract:** This paper focuses on the performance of cultural identities in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989), "Orbiting" (1988) and *Desirable Daughters* (2002). The paper argues that Mukherjee for the most part dismisses the notions of contingency and is inclined to the presentation of a voluntarist model of identity. Intentionality, choice and conscious transformation are perceived here as means for identity formation. The theories of performance provide a useful framework for the discussion; they help to accentuate the "restored behavior" (Schechner) of Mukherjee's characters. Discussing identity as a performance points also to the agency of the subject, who in the process of changing is also transforming the surrounding reality.
**Keywords:** South Asian American fiction, Bharati Mukherjee, performance, agency, voluntarist model of identity

With growing globalization, immigration, and border-crossing it becomes challenging, if not impossible, to essentialize national and cultural identities. Increased mobility of people, goods, images and ideas, enables frequent cultural encounters and leads to homogenization of culture around the world. Recent theories of cultural identity question the essentialist notions of a stable, unified, universal subject, and emphasize the fluidity or multiplicity of the subject. Stuart Hall aptly presents the issue in his discussion of diaspora identities:

> Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. (222)

In this excerpt Hall asserts that cultural identity is subject to discursive practices. It is in a continual process of (re)formation in relation to changing spaces and times, it is continuously "becoming". Nevertheless, the critic recognizes another way of thinking about identity. It is an essentialist outlook, which emphasizes the similarities among a group of people, their "oneness", which provides "stable, unchanging, and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of … actual history" (Hall 223). The intricacies of identity make the concept by no means "transparent" or "unproblematic" (Hall 222).

One of the common claims made by contemporary scholars is that the transformation of identity is determined by movement and changing locations. For instance, Linda McDowell argues for spatial construction of identity. She states that identity is "fluid and transitional, based on fragments of place memories, on desires and experience" (220) and claims that any type of a journey will have a transformative power for the subject: "movement involves the remapping of cultural identities" (210). This idea assumes that cultural identity is contingent, that is, dependent on particular circumstances, while the agency of the subject is insubstantial. The subject reconstitutes itself anew through movement and/or encounters with others.

The present article discusses three texts by Bharati Mukherjee, *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters* (novels) and "Orbiting" (short story). The paper argues that in these texts, in the presentation of fluid or fragmented identities, the novelist for the most part dismisses the notions of contingency and is inclined to the presentation of a voluntarist model of identity. Mukherjee challenges thinking of cultural identity as dependent on circumstances or happening by chance and exposes the element of intentionality. Thus, even though Mukherjee's characters in the discussed texts are relocated, that is, migrate from one place to another, neither the journey, nor the encounter with the cultural Other is the sole factor that induces the transformation of the subject. It is volition that is exposed as a necessary element of change (or resistance to change) and in this way the subject's agency is asserted.

In my discussion I would like to draw attention to the element of performance of identities as it is linked to the question of intention. The characters who are immigrants in America are often depicted like performers (or are performers, e.g. Padma in *Desirable Daughters*), who consciously work on their behavior, who have to learn and rehearse how to act, who use appropriate costumes, and whose volition and intentionality to transform their behavior are indicated in the texts. While Mukherjee strives to show the making of a consciousness, she pays in fact a lot of attention to the immigrant body, which is the key element when talking about performance: the posture, gait, gestures, the costume in which it is clad, voice, or actually the language. She thus indicates the consciousness of one's transformation. Furthermore, she demonstrates that as a cultural construct ethnic identity is subject to continuous change brought about in its enactment or performance.

The concept of performance as an analyzing tool draws our attention to the question of awareness. As Marvin Carlson has pointed out, all human activity that is "carried out with a consciousness of itself" can be understood as performance since "our lives are structured according to repeated and socially sanctioned modes of behavior" (qtd. in Schechner 31). In Mukherjee's texts the consciousness that an immigrant subject displays about his or her behavior or body as markers of cultural identity is crucial. For Richard

Schechner, performances are human actions or events that have been constructed through a multi-stage process: they have been rehearsed and prepared; a performance is the second (or third or fourth and so on) presentation of a practiced act. Therefore he calls performance "twice-behaved behavior" (29) or "restored behavior" (34). The fact of repetition does not dismiss the non-essential nature of performance, for as Schechner argues "every performance is different from every other" (30), because there may be, in fact, endless variations of behavior; another thing that changes is the interaction with audience, as well as the audience itself.

The idea of learning and rehearsing how to perform American identity is conspicuous especially in *Jasmine* and "Orbiting". Theories of performance direct our attention to the result; it is the outcome of performance that is particularly interesting, what the action, behavior does, how it relates to other actions or subjects, for "Performances exist only as actions, interactions and relationships" (Schechner 30). In my analyses of the texts I will try to ponder about the results of the characters' performance. Finally, performance and performativity can be connected to the question of agency, since in the process of changing (becoming) the subject is also changing the surrounding reality (Domańska 52).

The discussion does not cover the texts chronologically but it starts with Mukherjee's most well-known text, *Jasmine* (1989). The novel brings an interesting tension between contingent and voluntarist presentation of identity. On the one hand, one observes that the protagonist changes in the course of her journey from India across the US, which is an illustration of how location and identity may be treated as inseparable. Jasmine finds herself an eager student of Americanness, adapting to the new circumstances each time she starts to live in another place. In each new location she is given a new name, which aims to signal the remapping of her cultural identity. She is born as Jyoti in Hasnapur, India; her husband Prakash Vijh calls her Jasmine and triggers in her a willingness to educate and transgress the borders of Indian tradition; she is renamed as Jazzy at Lilian Gordon's shelter in Florida when she is taught to imitate Americans; she is called Jase by the Hayes family, for whom she works as a domestic in Manhattan; finally, in Baden, Iowa, she is Jane, married to Bud Ripplemeyer, on the one hand an exotic wife of a local banker, on the other an independent and determined woman who controls her life.

Though the transformation of the main character is shown as dependent on circumstances, that is, the re-location of the subject, the novel also exposes the element of willingness and conscious effort to transform. Jasmine's agency is underlined in the pivotal moments of her life. One of the memorable moments is her wish to change the meaning of the scar she receives as a young girl. As early as a seven year old she dismisses the foretold future of exile and widowhood and the angry astrologer hits her, which is how she wounds herself in the forehead. The scar disfigures her and may

dramatically diminish her chances of getting married in the future. The mark symbolizes patriarchy, male dominance and the low status of both a woman and a child in India. Jasmine intends to give it a different meaning, and she knows she has to perform therefore differently, not like a victim but a conscious and controlling subject, so she decides: "It's not a scar… it's my third eye … Now I'm a sage" (*Jasmine* 5). The belief in the power of performance will give her strength in the future.

The novel abounds in other instances of Jasmine's agency. She arrives in America in order to commit suicide (sati) after her husband's death, and yet, although victimized by the carrier of immigrants (Half-Face), she changes her decision and decides to live. She takes revenge on her perpetrator, whom she kills, and sets off on a journey across the US in search of a better life. Jasmine's agency is underlined each time she decides to abandon the place of her next residence, which happens for a variety of reasons. For example, she leaves Professor Vadhera's house because she is not satisfied with his family's non-American lifestyle, and she leaves her husband Bud Ripplemeyer (even though she is pregnant with his child) because she refuses to accept his Orientalizing attitude toward her.

Jasmine is an incredibly active character and through her activity she demonstrates a conviction that there are things that depend on her. Due to her will to survive and strength she has been likened to the American figures of the cowboy or pioneer (Hoppe 138), while Mukherjee's immigrant characters in general are identified as "settlers, Americans" (Drake 61) in the recognition of their American spirit. And indeed, Jasmine displays the spirit of the first settlers, who arrived in America and wished to start an entirely new life, and who had to discard their past identities in order to adapt to the new circumstances. The protagonist suggests that she makes a conscious choice whether to change or not: "I changed because I wanted to. To bunker oneself inside nostalgia, to sheathe the heart in a bulletproof vest, was to be a coward" (*Jasmine* 185). She does not act in the retrospective vein but wants to create new alliances, she wishes to belong to the new culture and the new country.

Thus, Jasmine undertakes the conscious effort to transform, in other words, she wants to discard her old cultural identity and adopt a new one. What is more, hers will be a performance aimed at having a particular effect on the spectators, that is, "all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" (Goffman qtd. in Schechner 29). The protagonist's actions and behavior are meant to convince Americans that she can belong; her imitation of Americans is directed at easing the tension, which results from cultural difference. The earliest facilitator in this venture is Lilian Gordon, a woman who runs a shelter for illegal immigrants and teaches them how to find their bearings in American reality and

to perform as much American as they can. Gordon is like a director who teaches her actors how to act, in other words, how to use their language, clothes, and physicality.

The inability to speak the language of the country of arrival is one of the major difficulties with which immigrants are usually confronted. It is a significant obstacle in adapting to the new reality. What Gordon considers as a very happy coincidence is Jasmine's knowledge of English. The fact that she can communicate with Americans already makes her successful: "I was lucky, she said, that India had once been a British colony" (*Jasmine* 132). Although one may have reservations about this positive validation of the colonial heritage it has to be admitted that Jasmine's position in America is privileged compared to the situation of other females in Gordon's shelter, namely the Kanjobal women. Their possibilities to establish themselves in the US are significantly restricted because they do not know the English language.

The second aspect of a good performance is the costume. Gordon teaches her female residents that to survive in a new country, immigrants, who are mostly illegal, undocumented, must blend in, not stand out, and clothes are a very effective way to cover up. Jasmine undergoes a transformation at Lilian's place, who gives her a new outfit and good advice how not to violate certain rules of American dress code:

> She gave me her daughter's high-school clothes: blouses with Peter Pan collars, maxi skirts, T-shirts with washed-out pictures, sweaters, cords, and loafers. But beware the shoes, she said, shoes are the biggest giveaway. Undocumented aliens wear boxy shoes with ambitious heels.… My daughter calls them Third World heels. (*Jasmine* 132)

Particular clothes guarantee at least partial "invisibility" in a new cultural environment. The American clothes offered by Lilian will help Jasmine pass for an American at first sight; also shoes turn out to be an important element of the costume, therefore they need to precisely match the rest of the outfit.

Finally, an element that can be learned, practiced and rehearsed is gait, the way of walking, which creates the sense of feeling comfortable in space, the sense of belonging. Just like in a theatrical performance where actors' movements have to be studied and then rehearsed, Mukherjee's heroine is "directed" by Lilian: "Walk American, she exhorted me, and she showed me how. I worked hard on the walk and deportment. Within a week she said I'd lost my shy sidle" (*Jasmine* 133). Jasmine is taught even how to do some basic things such as using the escalator because without this knowledge she could be easily detected as an immigrant and deported because of her illegal status: "They pick up dark people like you who're afraid to get on or off" (*Jasmine* 133). On leaving Lilian Gordon for New York, she receives another piece of advice: "Now remember, if you walk and talk American, they'll think you were born here. Most Americans can't imagine anything else" (*Jasmine* 135). Jasmine's success in the new land depends on her

performance, while her identity, as it can be observed throughout the novel, changes in the course of its enactment.

In *Jasmine*, Mukherjee holds a view that cultural identity is subject to change but only when the criterion of intentionality is fulfilled. A mere change of locations, even involving enormous distances, such as a journey from one continent to another, may not be sufficient. The Indian couple who hosts Jasmine in New York is an illustration of this belief. Professor Vadhera and his wife are immersed in their Indian way of life, affirming their Indianness through every daily act, and in the consequence, isolating from Americans. Taking into consideration Jasmine's words, "I changed because I wanted to", it can be inferred that the Vadheras have not changed because they refuse to do so. They prefer to recreate their homeland traditions in the new country and to cherish their "one true self" to use Hall's words (223). The novel does not endorse this way of life as desired. The protagonist finds the Vadheras' lifestyle stifling and oppressive, which makes her move on to another location.

It is interesting to look at *Jasmine*, and, in fact, at other Mukherjee's works, as a response to the transformations of America's population after the country opened its gates to immigration with the Hart-Celler Act of 1965. This new wave of immigration originating mainly from Latin America, Asia and the Caribbean Basin has significantly increased the ethnic diversity of American society, and in the result it has inspired a lot of controversy and fears about a possibility of the disintegration of the American society. The questions about the possibility of assimilation of new immigrants were raised. Mukherjee stresses that an immigrant from a non-European country, that is, a controversial subject, is able to assimilate. One can be taught a new cultural identity but one needs to be willing to change physically and mentally. The external transformation (clothes, movement, language) will produce the effect of invisibility and enable one to pass for an American, as a result, the subject will not be immediately rejected by the new society. Simultaneously, through the sheer presence in a new environment, let alone conscious action, one has the potential to transform it, as Jasmine implies when she speaks of herself: "I am subverting the taste buds of Elsa County" (*Jasmine* 19). The novel shows therefore the agency of the subject and implies that assimilation works in two ways; it is not just Jasmine who transforms but also the American society may change in the result of encounter with others. It is the second text, "Orbiting", that gives a better focus on this issue.

The short story "Orbiting" from the collection *The Middleman and Other Stories* published in 1988, a year earlier than *Jasmine*, presents a similar "formula" for performing American. The subject needs to make a decision to transform and it is strictly connected with the process of learning the cultural codes of the new country: one has to adopt an appropriate kind of language, clothes (costume) and particular movements

of the body. Again the situation of an immigrant brings associations with an actor's performance. In this story, the deMarcos family meets the new boyfriend, Roashan, of their daughter Rindy. The setting is symbolic, the occasion for Thanksgiving dinner reinforces the theme of immigrant identity. Moreover, the construction of characters helps to develop this theme – the welcoming family are Italian Americans, while the boyfriend is an immigrant from Afghanistan.

Just like the previously discussed heroine Jasmine, Rindy's boyfriend Roashan has the advantage of knowing the English language – the "blessing" of the British colonial heritage. Nonetheless, Rindy, as well as the rest of the family, sees deficiencies in his way of speaking: it is more British than American, as a result it startles and amuses. What is more, his clothes, which are "made to measure in Kabul" ("Orbiting" 71), stick out and attract attention. Yet, the way he moves is the most significant marker of his cultural difference:

> Asian men carry their bodies differently, even these famed warriors from the Khyber Pass. Ro doesn't stand like Brent or Dad. His hands hang kind of stiffly from the shoulder joints, and when he moves, his palms are tucked tight against his thighs, his stomach sticks out like a slightly pregnant woman's. Each culture establishes its own manly posture, different ways of claiming space. Ro … holds himself in a way that seems both too effeminate and too macho. ("Orbiting" 70)

Rindy notices that even such a basic gesture as nodding can look different: "Even his headshake is foreign" ("Orbiting" 71). Mukherjee again pays a lot of attention to the physicality of the immigrant and indicates that the movement of the body, gestures, and particular ways of behavior are fundamental in expressing cultural belonging. In order to claim a different identity one has to focus on the physicality in the first place.

"Orbiting" and *Jasmine* are linked by the idea that an immigrant can be taught to look like an American. Like an actor, an immigrant has to work on his or her language, choose adequate costume, and practice appropriate bodily movements. Moreover, it is stressed that the subject needs to exercise his/ her volition. Rindy, for instance, is ready to give Ro a new national identity but he has to make the decision, as she states: "I will give him citizenship if he asks" ("Orbiting" 74). She also declares help in teaching Ro how to perform American: "I shall teach him how to walk like an American, how to dress like Brent but better, how to fill up a room as Dad does instead of melting and blending but sticking out in the Afghan way" ("Orbiting" 74-75). Due to her eagerness to teach Ro American ways, Rindy has been called an "Americanizer" with a "patronizing attitude" (Nyman "Ethnosexual encounters" 159). This statement, however, may be too strong. Rindy is not intimidating or coercive but she respects Ro's decision, as her first statement "if he asks" ("Orbiting" 74) implies. This context of voluntariness cannot be ignored. What is more, she wants to undertake action out of love rather than

other, more selfish reasons: "I realize all in a rush how much I love this man with his blemished, tortured body" ("Orbiting" 74).

The short story like *Jasmine* implies that controversial immigrants are able to assimilate. Even Roashan's dark skin color poses no problem; the narrator, Rindy, makes analogy to Jews, Greeks and Italians, who were considered inassimilable in the past mostly because of their appearance, and yet in the course of time became included in the American mainstream ("Orbiting" 68). Mukherjee suggests that the same will happen to immigrants from Asia, whose visible difference may no longer be conspicuous in the future. The story seems to be written primarily for the American audience, Ro's imagined transformation and performance of the new acquired identity is meant to demonstrate that the acceptance of new immigrants can be a seamless process which does not pose any threat to disintegration of American society. Nevertheless, it may result in the transformation of American cultural codes. In her essays, Mukherjee explains that she wants to view an immigrant's process of integration as the "two-way transformation" of the immigrant and of America ("Beyond Multiculturalism" 34). Her way of thinking is compatible with sociological research which states that assimilation is not a one-way process, but rather a process of change that works in two directions: transforming both an immigrant and the host society (Alba and Nee 25).[1]

The question of imitation present both in *Jasmine* and "Orbiting" brings associations with Homi Bhabha's concept of mimicry. In his discussion of mimicry, which involves a complex relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, but can be used also in the immigrant context, Bhabha claims that mimicry eases the tension that results from cultural difference. And indeed, in the texts discussed, mimicry may be the first step to a meaningful social interaction, to reducing the tension between the members of a marginalized group and the dominant. When an immigrant is imitating the dominant culture, thus trying to blend in, there is a possibility for him/her of being included in the ranks of society rather than being relegated to an inferior position. For Bhabha mimicry is at once resemblance and menace (86) because it means resistance to colonial power, and ultimately has subversive potential. Mukherjee's characters in the analyzed texts may be interpreted as subversive when one takes into consideration their agency, namely their impact on the host society, which is envisioned as a gradual transformation of the American mainstream.

In a later novel *Desirable Daughters*, Mukherjee's notion of a voluntarist model of identity is expressed as two opposite formations of identity. The novel exposes the conflicting ideas about cultural identity, which may exist even within one family. Mukherjee depicts different life paths of three Indian sisters: two immigrate to the

1 On a more extensive treatment of the question of assimilation in this short story see Filipczak.

United States, while one stays in India. The two sisters living in America are entirely different: older Padma is active in maintaining her Indian self while Tara has chosen to gradually Americanize. Both of them are subject to the same circumstances such as a transcontinental journey, a necessity to establish oneself in a new location, and direct contact with a new culture, yet only one of them transforms her cultural identity. It transpires therefore that Mukherjee highlights again the subject's intentionality as a factor that determines the change of one's identity.

The conflict between cultural purity and hybrid identity is quite conspicuous and marked as an effect of the character's volition and taking effort to create a particular identity. Padma, who is a performance artist, a television personality and celebrity, an "icon among Bengalis of the tristate area" (*Desirable Daughters* 231), is a preserver of Bengali tradition. Very traditional in her appearance and manners, with an Indian husband, she helps other diasporic Bengalis keep up with the latest Indian fashion (*Desirable Daughters* 231) by organizing parties which are fashion shows, not ordinary social occasions. Jopi Nyman recognizes the essentializing portrayal of Padma's identity when he states that the woman "constructs Indianness as a form of purity rather than hybridity" (*Home, Identity, and Mobility* 210). This form of identity, that is, adherence to one's homeland culture and values, is criticized in the novel by Tara, who is Americanizing. For her

> [Padma's] clinging to a version of India and to Indian ways and Indian friends, Indian clothes and food and a 'charming' accent had seemed … a cowardly way of coping with a new country. Change is corruption; she seemed to be saying. Take what America can give, but don't let it tarnish you in any way. (*Desirable Daughters* 134)

In Tara's view an immigrant's unwillingness to adapt to the cultural codes of the host country is cowardice, a disability to perform in an appropriate way. She believes an appropriate way of coping with a new reality is creating new alliances and changing loyalties, in other words, showing care for the new homeland.

The intention to change and taking effort to do so characterizes Tara, Padma's younger sister. She is an example of cultural hybridizing which occurred at her will, yet she is not really aware of this process. The journey to America is a liberating event for the woman and from the very beginning she displays openness to new experiences and desires to embrace the novelty in her life: "This is the life I've been waiting for, I thought, the liberating promise of marriage and travel and the wider world" (*Desirable Daughters* 81). Tara is committed to the new way of life and for this reason she divorces her Indian husband, who wants to remain an upholder of Bengali tradition, and who therefore is not supportive of Tara's ideas. When "the promise of life as an American wife was not being fulfilled" (*Desirable Daughters* 82) the woman decides to leave Bish. Describing Tara's hybrid identity Nyman aptly highlights her sense of past and

present, memories of India, returning to her grandmother's stories of the past, which make her travel to India in search of her roots. In Tara's case mobility is connected to the transformation of identity: "The novel emphasizes how Tara's identity is imagined through space and linked with movement and plurality, not stasis and singularity" (*Home, Identity, and Mobility* 212). Yet, it cannot be overlooked that Tara, contrary to her sister Padma, has an intention to change and lets the new circumstances influence her.

The novel reinforces a view that mobility does not necessarily result in the change of identity through the portrayal of other traditional Indian immigrants in America. Tara's husband, Bish, is one such character stuck to traditional values. Interestingly, even though he has worked in the field of modern technologies in the US for several years and has achieved a great financial success globally with the invention of CHATTY, a transnational computer network, his beliefs or way of life are in no way advanced: "He lived and prospered by commonsense precepts that are ingrained in any middle-class Bengali boy. … Whatever he liked at twenty, and still liked at forty-two, now had tenure in his life" (*Desirable Daughters* 263). Bish insists on both a wife and a son of traditional outlook: "Bish could not tolerate a son who was not a perfect replica of himself; hardworking, respectful, brilliant, soberly, sociable, effortlessly athletic" (*Desirable Daughters* 154). He does not indulge in his son's independence and is upset when Rabi decides on an art school rather than becoming an engineer or scientist. Other characters who illustrate the common attitude of recreating the homeland traditions in the country of arrival is the New Jersey community of Indian immigrants and particularly Dr. Ghosal's grandparents. The former eagerly attend Padma's fashion shows showing themselves as followers of Indian fashion and style, and seeming more engaged in the matters of India than the US. Dr. Ghosal's grandparents on the other hand are so old and so attached to the Indian way of life that they do not leave their quarters, which are almost a perfect replica of the Indian home with Indian cooks, servants, furniture and decorations.

In *Desirable Daughters*, one can see an analogy to Mukherjee's personal situation. As she recounts in her essay "Two Ways to Belong," she and her sister also had conflicting views about how to "belong" in America. While the novelist eagerly accepted the new culture and integrated, her sister Mira cherished her loyalty to India and preferred to keep her status as an expatriate Indian. Thus, Mukherjee stresses that the aspect of intention is again the most vital element that guarantees the transformation of identity. Furthermore, the novelist evaluates her sister's choice negatively and implies that it may be taken as disintegrative for society because it is highlighting divisions or differences between groups of people. In another essay "American Dreamer" she reveals her fears connected with emphasizing one's ethnic distinctiveness and the state policy of multiculturalism: "We must be alert to the dangers of an 'us' vs. 'them' mentality"

("American Dreamer"). Mukherjee advocates strongly the policy of integration and she calls for the immigrants' willingness to integrate, which is clearly visible in her literary works. Critics recognize it as an endorsement of assimilation[2], e.g., David Cowart writes that she "reaffirm[s] the American immigrant myth" (71), the myth of blending in, assimilating into the dominant culture. Nevertheless, Mukherjee's view implies that assimilation does not assume the complete erasure of the individual's cultural identity but rather his/her becoming similar to the host culture with a simultaneous contribution to the existing culture, which, in the case of America, is already a fusion, or mixture of cultural elements.

The idea that cultural identity is a matter of choice rather than a result of changing circumstances inscribes Mukherjee in the line of social activists. In fact, the novelist makes it clear in her essays that she is concerned with the situation of immigrants in America. Her fiction is devoted to this agenda, aimed at influencing the immigrant's and American consciousness. In the first case she advocates that the best way to belong in the new country is to integrate and she intends to show that American identity can be successfully learned and rehearsed. Her portrayal of characters who persevere in maintaining their cultural patterns despite their dislocation and contact with other cultures serves two purposes: it emphasizes the novelist's emphasis of intentionality and it shows a possible, but not recommended, way of belonging.

As regards the change of American consciousness, it is Mukherjee's presentation of the subject's agency that matters. Her fiction expresses a conviction that the immigrant subject has a significant impact on the host society; a voluntarily assimilating subject will have a positive interaction with the audience. Moreover, the novelist's idea of assimilation does not entail a complete erasure of the immigrant's cultural identity but rather his/her contribution to the existing fusion of cultural elements, in other words a two-way transformation of identity. Yet, with this belief it seems that Mukherjee cannot entirely avoid the notion of contingency. In the assumption that the arriving immigrants will change American consciousness and American cultural patterns hides the belief that the American (un)willingness to transform can be disregarded because the change will happen in any event.

2 It has to be indicated that Mukherjee dismisses the word "assimilation" and prefers to use the word "mongrelisation" instead. She offers three reasons for doing that. Firstly, "mongrelisation" immediately suggests the mutual exchange of cultural elements in the process of assimilation, that is, transformation of identity working in both directions. Secondly, by this word she wants to acknowledge that the outcome of various cultures mixing is unpredictable. Thirdly, she distances herself from the political context of assimilation as established at the beginning of the 20th century, when assimilation was a coercive practice of the state. Although her concept bears a strong resemblance to the discourse of hybridization, Mukherjee wants to dissociate also from the academic discourse, stating that the term "hybridity" is too scientific or biological (Edwards 164-5).

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