Fetishising the Dominant Culture in Migration Narratives: Examining Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Bharati Mukhejree's *Jasmine* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

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Abstract:

This thesis addresses the ideological underpinnings in the migration narratives of Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2003), Bharati Mukhejree's *Jasmine* (1989) and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) in order to reveal how certain meanings become more legitimate than others. In my discussion I expose the ways a narrative can be shaped and aligned such that it appears to provide agency for the migrant character, particularly in respect to inviting the notion of desire, feminist discourses, human rights, alienation, yet fails to challenge the structure of the dominant culture. To sum my argument up, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, *Jasmine*, and *Brick Lane* do indeed engage with the dominant discourses of migration, yet they are infested with ideological contradictions and political absences. Though empowering the migrant figure, such as Nafisi, Jyoti and Nazneen, is laudable, the authors' narratives nevertheless grant the migrant the power of assimilation within the standards of the Western dominant culture without communicating the process of negotiating an identity between native and host cultures. These texts suggest that the failure of assimilation is a character flaw and represent "Third World" and "First World" cultures in a series of false dichotomies.

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I Chapter One: Introduction

This thesis examines the treatment of the migrant figure's identity in relation to the dominant culture of the host society, in the migration narratives of Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2003), Bharati Mukhejree's *Jasmine* (1989) and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003). It addresses how these texts, focalised through the migrant figure, present both the native country and the adopted home, and, in more specific terms, it considers how these texts offer up problematic notions of individual agency in which the female migrant protagonist from the "Third World" is allowed to assimilate relatively unproblematically in the "First World" of the host society. Ostensibly, these texts offer their protagonists a successful narrative of assimilation and, by doing so, they seem to present subversive tales that empower the protagonists within the adopted country, rather than depicting them in a marginalised modus vivendi.

Reading Lolita, *Jasmine*, and *Brick Lane* embrace an emancipatory discourse in their narration of the migrant journey in the host world, a discourse that combines the following components: a fascination with the immigrant ability to metamorphose their identity and adapt to the new home; enthusiasm about the potential opportunities and liberties available in the new society; and a gesture designed to propose "individual agency" as the key component to "making it" in the host country. However, I argue that these three texts are less interested in addressing the problematics of the broader material relations of power, domination, and exploitation within the host society than they are in fetishising its dominant culture, in a manner that seems to destroy their protagonists' bonds with their culture of origin. This being the case, the texts end up reproducing, rather than challenging, the oppressive forces the migrant figure faces.

Given these concerns, my focus here is on reading these sensational narratives of successful assimilation as forms of public pedagogies; an approach that offers the opportunity to engage with, and understand, their politics of representation as part of a broader commentary on the intersection of migration, human rights, feminist concerns, alienation, concepts of "home", ethnicity issues, and "First World" and "Third World" related implications.[1]

In taking up these issues, I acknowledge that, as Eleanor Bryne and Martin McQuillan propose in a different context, texts are 'radically indeterminate with respect to their meaning, [and] any reading of a text must be determined by factors not prescribed by the text itself'.[2] At the same time, I adopt the conclusions that James Proctor and Bethan Benwell draw from the study they recount in *Reading Across Worlds*, a study which assesses to what extent, and in what manner, the production of meaning expands by the texts being approached by various '*kinds*' of readers and other '*genres*' of reading, beyond those institutionalized within the academy.[3] In their chapter "Reading and Realism", they take *Brick Lane* as a case study of how fiction pertaining to social realism is perceived/read both within academia and outside of it. Highlighting in the process that the 'disembodied subject' of 'the reader' could be 'the reader-critic, the Western reader, [or] the naïve reader', in other words, that there is no singular model reader, the authors suggest that

> [T]he effects of realism are contingent upon how, where, when and by whom the text is decoded [. . .] [This suggests] not just that different readers and reading acts prompt a re-thinking of the category "realism",

[1] 'Public Pedagogies' as a term refers to 'learning in institutions such as museums, zoos, and libraries; in informal educational sites such as popular culture, media, commercial spaces, and the Internet; and through figures and sites of activism, including public intellectuals and grassroots social movements. [. . .] If education research fails to address the pedagogical force of popular culture and public culture [. . .] it risks operating under the false assumption that schools are closed systems, with learning occurring only within a pre-scribed pedagogical process'. Jennifer A. Sandlin, Michael P. O'Malley and Jake Burdick, "Mapping the Complexity of Public Pedagogy Scholarship: 1894-2010," *Review of Educational Research* 81, no. 3 (September 2011), 339.
[2] Eleanor Byrne and Martin McQuillan, *Deconstructing Disney* (London: Pluto, 1999), 3-4.

> but that realism exposes reading formations as, if not incommensurable, than certainly irreducible to a singular notion of 'the reader'. (136)

Procter and Benwell's study of the readings of realism in *Brick Lane* asserts that the notion of "realism" as a genre of fiction shifts according to the cultural context of the readership, and, as such, this response to "realist" texts helps us to understand that each type of readership, if not individual reader, has an understanding of social realism that is dependent upon their own society, or cultural sphere within society, and their role/status within that sphere, which thus determines the differences in the way they read such texts. The process of reading and henceforth the production of meaning is not fixed but it is rather dependent on factors determined by the position of readers, both those within and outside the academy. My approach is consistant with this conclusion about the production of meanings in such texts – texts that are 'geographically dispersed, [and] ethnically diverse [. . .] [that] readers viewed within transnational circuits of exchange and consumption' (1) – which led me to diagnose the sites of ambivalence in the narratives of *Reading Lolita*, *Jasmine,* and *Brick Lane* that give rise to the different/conflicting readings of these texts. For while the texts attempt to bridge the gap between the migrant figure and the host society, they simultaneously put into play particular ideologies and values that resonate with broader public conversations regarding how the migrant figure should view its host and native country. I am investigating *Reading Lolita*, *Jasmine*, and *Brick Lane* as public pedagogies specifically in the immediate cultural context in which they are received; that is, the configuration of the migrant identity within the limited frame of social relations in the dominant culture of the host society in the West.

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[3] James Procter and Bethan Benwell, *Reading Across Worlds: Transnational Book Groups and the Reception of Difference* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 1.

Such an approach is certainly not meant to attack these texts as much as it works to expose the ideological contradictions and absences that characterise them and which themselves operate to keep marginalised migrant individuals/groups on the periphery – contrary to what the texts appear to intend. These texts do not simply serve as entertainment; as Henry Giroux emphasises in his reading of the film *Fight Club* (2001), such texts have the ability to 'articulat[e] knowledge into affect'[4] and become 'important as public pedagogies because they play a powerful role in mobilizing meaning, pleasures and identifications'. (23) *Reading Lolita* topped the *New York Times* reading list for more than ninety weeks, sold more than a million copies, received enthusiastic reviews from critics across the West and has been translated into thirty-two languages. *Jasmine* is widely celebrated in the US as Mukherjee's best narrative of assimilation and it has the title of one of her best stories in her prize-winning collection *The Middleman and Other Stories*. *Brick Lane* is a bestseller novel that is widely celebrated in the UK and the US and was adapted for the big screen in 2007. Hence my choosing these particular texts for analysis – these are very popular texts, known for their vast readership and controversy, and thus play an important role as sites of instruction in the manner described by Giroux. Although the protagonists in these migration texts do not all share the same points of departure or arrival, they share – more than the fact that they are all women migrant characters written by women migrant authors – similar narratives of assimilation and similarly problematic relationships with the dominant culture of the host society. My reading of these texts is motivated by their pedagogical function because they produce and reflect important considerations in the public imagination of how the migrant character should live, engage with others, and define themselves in the new world.

[4] Henry Giroux, "Private Satisfactions and Public Disorders: 'Fight Club,' Patriarchy, and the Politics of Masculine Violence," *JAC* 21, no. 1 (Winter 2001), 6.

As will be seen, *Reading Lolita*, *Jasmine*, and *Brick Lane* are structured in ways that produce preferred meanings that advocate the dominant ideology of the adopted country. Pieter Jacobus Fourie, in commenting on Stuart Hall's theory of preferred reading, states that

> culture is a constant site of struggle between those with and those without power. Hall argues that while social practices and all forms of expression may offer a variety of meanings, their structure generally prefers a set of meanings that works to maintain the dominant ideology.[5]

Hall emphasises the social positioning of the reader/recipient in their role as a decoder, in the interpretation of the author's message, and the social positioning of the author in her role as an encoder, effectively translating the notion of hegemonic struggle into a communicative process. P. Eric Louw, explaining Hall's theory of 'encoding' and 'decoding', says that all messages have 'preferred meanings' encoded into them.[6] However, these 'preferred meanings' do not always prevail – Hall suggests that there are three potential decodings in relation to the dominant culture. The first one is the 'dominant reading' in which the decoder unproblematically accepts the preferred meaning of the encoder. The second is the 'negotiated reading' in which the decoder accepts some of the elements of the encoder's 'preferred' meaning while rejecting other aspects. The third is the 'oppositional reading' in which the decoder rejects the message of the encoder. Thus, one can say that the reader can indeed resist the dominant ideology of the 'preferred meaning' that is within the text, yet the 'preferred meanings' are still there and are nevertheless communicated to a significant portion of readers – the popular status of *Reading Lolita*, *Jasmine*, and *Brick Lane* ensures

[5] Pieter Jacobus Fourie, *Media Studies Volume 1: Institutions, Theories and Issues* (Lansdowne: Juta and Company Ltd, 2001), 376. Stuart Hall, "Encoding, Decoding 1," *Social Theory: Power and Identity in the Global Era*, no. 2 (2010).

that. In this thesis I examine the role of the text in positioning the reader within a particular narrative in a manner that impinges upon producing other readings. Here the authors specifically steer meaning-production towards their preferred understanding of the migrant subject, and I find that the apparent 'preferred reading' of the narratives by these particular authors, Nafisi, Mukhejree, and Ali, is aligned with the dominant ideology of the host society.

Take, for instance, the example of Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran,* in which the reader is passionately invited to sympathise with the alienation of the female characters, which is presented as caused by human rights abuses in Iran, such that it becomes highly unlikely for the reader to produce an oppositional reading to the compelling cause of female liberation espoused by the narrative. Eventually the protagonist leaves her country of origin because she is 'very American' and she yearns for her days in the US, thus reinforcing the American dream as the epitome of freedom.[7] Similarly, the narrative of *Jasmine* invites the reader to witness the harsh circumstances of its young rural protagonist, Jyoti, ranging from her brutal village life in India, to the Sikh terrorist that targets her but kills her husband instead, to her cruel border–crossing journey across the continent, to the rape she falls victim to on the shores of Florida, when she finally reaches US as an illegal immigrant. Mukherjee contrasts such horrific experiences with Jyoti's successful assimilation story in the US, because, we are told, Jyoti is "born American". 'Like Jasmine, I feel there are people born to be Americans. By American I mean an intensity of spirit and a quality of desire', says the author, celebrating the American dream and proposing that successful assimilation into the US is an issue that is simply contingent upon having the individual agency of desire.[8] Likewise, Ali emancipates Nazneen, the protagonist of her novel *Brick Lane*, from the violent

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[6] P. Eric Louw, "The Limits of Power: Resisting the Dominant Culture," *The Media and Cultural Production* (London: SAGE, 2001), 206.
[7] Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (London: Fourth Estate, 2004), 175.

discourses of oppression exercised by the Bangladeshi community of the novel. Yet the author does this without actually negotiating a process of identity transformation, in an assimilation tale that is best encapsulated in the symbolic image by which the author fulfils the protagonist's obsessive dream/fantasy of ice-skating. The novel ends with Nazneen skating, and the statement that this is England, where "you can do whatever you like" – again posing desire as the key factor to "making it" in the host world.[9]

These images of the female migrant figure are systematically ruthless in their omissions, thus filtering the narrative in a manner by which the dominant ideology of the host culture is internalised. The texts strategically deny the reader a complete picture of the female migrant protagonists' trajectory in the new world, even as they claim to provide the whole story. Despite the prevailing insight afforded by the authors' representations on the alienation and harsh circumstances the female migrant figure is subjected to, they cloud as much as they clarify. This tension between occlusion and revelation is most problematic to the disenfranchised individuals/groups who only have limited access to the means of self-representation – for these texts are presented to readers worldwide and privilege a reading that does not fully reflect the migrant experience, often, as will be discussed in detail, laying blame on the migrants for any failure to assimilate into the host society.

My approach to the thesis is thus concerned with exposing the ways in which *Reading Lolita*, *Jasmine*, and *Brick Lane* work to mobilise and promote such 'preferred meanings', privileging certain positions and readings above others. Along with the thinkers mentioned above, this thesis benefits from the following conceptual discourses, which further establish the set of issues and concerns that motivate and guide my reading. My methodology includes many approaches brought together in a unifying gesture to produce a diverse and detailed analysis of *Reading Lolita*, *Jasmine*, and *Brick Lane*.

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[8] Walter Gobel, "Bharati Mukherjee: Expatriation, Americanality and Literary Form," *Fusion of Cultures?* Ed. Peter O. Stummer and Christopher Blame (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), 115.

Firstly, the conglomeration of diverse issues analysed in this thesis is approached via closetextual analysis that mainly focuses on a critique of the ideology of representation, and specifically that of the dominant culture in the host society. In regards to such analysis, many theorists and critics have been instrumental in the field of recognising regressive ideologies and repressive politics in cultural texts and media. For instance, Louis Althusser's approach to ideology, James Phelan on rhetoric, James L. Resseguie on narratology, Edward Said on the postcolonial critique of the empire and Homi Bhabha on cultural hybiridty and difference.

Secondly, in regards to the context of the presentation of migrant figures in this thesis, it is important to point out that postcolonial criticism has given much attention to reconceiving notions of identity in order to account for the broad range of the historically, politically, and socially situated expressions of the migrant figure's subjectivity. The approaches that result from this focus provide an understanding of selfhood as a process of negotiation that is lived through, and not against, difference. For example, Homi Bhabha's concept of 'hybridity' and 'third space' rejects fixed notions of identity in favour of understanding migrant subjectivity as a continual process of negotiation and of becoming.[10] Gayatri Spivak problematises the representational forms of subaltern subjectivities. She poses the challenging question as to whether these forms can also be complicit in the ideology that has oppressed the marginalised subject in the first place.[11] She draws attention to the way postcolonial studies reinscribe as well as rehearse the neocolonial imperatives of political domination and cultural erasure that they seek to dismantle in the first place. In *The Post-Colonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (2001), Graham Huggan further elaborates and pushes forward the questions posed by Spivak. He examines the way postcolonial writing is

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[9] Monica Ali, *Brick Lane* (London: Black Swan, 2004), 492.
[10] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 34. Bhabha posits 'hybridity' as a form of liminal or in-between spaces where 'the cutting edge of translation and negotiation' takes place, and this he terms as the 'third space', 56.
[11] Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. L. Grossberg C. Nelson (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988).

'bound up in a system of cultural translation operating under the sign of the exotic', interrogating a breadth of issues, such as the marketing of the exotic for predominantly metropolitan audiences and the extent to which postcolonial 'writer/thinkers contend with *neo*colonial market forces'.[12]

Thirdly, I address feminist concerns that draw on a variety of critical concepts that also work to establish understandings of the notion of "home", which is not merely a physical place but an ideological concept. Irene Gedalof uses the term 'reproductive sphere' in order to refer to 'both the embodied work of mothering, such as childbirth and childcare, and the work of reproducing cultures and structures of belonging, such as the passing on of culturally specific histories and traditions regarding food, dress, family and other inter-personal relationships'.[13] Theoretical work by postcolonial and diasporic feminists such as Sara Ahmed, Irene Gedalof and Avtar Brah expose the 'violent' discourse in which the 'female body', as a symbolic representation of women's activities, is repeatedly appropriated as a marker of national, racial, religious, and ethnic communities in dominant discourses of identity. The 'female body' is employed within a particular discourse that Sara Ahmed calls 'stasis and fixity' and that Avtar Brah terms as 'staying put'.[14] While 'staying put' refers to the narrative of re-enacting the memory of the nation in the new home through the 'reproductive sphere', Ahmed's concept of 'stasis and fixity' associates this 'reproductive sphere' with 'the stasis of being'– which negatively impacts on the process of a woman's becoming in the new culture and stands in her way of negotiating an identity across cultures.[15] Therefore, in the role assigned to and imposed upon them, women in the diasporic community are positioned as the 'sacred' body of the nation, and, as such, this body must

[12] Graham Huggan, "Preface," *The Post-Colonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001), viii.
[13] Irene Gedalof, "Birth, Belonging and Migrant Mothers: Narratives of Reproduction in Feminist Migration Studies," *Feminist Review*, no. 93 (2009), 81.
[14] Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 2006), 178.

never be altered. Feminist discourses figure significantly in the texts, as they are inextricable from the process of "homing" and identity metamorphoses in the adopted country. Thus, this study is attentive to the problematic use of feminist discourses in the texts in the way they are clearly designed to move the audience to sympathise with the plight of the protagonists. I also expose the dynamic of the plots that relegates particular incidents to become problematic issues of women's rights and feminist concerns.

"Home" is imbeded in a multitude of meanings and possibilities throughout the thesis. The question of the relationship between the protagonists and their native home and their adopted home is invariably raised. The representation of the adopted home and the home of origin in *Reading Lolita*, *Jasmine* and *Brick Lane* underplays the tensions that arise from their complex historical contexts as it simply reduces them to binary oppositions of "First World" and "Third World". Thus, the question of "home" contends with both the ideological foregrounding and the position of the authors Nafisi, Mukherjee and Ali in relation to their texts. In discussing texts written by authors who are immigrants themselves,[16] I aim to engage with the question of authentic and inauthentic narratives which not only recurs incessantly in relation to dominant representations and works by minority authors, but is also a constituent part of the controversial status of the texts. In this instance, I explore what Hamid Dabashi identifies as the 'native informer': a particular notion of the author in terms of their representation of the country of origin. '[I]nformers are more effective in manufacturing the public illusions that empires need to sustain themselves than in truly informing the public about the cultures they denigrate and dismiss'.[17]

The chosen texts might appear dissimilar – in terms of the geographic locations of the protagonists and their assimilation tales – but they have interrelated fetishising discourses

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[15] Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 89.
[16] Ali is a second generation immigrant.
[17] Hamid Dabashi, *Brown Skins White Masks* (New York: Pluto Press, 2011), 13.

about the dominant culture of the host society. The ambition of my critical analysis is to learn and unlearn what it might mean to challenge assumptions and institutional forms that shape the relations of the migrant figure with and in the new home, regardless of where and how they manifest themselves – acknowledging that literature is a force in the shaping of consciousness and the legitimisation of social practices. After all, it is an admirable effort to empower the female migrant in the host world, but, rather than the feel-good result of successful assimiliation, what is more important is the process through which the protagonists are capable of achieving this end. In *Reading Lolita*, *Jasmine*, and *Brick Lane*, the migrant figure is granted the ultimate ability to assimilate in the new home as long as she remains confined to the limited frame of social relations that does not challenge the ideology of the dominant culture of the host country. But home is not about internalising the dominant culture of the new society, or privileging the "West" over the "East", as much as, in Dabashi's words, '[h]ome is where you hold your horses, hang your hat, and above all raise your voice in defiance and say no to oppression'. (23) For the migrant figure, challenging fixed notions and assumptions does not indicate a rejection of the new home; it rather reflects the ability to negotiate not only their own identity but also that of the host society – a gesture that is intended to provide an informed critique that will result in a better future for all in that society.

Thus, the purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate the ways in which, despite their seemingly liberating narratives, *Reading Lolita*, *Jasmine,* and *Brick Lane* are complicit in the dominant ideology of the host culture. In taking up the previously stated issues and concerns, in every chapter, I first provide a summary of the plot events for each text and a critical review of its reception. Secondly, I analyse the narrative structure of the text, addressing, simultaneously, the relationship between the literary form and the thematic content. In doing so, I examine the representational politics that structure the text, in an attempt to map the

ways in which the writing style is symptomatic of the thematic content. Through close textual analysis, I expose the inconsistencies, contradictions, and sites of ambivalence by which each text contradicts their apparent narrative of resistance. I demonstrate how, in the process of writing a liberating narrative and an emancipatory tale of assimilation, the texts subscribe to and feed into oppressive assumptions and notions regarding the migrant figure in the host society, thus reproducing the problems they seek to resist.

I.1 Chapter Outline:

I.1.1 Chapter One: Alienating "Home": Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*

The chapter intends to expose the way the text contradicts itself revealing, in Slavoj Zizek's words, 'the most dangerous form of non-freedom [;] the non-freedom which is not even perceived as such'.[18] I argue that while alienation is principally used in the narrative to expose the ideology of a despotic regime in Iran, registering a legitimate concern against confiscated freedoms, Nafisi subsumes her country and its people under a far more powerful and wider-reaching ideology, one that disseminates discriminating notions against Iranian culture, and other Eastern cultures by extension. My intention is to diagnose the ideological contradiction in Nafisi's privileging of one hegemonic ideology over another – which is especially important given the work's pedagogical function. Its wide-reaching success is primarily motivated by the readers' curiosity to gain authentic knowledge of the Islamic republic of Iran and the lives of Iranian women.

I interrogate the genre of the *Reading Lolita*, and how its rhetoric is impacted by its literary form of a semi-fictionalised memoir. This style is rife with rhetorical implications given that it tells the reader of an apparently true history whilst reading as fiction. I cross

examine rhetoric, as defined by James Phelan – 'the synergy occurring between authorial agency, textual phenomena, and reader response' – and the ideological point of view of the text, as understood by James Resseguie – '[t]he conceptual framework or world view of the narrator' that refers to 'the narrator's attitude toward or evaluation of the action, dialogue, characters, settings, and events'.[19]

I further investigate the way the narrator's experience of migration, and her complex relationship with "home", informs the narrative of the text. The speaker[20] experiences seventeen years of transmigration. During the period she was sent to complete her studies in boarding school from the age of thirteen until seventeen, her relationship with Tehran is in the form of holiday romance. At the age of eighteen she migrates to the US with her first husband, later returning to Iran, after the revolution, at the age of thirty. Drawing on particular ideas by Gaston Bachelard, Milan Kundera, and Salman Rushdie, I argue that the narrator's alienation is rooted in a series of physical displacements, before it gets further entangled and problematised by the regime change in Iran. The concept of ideology, which largely informs this chapter, conforms to Louis Althusser's seminal definition of the ideological as 'a "representation" of the Imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence'.[21] In this light, I examine the narrative of alienation in relation to reader response, exploring the rhetorical content and how it works to draw out sympathy from the reader, particularly in regard to the text's use of human rights discourse. The purpose of this is to uncover how such causes of alienation are depicted in order to fulfil the

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[18] Slavoj Zizek, "What is Freedom Today?" *The Guardian*, (video-recording), produced by Nicole Jackson, Ben Marshall, Bruno Rincolucri, Anetta Jones, Robbie Kilgour and Caterina Monzani, *theguardian.com*, Wednesday 3rd December, 2014, accessed 20 December 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/video/2014/dec/03/slavoj-zizek-philosopher-what-is-freedom-today-video.

[19] James Phelan, N*arrative as Rhetoric: Technique, Audiences, Ethics, Ideology* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1996), xii, and James L. Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 169.

[20] Given the text is a semi-fictionalised memoir, I refer to the voice of the figure depicted as the narrator or speaker, rather than Nafisi herself, which would underplay the fictional aspect, or a protagonist, which would make the figure communicating the text wholly detached from any reality of the account.

author's ideological aims. I close this chapter addressing the text's representation of Iran vis à vis the US, and the political and social implications of the contrasts it puts forward.

I.1.2 Exploiting the Fluidity of the Immigrant Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

Attempting to reject the paralysis of the immigrant exilic experience, Mukherjee writes an emancipatory narrative of assimilation by way of Jyoti, the novel's undocumented heroine, whose process of identity-metamorphoses exemplifies the fluidity of immigrant identity. I argue that, although Mukherjee's immigrant aesthetics pose a legitimate concern about the plight of immigrants in the US, *Jasmine* employs this predicament squarely in the service of a nationalistic US ideology that suggests the country is a unique and liberal place that offers freedom and agency through migration.

I examine the narrative of the author's own migrations, because Mukherjee's migrant experiences seem to significantly intersect with her fiction and inform her immigration aesthetics. And this, in turn, feeds into my investigation of the narrative style of *Jasmine*, which is particularly focused on the construction of the immigrant identity in the text. Pin-chia Feng regards 'any writing by an ethnic woman about the identity formation of an ethnic woman, whether fictional or autobiographical in form, chronologically or retrospectively in plot, as a *Bildungsroman*'.[22] However, I propose that while *Jasmine* is written as a bildungsroman, it is not a conventional one. This is because the narrative also structurally draws upon certain elements of the fairy-tale. In order to diagnose the relationship between the writing style and the ideological content of the text, I analyse *Jasmine*'s narrative structure in detail, further engaging with Joseph R. Slaughter's definition of the idealist

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[21] Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy* (London: New Left Books, 1971), 162.
[22] Pin-chia Feng, *The Female Bildungsroman by Toni Morrison and Maxine Hong Kingston: A Postmodern Reading* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), 15.

bildungsroman and Vladimir Propp's list of the thirty-one functions of the dramatis personae.[23]

I problematise Mukherjee's "maximalist" assimilation approach in relation to US "nationalism", addressing the way a supposed American identity is presented in the world of the novel. Through the character of Jyoti, the author articulates the terms and conditions of assimilation into US culture as based on participation within the dominant culture of the American nation, but also the rejection of the cultural identity of the migrant's country of origin. I argue that this approach to "Americanisation" not only requires the annihilation of the migrant figure's ethnic identity but also treats the culture of the US as a timeless and static set of traits, rather than a living set of social relations, contradicting therein Clifford Greetz's argument that the nature of culture is continuously contested.[24]

I argue that the treatment of ethnic identity in *Jasmine* emphasises homogenising notions within the context of migration. Trinh T. Minh-ha points out how '[d]ifference does not annul identity. It is beyond and alongside identity'.[25] However, in *Jasmine*, on the contrary, the protagonist is denied an opportunity to negotiate her identity as a woman immigrant alongside her native ethnicity and cultural identity. Instead, the text embraces an "American" feminist discourse of emancipation and growth, such that the novel depicts an Asian woman who constructs her liberation within a hegemonic feminist narrative. The text circumvents ethnicity in a way that characterises it as an "option" that can be employed when needed, and is otherwise discarded, depending on the incident at hand. There is 'difference and there is power', June Jordan writes, and 'who holds the power shall decide the meaning

[23] Joseph R. Slaughter, *Human Rights Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative, Form, and International Law* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), and Vladimir Lakovlevitch Propp, "The Functions of Dramatis Personae," *Morphology of the Folktale*, 2nd edition (Austin: University of Texas, 2009).
[24] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).
[25] Trinh T Minh-ha, *Women, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1998), 104.

of difference'.[26] Given that for most of the novel Jyoti's ethnicity is concealed, and is only made visible when she needs to access US culture through white men who find her ethnicity exotic, she is giving power to this society: it is the members of the dominant US society that choose how to valorise Jyoti's beauty, and so I argue this disempowers the woman immigrant. These issues will be examined with reference to Gayatri Spivak's argument about '[w]hite men saving brown women from brown men', in "Can the Subaltern Speak?"[27]

I further interrogate the historical socio-political events that link India to the US, by way of Jyoti's cross-cultural movement and narrative of becoming "American", in order to highlight the lack of complexity in the novel's representation of the protagonist's home and adopted countries. Edward Said explains that 'texts are worldly [. . .] even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of a social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located'.[28] In this respect, I examine the ways in which the conspicuous absence of historical complexity turns the novel into a complacent connivance of the literary that only works to forward US hegemony. Some of the aspects that the novel fails to contextualise, and which will be addressed in this chapter, are the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA), that would sanction employers who knowingly hired unauthorised workers in the US,[29] and the Hindu-Sikh conflict of nineteen-eighties India.

I.1.3 Chapter Four: Interrogating Ideological Ambivalence in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

In this chapter I interrogate the ideological ambivalence of the text's representational politics, arguing that, while *Brick Lane* appears to offer an emancipatory narrative of the migrant

[26] June Jordan, *Technical Difficulties* (Boston: Beacon, 1994), 197.
[27] Gayatri Spivak Chakrabarty, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. L. Grossberg C. Nelson (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988).
[28] Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), 4.

figure, it simultaneously undermines it by solely privileging the dominant culture of the host society. What makes this text distinct is that it tackles a number of migrant characters within an immigrant community, presenting what appears to be a democratic perspective on the world of the novel by means of highlighting variations within the migrant subjectivity, such that the reader is given the impression that each character chooses "home" freely and independently. I argue, however, that the narrative subverts its democratic aesthetics by exposing the problematic notion of agency suggested in the text: assimilation in the host society seems to be contingent upon nothing more than *desire*.

Further, I examine the controversy regarding the author's mixed ethnicity (of Bangladeshi and British parentage) in relation to issues of "representation" and "authenticity" in her portraying the Bangladeshi community of the novel, which is further problematised by its referring to a real migrant community in the real place of Brick Lane, London. I then address the narrative style of the novel, arguing that there are conflicting modes of writing that contribute to the ambivalence that characterises the ideological foundation of the text. Finally, I analyse this ideological ambivalence of *Brick Lane* through a detailed study of identity performance in the characters of Chanu, Nazneen and Shahana, drawing on a variety of postcolonial and feminist theories as well as critical references.

Within this analysis, the following points are addressed. I argue that in its treatment of the negotiation of the migrant identity in the host society, the text ignores political and social issues in a way that affects the development of the characters. I address the ways in which the text oversimplifies the notion of hybridity and cultural identity, proposing that the novel emphasises a static and monolithic view of migrant communities within a multicultural environment, which is particularly reflected in its treatment of female dress codes. And, finally, I examine the representation of the country of origin of these characters in relation to

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[29] Bill Ong Hing, *Making and Remaking Asian America through Immigration Policy: 1850-1990* (Stanford:

that of the adopted country, finding that Bangladesh and Britain are communicated as binary opposites.

Stanford University Press, 1994).

II Chapter Two: Alienating "Home" in Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*

II.1 Introduction

Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2003) is the story of seven women who gather in secret in order to discuss Western literature in defiance of Islamic authorities in Tehran.[30] After resigning from her post as a teacher in the University of Tehran because of clerical control over the curriculum and the obligation of wearing the veil, Azar Nafisi gathers seven of her female students to teach them Western literary classics in the privacy of her home. Through this reading group, Nafisi offers a detailed account of the abuse and persecution practiced by the totalitarian autocracy of Iran. According to the memoir, the characters described in the text are based on real people with whom Azar Nafisi shared such experiences in Iran. Their experiences produce painful images of alienation, mostly of women who are deprived of human rights, and who are surviving in an aggressive environment of oppression and suppression. At the end of the text, having lost every reason to stay in Iran, Nafisi poses her choice to migrate to the US as the only way for her to survive.

With the interweaving of personal history with the theme of alienation and political reflection – the text is marked with strong ideological declarations concerning, and challenging, the political and social practices of the Iranian authorities – as well as the employment and analysis of pre-existing literary texts – significantly classics of the Western canon, Nafisi claims to have given an honest portrait of the situation in that part of the

[30] Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (London: Fourth Estate, 2004).

world.[31] However, there are a number of problems that are rather difficult to ignore in a text dwelling on the aforementioned issues. For the alienation theme, which is intrinsic to the content of the text and unfolds itself throughout the discussion, is not portrayed from a solely personal position. The world of Iran communicated by Nafisi's text is infused with a pro-Western rhetoric, portraying an ideological standpoint that advocates Western values concerning freedom and democracy and singles out the negative aspects of life in Iran, as the protagonist/narrator sees it, and presents them in such a way that the reader, too, registers such descriptions as negative.

The narrative of *Reading Lolita* directly reflects conditions and states of mind that are commonly associated with the term 'alienation', and its ideological foundations; there is a haunting preoccupation with place, which is suffused with and inseparable from feelings of estrangement. This chapter investigates the frustrated longings of the protagonist(s) for utopian realms, often expressed via everyday encounters within a geography of spaces related to the inside/outside, public/private and East/West. As alienation is the leitmotif of the book's narrative, its ultimate purpose is to protest against oppression and, by implication, to call for freedom; specifically, a freedom that takes the form of a democracy that advocates a Western life style. As such, this chapter argues that while alienation is principally used to expose the ideology of a despotic regime in Iran, registering a legitimate concern against confiscated freedoms, Nafisi subsumes her country and its people under a far more powerful and wider-reaching ideology, one that disseminates discriminating notions against Iranian culture, and other Eastern cultures by extension. If the freedom called for in the text is intended to interrogate and challenge hegemonic ideology, such as that of Iran's theocratic regime, then

[31] It is important to note that, though ostensibly a memoir concerning the life of an Iranian teacher of English Literature in Iran, Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is not conventionally autobiographical. The book has four chapters tackling many works of fiction, the most prominent authors being the ones that provide the titles of the chapters: Vladimir Nabokov, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Henry James and Jane Austen. The memoir is a combination of personal reflections, mostly focused on the subject matter of the hardships related to living under clerical rule in Iran, narratively interwoven with these pre-existing fictional narratives of the Western canon.

the text contradicts itself, for its suggestion that freedom lies in the Western lifestyle merely replaces one totalising ideology with another. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is an important instance of a literary text as an ambassador of US cultural values for two reasons. Firstly, because of its success in reaching a wide audience – the book topped the *New York Times* reading list for more than ninety weeks, sold more than a million copies, received enthusiastic reviews from critics across the West and has been translated into thirty-two languages – though, ironically not including Persian, despite being about life in Iran. And, secondly, complementary to the first, this broad audience was exposed to a text that demonstrates what Slavoj Zizek identifies as 'the most dangerous form of non-freedom is the non-freedom which is not even perceived as such'.[32]

As suggested, such non-freedom pertains to the rhetoric of the work, which favours US ideologies in polar opposition to the Islamic republic. Issues pertaining to the speaker's complex relationship with the concept of 'home' are usually overlooked in academic discussions of this text, but a treatment of this concept is arguably vital to understanding the ideological position put forward by Nafisi.[33] I characterise the notion of 'home' in the text as oscillating between two meanings; one geographical (the physical place of Iran) and the other abstract (the emotional sense of belonging in the US). The speaker's alienation during her stay in Iran is predicated on elements of political and social realities there; however, in her attempt to reconnect herself to a space of belonging, she falls back on the US ideological discourse of democracy as essential to freedom, suggesting that this conception of democracy constitutes the only way to lead a free life. Having been exposed to Western culture since childhood, and having lived in the US for more than a decade, the speaker enthusiastically

[32] Slavoj Zizek, "What is Freedom Today?" *The Guardian*, (video-recording), produced by Nicole Jackson, Ben Marshall, Bruno Rincolucri, Anetta Jones, Robbie Kilgour and Caterina Monzani, *theguardian.com*, Wednesday 3rd December, 2014, accessed 20 December 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/video/2014/dec/03/slavoj-zizek-philosopher-what-is-freedom-today-video.

embraces the US cultural, social, and political, discourse of freedom and (or *as*) democracy. Her psychological evolution is reflected in the text, which by extension affects 'the girls' who, influenced by their teacher, endorse the US's (paradoxically) hegemonic notion of freedom as the only route by which they can 'free' the mind from the autocratic rule of Iran. However, the text subverts this emancipatory rhetoric by creating contradictory sites of performance where the narrative is trapped in a series of false dichotomies: the speaker is resistant to the regime yet simultaneously complicit in advocating another totalizing ideology.

This engagement with ideology problematises the content of the book, and this chapter thus examines the ways in which the alienation expressed in the personal – a seemingly profound and painful memoir of a woman's life in Tehran – deploys larger discourses of human rights and freedom. Before proceeding to the discussion of 'home', the next section of this chapter provides a critical review in order to situate the book in terms of its reception within academia.

II.2 Critical Review

The reception of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* oscillates between defensive anger and critical acclaim. 'How could a memoir about repressed women getting together to read the classics in a country run by clerics generate so much hostility?' wonders Firoozeh Papan-Matin, the director of Persian and Iranian Studies at the University of Washington in Seattle, defending Nafisi.[34] As suggested in that rhetorical question, the text is highly acclaimed by some for portraying the human rights abuses of the Islamic regime in Iran and the tyranny of its

[33] As stated, the 'memoir' is complicated by the employment of pre-existing fictional narratives; as such, I refer to the narrator of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* as the 'speaker' rather than Nafisi.
[34] Firoozeh Papan-Matin, "Reading & Misreading Lolita in Tehran: A Propaganada Tool?," *Onislam.net*, Friday, 19 October, 2007, accessed January, 2011, http://www.onislam.net/english/politics/asia/436232.html.

governmental regulations, particularly those regarding women's rights. For example, author, philosopher, and literary critic Susan Sontag writes in her review of the book:

> I was enthralled and moved by Azar Nafisi's account of how she defied, and helped others to defy, radical Islam's war against women. Her memoir contains important and properly complex reflections about the ravages of theocracy, about thoughtfulness, and about the ordeals of freedom—as well as a stirring account of the pleasures and deepening of consciousness that result from an encounter with great literature and with an inspired teacher.[35]

While Mona Simpson writes in *The Atlantic Monthly*:

> There are certain books [. . .] [that] carry inside their covers the heat and struggle of a life's central choice being made and the price being paid, while the writer tells us about other matters, and leaves behind a path of sadness and sparkling loss. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is such a book.[36]

On the other hand, Negar Mottahedeh, an Iranian cultural critic and film theorist resident in the US, whilst acknowledging the feminist concern in the text, finds that Nafisi's memoir intercepts this narrative with a problem: 'a consistently ahistorical analysis of Iran – one that does not distinguish between past and present – cannot be the rallying call for efforts on behalf of Iranian women today'.[37] Commenting on Nafisi's statement to *The Washington*

[35] This quote by Susan Sontag is written as a preview to the novel in the edition published by Hachette Australia. Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (Sydney: Hachette, 2013), not paginated.
[36] Mona Simpson, "Book Group in Chadors." *The Atlantic Monthly*, June, 2003, accessed 31 May, 2010, http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/print/200306/simpson.
[37] Negar Mottahedeh, "Off the Grid: Reading Iranian Memoirs in Our Time of Total War." *The Iranian*, September 2004, accessed March, 2010, http://www.merip.org/mero/interventions/grid.

Post in December 2003 that '[w]hen we had this secret class in Tehran […] we felt utterly helpless',[38] Mottahedeh says that 'not all Iranian women felt helpless after the limited opening for social and political activism offered by the period of Khatami's presidency, and indeed Nafisi is hardly unaware of the powerful presence of women in Iranian society today'. John Carlos Rowe, a professor at the University of Southern California, also expresses concerns about the way the narrative, firstly, feeds into the fantasy of what the Middle East should be like. Secondly, his analysis draws attention to the contradiction in the way the text depicts the Islamic revolution, and the regime of the Shah that it overthrew. The very little attention given to the brutality of the Shah's rule leaves 'the reader with the overall impression that the Islamic revolution occurred in a political vacuum and that its repressive rule was not motivated at least in part by the tyranny of the U.S.-backed Shah's regime and the brutality of its secret police, SAVAK'.[39] Moreover, in her journalism, Nafisi celebrates the Shah's era 'in terms of its advocacy of Western-style modernization', Rowe adds.[40]

Rowe is but one of many, such as Hamid Dabashi, Christopher Hitchens, and Seyed Marandi, who have shed light on Nafisi's dubious associations and connections in respect to this matter; for example, the political office held by her parents during the sovereignty of the Shah. Rowe further locates *Reading Lolita in Tehran* in the larger political discourse of neoliberal rhetoric that is deployed by the neoconservatives – the 'rhetorical emphasis', characterised as a 'hysterical patriotism', on the US as the democratic model for the rest of the world. (253) One strategy adopted in the pursuit of this agenda is the neoconservative support for women and ethnic minorities who share their conviction, for such subjects lend legitimacy to the cultural diversity of their presumed meritocracy. Condoleeza Rice (Secretary of State) and Clarence Thomas (Supreme Court Justice) are among the individuals

[38] Nafisi implies that the situation of women has always been helpless under the Islamic republic and the text does not tell the reader about any of the women movements that have been active in Iran.
[39] Nafisi speaks of SAVAK briefly on page 113 of *Reading Lolita*.
[40] John Carlos Rowe, "Reading Reading Lolita in Tehran in Idaho," *American Quarterly* 59, no. 2 (2007): 258.

Rowe cites in respect to this. Such women and ethnic minorities have been criticised by liberal and leftist intellectuals for endorsing the neoconservative agenda and being puppets at the hands of neoconservatives. However, according to Rowe, Nafisi 'represents a more complex figure whose defense of the aesthetic critique of social tyranny carefully imitates the rhetoric of classic liberalism'. (254) His critique of the text revolves around the way this memoir is deployed as part of a larger effort by neoconservatives 'to build the cultural and political case against diplomatic negotiations with the present government of Iran'. In other words, by presenting liberal values as against, and alien to, Iran's theocracy, the novel lends support to the neoconservative rejection of attempts to achieve the normalisation of relations between the US and Iran. Rowe further sheds light on Nafisi's connections to the neoconservatives of the US. For example, the author works at the Paul H. Nitze School for Advanced International Studies, where she is the director of the Dialogue Project, 'a multi-year initiative designed to promote—in [a] primarily cultural context—the development of democracy and human rights in the Muslim world'. (255-6) Then there is her connection to Princeton historian, and advisor to former Vice President Dick Cheney, Bernard Lewis.[41] Lewis is the author of *What Went Wrong? The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East*.[42] He coined the term 'clash of civilizations', a phrase adopted by many neoconservatives in order to express the problems related to Islam in the US.[43] Lewis is thanked in *Reading Lolita*'s acknowledgements as the one 'who opened the door'.[44] Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that the book was appraised by Lewis, and many other

[41] Christopher Hitchens, "Hurricane Lolita." *The Atlantic Monthly*, December, 2005, accessed January 2011, http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2005/12/hurricane-lolita/304386/.
[42] Bernard, Lewis, *What Went Wrong? The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East* (New York: Perennial, 2002).
[43] Although 'clash of civilizations' was proposed as a theory by the political scientist Samuel P. Huntington in 1992, and discussed in his book *The Clash of Civilizations?* The Debate in 1993, the term, as a heading in an article, is used earlier in 1990 by Bernard Lewis: "The Roots of Muslim Rage: why so many Muslims deeply resent the West, and why their bitterness will not easily be mollified." *The Atlantic Monthly*, September 1990, accessed March 2011, http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1990/09/the-roots-of-muslim-rage/304643/.
[44] Nafisi, *Reading Lolita*, 346.

neoconservatives, as a 'masterpiece' because they read the text as advocating democratic capitalism.[45]

Having laid out the critical reception of the text, it is clear how this chapter is distinguished in its approach, for this analysis does not focus on the author's connections outside the text but rather on the contradictions imbedded within. It also engages with issues related to form and its relationship with the content communicated through the book.

II.3 Rhetoric and Genre: Communicating Ideology through a Semi-Fictionalized Memoir

Rhetoric is described by James Resseguie as

> [T]he art of persuasion. It breathes life into a narrative and influences how we feel and think about what the author says. […] It is an integral and indispensable part of every mode of discourse […] for it is by means of which authors persuade us of their ideological point of view, norms, believes and values.[46]

'The conceptual framework or world view of the narrator' is called the ideological point of view, and it refers to 'the narrator's attitude toward or evaluation of the action, dialogue, characters, settings, and events'. (169) In terms of its employment within the wider textual narrative, rhetoric, as defined by the renowned narratologist James Phelan, is 'the synergy

[45] Hamid Dabashi, "Literature and Empire," *Brown Skin, White Masks* (New York: Pluto Press, 2011), 58.
[46] James L. Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 41.

occurring between authorial agency, textual phenomena, and reader response',[47] it is the strategy employed in 'telling a particular story to a particular audience in a particular situation for, presumably, a particular purpose'. (4) Rhetoric therefore is the communicative power of the narrative to mould the reader into accepting an argument or a particular way of looking at things, as they are advertently placed within an authorial design of both narration and plot. Peter Phillips usefully adds that rhetorical narrative invokes the readers to 'consider their existing world view in the light of a world promoted through strategic communication', influencing how they think and feel about an argument.[48]

In conceiving of *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* as a narrative of rhetoric, then, one needs to identify in the text the three elements defined by Phelan as 'authorial agency, textual phenomena, and reader response', and to then explain how their synergy constitutes a narrative of rhetoric, and how this rhetoric disseminates what Resseguie points out is the author's ideological point of view. However, what complicates such a task is the hybrid register adopted in this text; because the text is a personal narrative, a memoir, that is convoluted by its fusing with fictional narratives, as here the 'authorial agency' is conflated with the 'textual phenomenon' and 'reader response'.

As suggested earlier, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* is arguably a semi-fictionalised memoir. When the narrative is a merging of such genres, of fiction and memoir, it is a technique rife with rhetorical implications given that it tells the reader of an apparently true history whilst reading as a fiction. 'Memoirs, despite the myriad ways in which they might stretch, evade or incorrectly portray the truth, are grounded in real people, places and things and thus better suited to tell us 'what really happened' than are fictional

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[47] James Phelan, *Narrative as Rhetoric: Technique, Audiences, Ethics, Ideology* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1996), xii.
[48] Peter Philips, "Rhetoric," *Explorations in Biblical Interpretations and Literary Theory*, ed. David G. Firth and James A. Grant (Downers Grove: InterVasity, 2008), 241.

texts'.[49] However, *Reading Lolita* unconventionally merges genres, memoirs and fiction. Nafisi presents the reader with a protagonist – the 'speaker', or narrator, of the text – who is as much preoccupied with the world surrounding her as she is with her own position within it, as an author. It can be assumed that the life being presented in the narrative is indeed the life of the real-world author, meaning that the speaker is Nafisi, and, more specifically, that the history and experiences recounted by the speaker are shared by Nafisi. As Beth Holmgren points out, all definitions of the genre signal the memoir's connection with the 'real' and the 'true' because, as a documentary genre, the memoir stands 'distinct from imaginative literature in its 'orientation towards authenticity […]'. That orientation does not guarantee that the text 'tells the truth,' but it invokes a different dual relationship between author and reader in which the reader can presume independent knowledge of the events and experiences the writer represents'.[50] Accordingly, a memoir can be perceived as a mediated representation that is once-removed from reality. However, in a semi-fictionalised memoir this assumption is problematic. Conventionally, memoirs are written *either* in the first *or*, in some cases, third person using *either* past *or* present tense, whereas *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is written in the present *and* past tense *and* in the first *and* sometimes third person. This combining of tenses and narrative positions is particularly clear in the oscillation from the narrative 'I' in the past tense to the experiencing 'I' in the present tense, and in the shifts from first to third person, suggesting that the text borrows more of the features, or narrative devices, of the novel than of life-writing genres such as the memoir. This style automatically moves the text's generic status outside of the basic categories of memoir and fiction: the text appears to belong wholly to neither.

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[49] Jennifer Jensen Wallach, *Closer to the Truth Than Any Fact: Memoir, Memory, and Jim Crow* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 50.
[50] Beth Holmgren, "Introduction," *The Russian Memoir: History and Literature*, ed. Beth Holmgren (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003), xii.

On the fictional character of the text, the speaker subtly influences the reading experience through the advice she offers to her students, how to approach the text: '*do not,* under *any* circumstances, belittle a work of fiction by trying to turn it into a carbon copy of real life; what we search for in fiction is not so much reality but the epiphany of truth'.[51] This quotation does not only function on the simple level of the narrator 'warning', as she puts it, her students of how one might misread fictional texts, but it also implicitly instructs the real-world reader of how to approach *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. According to the narrator, fiction is not supposed to inscribe reality, but instead draws out the 'truth' beneath it, whereas a memoir is expected to be a personal account that inscribes real life events. Nafisi notes: '[t]he facts in this story are true [. . .], but I have made every effort to protect friends and students, baptizing them with new names [. . .] so that their secrets are safe'. (ix) Given her characterisation of fiction, the narrator tries to incorporate fiction into her memoir in order to narrate the 'truth' behind everyday life in Tehran.

Further, the genre of 'memoir' itself is somewhat elastic, perhaps giving credibility to Nafisi's incorporation of fiction into her work. Beth Holmgren concedes that contemporary criticism is likely to leave the memoir free of strict definition due to its wild variations, highlighting the complexity of the genre as follows:

> The memoir thus presents a remarkably fluid and affective genre, coincident with and sometimes indiscernible from fiction, autobiography, biography, history, and gossip; and capacious enough to combine fictional enhancements with nonfictional authority, confession with observation, personal license with verifiable facts, subversive rumors with celebrity worship. Yet—to intone a recurring feature—the memoir

[51] Nafisi, *Reading Lolita*, 3.

> necessarily presumes to record its subject's different public performance on 'real' stages: among family and intimates; in various social and political milieus; in the real space and time of history. Unbound by scholarly strictures and privileged with firsthand knowledge, the memoirist wields interpretive power more overtly, freely, and intimately than either historian or biographer.[52]

Liam Harte, discussing autobiography – the genre of life-writing that is often placed in contrast to memoir by way of 'seriousness' in literary technique and content[53] – also asserts what he calls the 'core paradox of the form', in the fact that as 'a slippery, contrary genre in which fact and fiction are intimately and indissolubly intertwined, autobiography necessarily reflects, generates and transforms social reality'.[54] In cross examining Harte and Holmgren's views, it can be said that life-writing, whether as memoir or autobiography, sustains an inextricable interplay of both factual and fictive elements.[55] *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, however, takes this ambiguity to an extreme: it actually, and explicitly, includes/borrows fictional narratives. The point to make here is: if the memoir is already a genre that offers a *re*presentation of social reality because it combines fact and fiction, the literary and historical, how to approach a semi-fictionalised memoir? For a semi-fictionalised memoir offers an even greater variation in its *re*presentation of the social reality, and given the political dimensions of the content of *Reading Lolita*, the question of authenticity is all the more pertinent.

Given Holmgren's initial account of memoir as oriented towards authenticity as a mediated representation, a semi-fictionalized memoir, with its further fictional narratives, is

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[52] Holmgren, "Introduction," xv.
[53] For further discussion, please see Laura Marcus who states this distinction in the introduction of her book. Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses: Criticism, Theory, Practice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994).
[54] Liam Harte, "Introduction," *The Literature of the Irish in Britain: Autobiography and Memoir, 1725-2001* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2009), xxvii.

twice-removed from reality. J. M. Coetzee states that: '[a]utobiography, and to a lesser extent memoir, seems to me to involve an undertaking to tell the truth, and to tell the truth in a quite an exacting sense, which would include not making up things'.[56] As suggested by Laura Marcus, there is a recognisable affiliation between the two forms of life-writing; nevertheless, a memoir seems to be less responsible for presenting the truth. There is, in a memoir, an authorial obligation to *re*present social reality, even if it is to a lesser extent than that in an autobiography. However, due to its generic hybridity as a semi-fictionalised memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* holds no firm position towards any of these genres, be it memoir or fiction. The generic hybridity breaks any lingering notion of generic constraints, and the authorial obligation to tell 'the truth', as Coetzee puts it, is also broken by extension.

The generic hybridity acts as a marker for ambiguity and contradiction in the text, aspects that are further emphasised by the structural and discursive content of the narrative. Describing her moment of arrival at Tehran airport, for example, the speaker says:

> Not having registered as yet that the home *she had left* seventeen years before, at the age of thirteen, was not home anymore, *she stands* alone, filled with emotions wriggling this way and that, ready to burst at the slightest provocation. *I try not to see her*, not to bump into her, to pass by unnoticed. Yet there is no way *I can avoid her* [my italics].[57]

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[55] For more on the unreliable truth of memoirs, please see: Maureen Murdock, *Unreliable Truth: On Memoir and Memory* (New York: Seal Press, 2003), and Russell Baker and William Knowlton Zinsser, *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1998).

[56] This quote is taken from Coetzee's letter to Tim Guest dated 16th March 2004, following the publication of Boyhood and Youth. J. C. Kannemeyer, *J.M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing* (London: Scribe Publication, 2012), 14333 [Kindle Version], quoted in Catherine Elaine Luther, "'The Wooden Man': A study of J.M. Coetzee's fictionalized memoir" (PhD diss., University of Essex, 2015), 118-119.

[57] Nafisi, *Reading Lolita*, 82.

Harte insists that 'however much a memoirist presents him- or herself as honest witness, the text must ultimately be read as a complex narrative *re*presentation of self and experience in which reality and identity are constructed through the act of autobiographical narration.'[58] Here we can see that the speaker uses the third person narrator as well as the first while also switching between past and present tense – a demonstration of the generic hybridity that allows Nafisi to give us the 'truth' of the event, that is the way the event *felt* – the above passage is describing the sensation of stepping outside of the self, or beside the self at a moment in time. The 'I' is her thoughts (that is her mental reflection) at that moment in time (the 'she' being temporally simultaneous to the reflection, the version of the narrator standing numb/stunned at the physical location; the 'she' is still in the present moment, as she 'had' thought those things in the past, but the 'she' is not in the past, hence 'she stands' there). The use of fiction is employed to give a fuller sense of experience for that moment in time and it enables a doubling of the protagonist; this doubling demonstrates how the memoir component is present in the 'I' of reflection, the fictive component being constituted by the 'she' as the figure of the character within the space-time of the narrative world itself. The Tehran she faces now is very different from the one she left and the doubling of the protagonist as both first person thought and third person body allows the reader to get a fuller sense of the scene, to experience the trauma and alienation of that moment. Nafisi borrows fictional narratives and techniques and then skillfully injects them within a life-writing narrative. As a semi-fictionalised memoir, the text's ambition is to be as interesting as a novel might be, whilst still communicating intimate, personal, historical and political experiences. It aspires to be literary; for that reason it borrows many of the features of the novel, of fiction, yet it implicitly promises the reader to present a factual account. With this semi-fictionalised text, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* does not record the past but recreates it in the author's own vision.

[58] Harte, "Introduction," xxvii.

In her discussion of genre in J.M. Coetzee's *Boyhood* and *Youth*, in which the narratives present a young protagonist with the same name and date of birth of the author in works that are neither identified as fiction or autobiography, Catherine Luther argues that Coetzee's unwillingness to conform to the rules of any genre is an attempt to loosen generic constraints, thus making way for 'revolutionary forms that challenge literary preconceptions'.[59] Luther emphasises that Coetzee's rejection of the categorisation of his works as either autobiography or fiction, such that his writing style 'hovers' between both, holds the purpose of avoiding the 'ideological pitfall' associated with restraining one's writing within a specific genre. It is this 'ideological pitfall' that shapes the character of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. (148) Since the author herself chooses to produce the text as '*A Memoir in Books*', this hybrid form of life-writing can be described as a semi-fictionalised memoir; where the narrative is predicated on elements of truth that are intertwined with fictional narratives in order to deliver a subjective view point. And it is the particular synergy occurring between the unusual position of 'authorial agency' that interacts with the 'textual phenomenon' and influences the 'reader response' that makes up the rhetoric in the narrative of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*.

Yet, as has been suggested, whilst Coetzee is attempting to elude ideological determinations, Nafisi's rhetoric is ideologically infused in *Reading Lolita*. For example, concerning the earlier cited passage that recounts the protagonist's return to Tehran, and the shock and trauma at facing a place that looks entirely alien to her, when one looks into Nafisi's background we find that the author was a member in the Iranian students' movement in the US during the revolution, which indicates that she was in touch with the ongoing transformation of Iran during that period of her absence. This undermines, to a certain extent, the elements of shock and alienation described in the previous quotation. And, as such, the

[59] Catherine Elaine Luther, "'The Wooden Man,'" 122.

narrator's magnifying of her alienation on arrival in Iran is a fictional distortion of the reality of Nafisi's circumstances.[60] There are many such discrepancies that propel us to question Nafisi's rhetorical communication in the text; an interrogation that results in the identification of ideological stances embedded in her work.

II.4 "Homing" the Narrator and Narrating "Home"

This section investigates the way the narrator's relationship with 'home' informs the narrative of the text. As such I begin with a brief overview of the biography in the text, which closely corresponds to Nafisi's real life, her places of occupancy and departure. Nafisi was born in 1955 to a privileged and prominent family in Tehran. At the age of thirteen, she was sent to complete her studies at boarding schools in Switzerland and England. While abroad, her father Ahmad Nafisi, the mayor of Tehran at the time (1961-1963), was jailed on insubordination and corruption charges.[61] In the same year of 1963, her mother became one of the first women members of the Iranian parliament.[62] In perhaps another example of the aforementioned discrepancies between fact and fiction, or, more accurately, between life-event and feeling in Nafisi's rhetorical method, her family apparently undertook such public positions in spite of their propensity to 'look down on politics'; the narrator instead proclaiming her family to have prided themselves on their 'contribution to literature and science' for eight hundred years. (84) It was in 1963, at the age of seventeen, Nafisi returned

[60] It should be noted that in an interview the author contradicts the account given in the book concerning her return to Tehran, as she states that she already knew that Iran has changed before she returned at the age of thirty. '[W]hen I went back, I had been dreaming of returning home to Iran since I was thirteen—which meant that the Iran I had created in my mind would already have been very different from the one that actually existed. In addition, I was returning to revolutionary Iran [at the age of thirty], where everything that I had called home—the streets of my childhood, their names—had changed'. Azar Nafisi, "Author Q & A: A Conversation with Azar Nafisi," in *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (New York: Random House, 2003), 351.
[61] Morteza, Rasouli, "An Interview with Ahmad Nafisi, The Former Mayer of Tehran." *Iranian Institute for Contemporary Historical Studies*, 2012, accessed May, 2013, http://iichs.org/index_en.asp?id=721&doc_cat=17.
[62] Nafisi, *Reading Lolita*, 261.

to Tehran for a year. Right before her eighteenth birthday, she imprudently married an Iranian man, whom she now describes as 'an insanely jealous husband'. (83) Nafisi moved to the United States with him in order to pursue their study at the University of Oklahoma, where she would continue studying after her divorce, earning a Ph.D in English Literature. The speaker lives out what the text implies to be the "American democratic experience" when she joins the Iranian student movement against the Shah dynasty (1976-1979), which was part of the revolution waged against the regime of Mohammad Reza Shah (1941-1979). (85) In 1977 she married her current husband Bijan Naderi and returned to teach in Tehran in 1979. After seventeen years of voluntary exile, during which she was consumed by thoughts of 'home', the thirty-year-old author returns to Iran. However, once in Tehran, she finds herself confined and restrained by the limitations of the Islamic Republic. She taught at the University of Tehran (1979-1982) as an assistant professor until she was expelled for refusing to wear the veil. In 1987, she took a post at the University of Allameh Tabatabai as an associate professor and taught there for seven years until she resigned and formed the reading group that occupies the narrative plot of this memoir. In 1997, the narrator and her family migrated to the US, where she wrote this memoir, which would be published in March 2003. [63]

Reading Lolita is predicated on elements of reality pertaining to Nafisi's life and outlook, yet there is much propaganda and misinformation that can be detected in this book. These further ideological elements emerge by way of the author's employment of rhetoric as outlined previously. What will be focused upon herein is how in her attempt to delienate herself during her stay in Iran, the speaker falls back on the US ideological discourse of freedom and democracy as the only way to lead a free life. This is what helps the speaker to cope with the situation in Tehran; it will be argued that such a belief is a defence mechanism

[63] For the past decade, the author has been a faculty member at the John Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies. She is involved in many cultural projects and has many appearances in the media that address women's rights in the Middle East and Islam. The author becomes a naturalized citizen in

manifested as a reaction formation. Her exposure to Western culture as a young adult, and through her living in the US in later years, leads to the belief that such an ideology is the only resource for achieving a happy and healthy lifestyle.

What aids this emphasis on American ideological values as determining the best way to live, so to speak, is the contrast given by way of the Iranian regime's alienating effect on living. On the writing of her memoir, the speaker explains that she wants 'to write about Austen and Nabokov and those who read and lived them with me'.[64] These authors are read and discussed in the reading group; she selects seven of her finest and most enthusiastic female students, in what Dabashi characterizes as 'ritualistic Thursday Kaffeeklatschs',[65] to read what she describes as the banned masterpieces of literary classics in the context of their lives under the 'brutal totalitarian' Islamic regime.[66] The members of the group identify their unfortunate predicaments with the characters they read about in an attempt to alleviate their oppression and exorcise their painful experiences. In other words, the alienation of the narrator is the leitmotif of this account and because, as the text emphasises, it is caused by the limitations and restrictions imposed by the clerical rule in Iran; alienation becomes almost synonymous with the practices of this regime. This association between autocratic rule and alienation in the text becomes problematic for the many reasons that will be explored below. The memoir is a personal narrative but it claims itself as a voice on behalf of women and in the name of women's rights in Iran. I would suggest that elevating this personal memoir into a political statement that speaks on the behalf of a larger audience is arguably a non sequitur, yet it is this elevation that broadened the work's appeal. Margaret Atwood, for example,

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2008: Azar Nafisi, "Vagabond Nation." *The New Yorker*, April 18, 2011, accessed August, 2012, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/04/18/vagabond-nation.

[64] Nafisi, *Reading Lolita*, 339.

[65] Kafeeklatsch 'is another term for KLATCH'. Origin is German, from 'Kaffee "coffee" + Klatsch "gossip"': Oxford Dictionary of English, Rev. 2nd ed. Edited by Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 944. Also available at http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/. The term is used by: Dabashi, *Brown Skin, White Masks*, 69.

[66] Nafisi, *Reading Lolita*, 42.

endorses the memoir according to the human rights context it claims for itself, and characterises it as a 'reading of mostly modern Western classics under a fundamentalist Muslim dictatorship, with hanging, shooting and bombing complications'.[67] As the quotation suggests, Iran is given a reductive representation that signifies total oppression, and I suggest that this works to emphasise the favouring of the US ideology expressed in the text.

And a close analysis of the text highlights another aspect, other than the Iranian regime, that might have been overlooked in the discussions of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. The speaker's alienation is conceivably rooted in her complex relationship with the notion of 'home' before it gets further entangled and problematised by the political change in Iran.

The speaker experiences seventeen years of voluntary exile that finds her inhabiting three different countries (Switzerland, England, and the US), and which consists of multiple episodes of departure and return. The text provides an opportunity to investigate the way the speaker's personal narrative of migration, comprising of a series of displacements and transitions, complicates and metamorphoses the way she perceives of 'home'. 'Home' arguably sets up a tension in the narrative, an opposition between two possible meanings that could, in most cases, align. These meanings are that of home as a point on the map (as in a geographic location, or the physicality of a place), and the concept of home as an abstract notion demarcating an emotional state or sense of self. While for many persons 'home' will consist of both components simultaneously, it is notable that Nafisi's narrator splits the two components, emphasising one or the other in a manner that designates Iran as her physical home and the US as her emotional site of belonging.

During her exile, the speaker's sense of home is seen as the physical place of Iran; her sense of belonging is knit into the fabric of its landscape.

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[67] Margaret Atwood, "The Book Lover's Tale: Using Literature to Stay Afloat in a Fundamentalist Sea." *Literary Review of Canada*, September, 2003, accessed August, 2012,

> During my first years abroad—when I was in school in England and Switzerland, and later, when I lived in America, I attempted to shape other places according to my *concept* of Iran [my italics]. I tried to Persianize the landscape and even transferred for a term to a small college in New Mexico, mainly because it reminded me of home.[68]

The language that communicates the sense of 'home' in this scene is suffused with place-related vocabulary. With phrases such as 'shape other places', 'persianize the landscape' and 'new Mexico', the reader understands that home for the narrator is identified as Iran (the place). In this passage, she stresses the geographical/architectural scenery, revealing the way she associates home with elements of place. In other words, the narrator's sense of home and belonging is rooted in the physicality of Iran.

After the exile, the narrator returns to what she initially describes as 'home' (Iran) at the age of thirty fulfilling what she describes as 'the dream had finally come true'. Nevertheless, instead of feeling ultimately at 'home', she experiences a different sense of belonging, only this time it is not related to Iran (the place):

> I discovered to my surprise that I was afflicted by […] a predicament. I had just returned to my home, where I could speak at last in my mother tongue, and there I was longing to talk to someone who spoke English, preferably with a New York accent, someone who was intelligent and

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http://reviewcanada.ca/magazine/2003/09/the-book-lovers-tale/.
[68] Nafisi, *Reading Lolita*, 82.

> appreciated Gatsby and Häagen-Dazs and knew about Mike Gold's Lower East Side. (107)

Another sense of 'home' is introduced in this paragraph; it comprises a set of practices and habits that can be identified within the frame of a US life style, whether intellectual or social. Though she can now speak 'at last in my mother tongue', at this point the speaker is longing for something else that is ultimately not characteristic of the place she used to consider home (Iran). With words such as 'discovered', 'surprise' and 'predicament' the narrator comes to the realization that home is not the physical sense of location but it rather lies in the abstract sense of dislocation. What she yearns for in this paragraph does not summon a physical or a direct approach to 'home', as was suggested previously, it rather shifts the meaning of 'home' into a more personalised and private construct. When she reaches the homeland the idea of home becomes abstract, recognising that home is not constituted by place inasmuch as it is by the speaker's sense of self, that is her life style. Her predicament is manifested in the epiphany that 'home' cannot be materialised especially if she cannot do the things that fulfill her 'self', be it discussing Gatsby or enjoying fancy ice cream. Though emphasising the reductive contrast she puts forward between the US and Iran, which I discussed earlier, the further point is that in Tehran, the speaker's concept of 'home' shifts from the privileging of home as a concrete and material structure, a physical place, to the privileging of the notion of home as an idea, as an emotional state of belonging. It is on the basis of this discovery/revelation that the author decides to migrate back to the US, and it is in this way that *Reading Lolita in Tehran* can be regarded as a narrative of migration.

This rigid split in the concept of 'home' is determined by the narrator's exilic experience. In the narrative, one can identify two different types of exile; the first is her

voluntary exile that is characterised by her physically being outside of Iran, and the second is more of an intellectual exile imposed by the Iranian government after the speaker returns to Tehran. Nafisi starts experiencing the first exile as a child, when she is sent to be educated in Switzerland and England. (82) During this time, 'home' for the speaker manifests its meaning with an emphasis on the physical sense of place (Tehran); it survives as a figment of imagination formed from the memory of the narrator as a child. When she returns to Tehran for a year, following the jailing of her father, the narrator feels that 'home' is not what it used to be. On the marriage she rushes into near the end of this first return to Tehran, the narrator says, 'I was insecure enough to marry at the spur of a moment, before my eighteenth birthday […] he was insanely jealous […] the day I said yes, I knew I was going to divorce him'. (83) They both move to the US to study in the University of Oklahoma, where she enrolls in the English Department as the 'only foreign student'. However, the new life with an 'insanely jealous' husband is a frustrating and unsatisfying one, and is suffused with emotional dismay. After moving to Norman, in Oklahoma, she says: 'in six months' time I had reached the conclusion that I would divorce him'. It took the speaker three more unsettling years of embattlement to divorce her husband, who relentlessly refuses the idea because he believes that 'a woman enters her husband's home in her wedding gown and leaves it in her shroud,' as the narrator puts it. Afterwards, she intentionally distances herself from the Iranian community in the US, 'especially the men', she explains, 'who had numerous illusions about a young divorcee's availability'. Her yearning for 'home' grows deeper, heightened by a sense of loss and nostalgia,[69] which prompts the speaker to search for a sense of familiarity in places, even if they are remotely similar to Tehran, as discussed in the previously quoted

[69] The sense of loss and nostalgia are related to her childhood, i.e. to her life before marriage and adult problems, which, given her childhood was mostly spend in Tehran, becomes equated with Tehran and the physicality of the place. During school years abroad, in Switzerland and England, the speaker experienced Iran in the form of holiday romance – which is reserved in her memory as the only version of Iran.

extract where the narrator explains her ‘persianizing the landscape’ and moving to a smaller college in New Mexico that physically resembles the Tehran she remembers.

The significance and value of the physical ‘home’ as an image through which individuals live and perceive other places in one’s mind are explicated in Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space*. Bachelard illustrates the relationship between ‘home’ (as in the physical space) and the imagination; he emphasises that home is where our selfhood (psyche) and our imagination are formed first. Thus, the physical ‘home’ is exaggerated and distorted when one attempts to extract it from memory.

> We live fixations, fixations of happiness. We comfort ourselves by reliving memories of protection. Something closed must retain our memories, while leaving them their original value as images. Memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home and, by recalling these memories, we add to our store of dreams […] our emotion is perhaps nothing but an expression of a poetry that was lost.[70]

It the light of Bachelard’s words, the narrator’s emotional re-living of the landscape of her ‘home’ becomes clear. She attempts to reiterate the fixations of happiness she associates with Iran while she lives in the US. As long as Iran is ‘home’ in the physical sense, it changes the way she perceives of other places.

After her divorce, by then a Ph.D student, the narrator’s ‘obsessive yearning for home’, as she puts it, continues and this time it is

> shaped into excited speeches against the tyrants back home and their American backers, and although I felt alienated from the movement itself, which was never home to me at any point, I had found an ideological framework within which to justify this unbridled, unreflective passion.[71]

Joining the Iranian student movement against the Pahlavi dynasty makes the narrator feel close to 'home' but not exactly at 'home'; the above quote, then, again emphasises the split in her usage of the term, the tyrants are 'back home' in the physical place of Iran, yet her emotional state is not aligned with the revolutionary movement, which is 'never home to me at any point'. The 'home' of Iran becomes schismatic during this period, oscillating between two images: the first is the construct of 'home' from childhood that she is nostalgic for, and the second is the utopian 'home' promised by the revolution. On the discrepancy of 'home' the narrator is split between 'the familiar Iran [she] felt nostalgic about, the place of parents and friends and summer nights by the Caspian Sea'; and the real new and becoming version of 'home' in the process of political upheaval, which is discussed in the meetings of the movement and to which she does not feel she belongs. As such, one can pin-point the demarcation between the two senses of home – as place and as emotional state of belonging – as they specifically relate to Iran and to this particular moment in time in the narrator's life. She expands: 'I then began a schizophrenic period in my life in which I tried to reconcile my revolutionary aspirations with the lifestyle I most enjoyed. I never fully integrated into the movement'. (85). The narrator is still stuck in a dilemmatic situation where she tries to reconcile two things that seem to be different and distant from each other: one is *feeling at*

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[70] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 6.
[71] Nafisi, *Reading Lolita*, 86.

home in the US's life style, which she craves and enjoys, and another is wishing *to be home* in the physical place of Iran—neither of the two alone is satisfying for the speaker.

A further point here is that the physical sense of home detaches itself from its basis in the literal concrete, bricks, and mortar, of Iran and finds its aesthetic developing into an imaginative construct. This is demonstrated by the alienation the speaker feels on her second return to her 'home', by which the speaker's first phase of exile, seventeen years of dislocation, finally ends with the end of her university studies in the US and her attempt to resettle in Iran. The following extract reveals the image of Tehran engraved in the speaker's memory, the Tehran she believes she is returning to, at the age of thirty.

> When I left Tehran for the first time, it was a hospitable place, with a fine restaurant that hosted dances on Friday evenings and a coffee shop with big French windows opening onto a balcony […]. Always on arrival there was a particular moment of epiphany, when suddenly a blanket of lights signaled that we have arrived [. . .] for seventeen years I dreamed of those lights, so beckoning and seductive. I dreamed of being submerged in them and of never having to leave again. (81)

Between nostalgia and reality, the narrator's 'home' remains suspended. In this passage, the speaker elevates 'home' into an almost idealised state. With words such as 'epiphany', 'seductive' and 'dreaming'; and with a description that portrays Tehran airport, and Tehran by implication, as a vigorous painting suffused with sentimental associations (with people drinking coffee in a French-style-designed restaurant opening on a balcony and dancing under the stars); one can conclude that the speaker's construct of the physical place of 'home'

is symbolic, fetishised and infused with past memory, imagination, nostalgia, and a feeling of loss.

> Far from the immensities of sea and land, merely through memory, we can recapture, by means of meditation, the resonances of this contemplation of grandeur. But is this really memory? Isn't imagination alone able to enlarge indefinitely the images of immensity? In point of face, daydreaming, from the very first second, is an entirely constituted state.[72]

Bachelard explains how the poetics of space echo deeply in the mind and vibrate in the imagination, establishing the fact that what is considered memory goes through a process of, if not disguise, imagination, elevating this memory into something constructed and larger than itself. The poetic memory of the airport, with its 'blanket of lights', that Nafisi resorts to, is a transformation by means of imagination into something much more than its reality.

Bachelard's explains how the real image of the place of home is distorted in the process of remembering it, when one is far from home. The elvation of memory that Bachelard explains might as well be the work of nostalgia disguising the memory by means of imagination. Nostalgia is a powerful feeling that partly expresses the pain of being away and it configures significantly in the transformation of 'home' into an imaginative construct. 'Nostalgia' is derived from the Greek words *nostos* - the word for 'return' – and *algos* – which means 'suffering'. Milan Kundera expands on the meaning of the word and connects the pain of being far to the llusions one might face when they experience nostalgia from "home".

In *Ignorance*, Kundera explains the standard understanding of nostalgia as 'the suffering caused by an unappeased yearning to return'.[73] He further elaborates on the etymology of 'nostalgia' comparing it with other words that communicate a similar meaning in different languages. 'In that etymological light', he concludes, 'nostalgia seems something like the pain of ignorance, of not knowing. You are far away, and I don't know what has become of you. My country is far away, and I don't know what's happening there'. Kundera's explanation of nostalgia sheds light on Nafisi's narrator's illusions of 'home'. She longs for a past and a lost childhood; therefore, while abroad, she constructs a sentimental narration of Iranianness that masks the fact that the 'home' she constructs is not based on her life there inasmuch as it is an adherence to what one might call a 'holiday romance' with Iran. Upon her arrival, the narrator describes herself in retrospect at the airport in the third person: '[n]ot having registered as yet that the home she had left seventeen years before, at the age of thirteen, was not home anymore, she stands alone filled with emotions wriggling this way and that, ready to burst at the slightest provocation'.[74] Thus, the speaker's 'concept' of Iran is based on the memory of a thirteen-year-old child and the fantasy of an adult who believes she is alienated, far away from 'home', in an alien country.

The image of 'home' implied in the imagination/memory of arriving at the airport, in the passage quoted earlier, stands in contrast to the real image of the place upon the speaker's second return to Iran, as an adult, following her studies in the US.

> The dream had finally come true, I was home, but the mood in the airport was not welcoming. It was somber and slightly menacing, like the unsmiling portraits of Ayatollah Khomeini and his anointed successor,

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[72] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 183.
[73] Milan Kundera, *Ignorance*, trans. Linda Asher (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 5-6.

> Ayatollah Montazeri, that covered the walls. It seemed as if a bad witch with a broomstick had flown over the building and in one sweep had taken away the restaurants, the children and women in colorful clothes that I remembered. (82)

The narrative eventually invites us to see that 'home' can be perceived not as an imaginary but as an imaginative construct. There is a gap between reality and what the narrator remembers/constructs. It reflects the way 'home' for her is a memory that is stretched for seventeen years during which it metamorphosed into a constructed world, after being fueled if not saturated by feelings of nostalgia and loss. The speaker's alienation in this extract emerges from the fact that she cannot restore/reclaim the past image of 'home'; Iran now feels to her almost like a foreign country. Her sense of alienation emerges from this split between how the speaker sees 'home' in her formative years as an expatriate and how she faces its reality upon the moment of her arrival.

Bearing in mind Bachelatd's illustration of the distortion of memory plus the work of nostalgia as Kundera explains one can understand how living in exile might indeed illicit certain feelings leading to an imagine 'home' in a way far from its reality. This imaginative construct of 'home' is a recognisable symptom among authors who live in exile. For instance, Salman Rushdie, who left India at the age of fourteen, is familiar with the sentiment of nostalgia as well as being aware of what he calls 'distortions of memory' in the process of 'unlocking the gates of lost time'.[75] In his essay 'Imaginary Homelands', Rushdie comments on the process of writing his novel *Midnight Children*:

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[74] Nafisi, *Reading Lolita*, 81.

> What I was actually doing was a novel of memory and about memory, so that my India was just that: 'my' India, a version and no more than one version of all the hundreds of millions of possible versions. I tried to make it as imaginatively true as I could, but imaginative truth is simultaneously honourable and suspect […]. It may be that when the Indian writer who writes from outside India tries to reflect that world, he is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost.

Rushdie here highlights, by way of contrast, the predicament of Nafisi's narrator. While Rushdie is self-aware that the version of India he is writing about is a subjective portrayal – he asserts it is '"my" India' – the narrator of *Reading Lolita* is actually shocked that the reality of her country differs from her memory of it. According to the text, she is under the illusion that her version of Iran is indeed the real country, which transforms her homecoming dream into a painful and estranging experience. As the narrator reveals, it is only with hindsight that the narrator can understand her concept of 'home'; it is through writing this memoir that she is able to organise her thoughts and feelings into a comprehensive conception of what 'home' is to her. However, like Rushdie the author Azar Nafisi outside the memoir, in an interview, does explain that she was aware that her image of Iran was an imaginary construct. This awareness undermines the shock of her return described in *Reading Lolita* and propels us to rethink the use of this shock and alienation in terms creating a stronger ideological effect in the narrative.[76]

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[75] Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta Books in association with Penguin Books, 1992), 10-11.

[76] '[W]hen I went back, I had been dreaming of returning home to Iran since I was thirteen—which meant that the Iran I had created in my mind would already have been very different from the one that actually existed. In addition, I was returning to revolutionary Iran [at the age of thirty], where everything that I had called home—the streets of my childhood, their names—had changed'. Azar Nafisi, "Author Q & A: A Conversation with Azar Nafisi," in *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (New York: Random House, 2003), 351.

It is upon her return to Iran as an adult looking to resettle there that we find the US beginning to consolidate itself into the emotional state of 'home' in the narrator's mind. The narrator's return to Tehran marks a second phase of exile, of which its defining characteristic is intellectual alienation, as opposed to the physical departure of her previous exile. The period between 1979 and 1997, which marks her arrival and departure, is a turbulent time of political upheaval in the history of modern Iran. The memoir details the historical changes as follows: the Shah left Iran on January 16, 1979, and Khomeini returned to Iran on February 1, with the effect that the Pahlavi dynasty was suddenly replaced with a 'far more reactionary and despotic regime'.[77] The revolution against the oppressive and corrupt rule of the Shah began in 1977 before the speaker's return, at which point she was participating in the aforementioned Iranian student movement in the US. During this period, diverse groups united to fight the Shah's rule including Marxists, Leftists, Islamists, and theocrats – though the revolution was predominantly Islamic and led by Khomeini from abroad. On April 1, 1979, Iranians voted in a national referendum to turn the country into an Islamic Republic. Khomeini's regime started executing members of the once-united-groups who did not agree with the new Islamic constitution.

> [O]pening the morning paper, I saw pictures of Ali and Faramarz and other friends from the student movement. […] they had been killed. […] I tore out the pages and for months hid them in my closet, using them as shoe trees, taking them out almost daily to look again at those faces I had last seen in another country that appeared to me now only in my dreams.

[77] Nafisi, *Reading Lolita*, 102.

Though already offering a lifestyle she identified with better, as mentioned earlier, its appearance in her 'dreams' suggest the US is now consolidating itself as the emotional 'home' the narrator seeks, by virtue of the contrast it offers to the alienating effect of this new theocracy on her life in Iran.

In December of 1979, the country adopted a theocratic republican constitution and Khomeini became Supreme Leader. The speaker recalls her further witnessing of her comrades and friends in the movement being executed for treason in the immediate period that follows. And for the two decades the speaker would stay in Tehran, the country would continue to be in turmoil; the eight years of war with Iraq reinforced and consolidated the Islamic regime's internal power. The speaker dedicates much of the memoir to the alienation caused by the myriad ways (social, political, and intellectual) in which the totalitarian regime controlled and oppressed the daily lives of people, and particularly women, in Iran. This is how the narrator describes her understanding of 'home' and 'exile' after she returns and starts teaching in the University of Tehran:

> As the years went by, the snow became polluted with the increasing pollution of Tehran; my friend was now in exile, and I had come home. Until then home had been amorphous and illusive: it presented itself in tantalising glimpses, with the impersonal familiarity of old family photographs. But all these feelings belonged to the past. Home was constantly changing before my eyes. […] I had never felt this sense of loss when I was a student in the States. In all those years, my yearning was tied to the certainty that home was mine for the having, that I could go back anytime I wished. It was not until I had reached home that I realized the true meaning of exile. (145)

This passage is important for two reasons. Firstly, it confirms that her earlier notion of Iran as 'home' was tied to physicality – whether based on her memory or an aesthetic constructed by her imagination – as her sense of loss is tied to the place 'constantly changing before my eyes'. And secondly, that her emotional 'home' is that of the US, hence she now realises 'the true meaning of exile'. As such, it can be concluded that her outright confession that her true exile is that of actually being in Iran is not solely caused by the totalitarian practices of that country's regime, but an understandably big part of it belongs to the author's relationship with the US, which she developed as an expatriate. As one imaginative, visual, 'home' disappears before her eyes in Iran, the emotional belonging she found in the US, lingers. It can be said, then, that the author does not later migrate to the US simply because she has been persecuted in Iran, after all she made a conscious choice to return to Tehran in 1979 when many members of the Iranian elites were leaving the country. In other words, the status quo of the country then was not news to the speaker, yet she chose to endure it. She migrates, instead, because she is conflicted within, struck by the 'epiphany' that she misses her life in the US.

And so, to conclude this section of the chapter, it is important to address what this complex understanding of 'home' means for the memoir's aforementioned status as a political statement. The speaker's intimate friend in Iran describes the narrator as 'very American'. (175) She comments: '[w]as this a compliment? Not particularly; it was merely a fact'. (176) In other words, her alienation in Iran is closer to that which could be felt by an American living in Iran, rather than that of a native Iranian. Therefore, the narrator's complex story with the notion of 'home' with all the alienation included inside and outside Iranian borders—an individual pattern and a unique personal trajectory of dislocation—acts as the main frame of the memoir. Hence, the significance of this point lies not only in clarifying the imbrications in the meaning of 'home' for the author, but, more importantly, in the problematic of

generalising her experience as one which is representative of that of Iranians, particularly Iranian women.

The speaker's personal trajectory of transmigration, and her privileged status as an individual, is not identical to every woman in Iran and that is what makes her political statement in the memoir rather more personal than a general expression on behalf of others. Her story of 'home' is different from other Iranians, as has been explicated above. And it is that story which results in the speaker, throughout the text, continually contrasting her experience in Europe and the US with the way she lives in Iran. The rhetoric of the narrative is such that the oppression in Iran is always presented vis-à-vis the liberty in the US. Her account of the political events and oppression in the country is also detailed from her own perspective that neglects many important acts and events of resistance, including women's movements that happened in Iran across the period she covers. Anne Donaday and Huma Ahmed-Ghosh, who provide a historical reading of the context of the memoir, do not only criticise Nafisi for operating from an entirely secular perspective, which is influenced, if not shaped, by her life abroad, but also for neglecting as well as omitting to mention other events in the modern history of Iran during her stay. They argue that 'she does not discuss the attempts, and in some case strides, made by Islamic feminists toward women's rights while she lives in Iran. Yet it is not possible for her to be unaware of the emergence of the various women's journals and movements'.[78] Nafisi is therefore trying to impose a certain style of Western feminism and a discourse of freedom that is borrowed predominantly from the US. And what Donaday and Ahmed-Ghosh help to highlight is that this Western feminism is particular to Nafisi's specific background and experiences, where Iranians had their own feminism particularly founded on their own background and experiences – thus demonstrating why elevating Nafisi's text to the status of a general voice for Iranian women is problematic.

Further, the depiction of the Islamic ideology as 'black' and the US ideology as 'white', the positing of them as binary opposites of negative and positive, is a simplistic, if not naïve, approach in dealing with the problem. And such polarisation, and its negative outcomes, is inherent to the very core of the text. The Thursday gatherings unite the eight women and allow them to communicate freely. For almost three hours, in the narrator's living room, they can ignore oppression. Their presence and practices in that place do not fall under the threats and persecutions that dominate their lives; they are free to speak their own minds. Nevertheless, the female characters, feeling alien among unsympathetic strangers, move to the margin of society. The Thursday classes thus arguably constitute a double bind. While choosing literature to escape the present oppressing reality to a free world of imagination is a good technique to de-alienate the group, they end up isolating themselves and therefore furthering their marginalisation. It is because of this situation that the female characters come to see everything through a narrow vision of 'either/or'. The text persists in creating polarised images of oppression and freedom, rather than attempting to negotiate a way in between. For example, the speaker says:

> I have two photographs in front of me now. In the first there are seven women, standing against a white wall. They are, according to the law of the land, dressed in black robes and head scarves, covered except for the oval of their faces and their hands. In the second photograph the same group, in the same position, stands against the same wall. Only they have taken off their coverings. Splashes of color separate one from the next. Each has become distinct through the color and style of her clothes, the color and the length of her hair; not even the two who are still wearing their headscarves look the same. (4)

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[78] For more on this idea, please see Anne Donaday and Huma Ahmed–Ghosh, "Why Americans Love Azar Nafisi's Reading Lolita in Tehran," *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 33, no. 3 (2008): 628.

From the beginning of the text, the juxtaposition of the two images establishes a dichotomy. One that suggests that women in veil are totally devoid of any sense of individuality, particularly in opposition to their counter image, with all the colours and peculiarities when they remove the veil. The contradiction of the narrator's sentiment, of course, is that, though the veil is represented as a symbol of oppression, the two girls who choose to remain in the veil are indeed asserting their individuality by means of that choice. The narrator gives lip service to the idea of choice (regarding to wearing the veil) but the text ultimately portrays the veil as a symbol of oppression. The comparison of the photographs is further significant in delivering another contradictory issue in the text. The narrator's deliverance and resolution of alienation lies in the utopian setting of the US. However, in the US wearing the veil is not a symbol of confiscated freedom or individuality, but exactly the opposite; the State does not require women to wear the veils, and so it is instead a demonstration of personal freedoms. Thus, in this regard, the text fails to register the US as a transcultural place.

Polarising struggles of a cultural nature is usually very problematic, because treating matters of this importance cannot be well addressed by employing absolute categorisation rather than nuanced discussion. It is this lack of nuance that continues to strain relations between the two nations. Many people in Iran view the West as 'decadent', particularly the US.[79] Similarly, the West generally perceives Iran as an oppressive and dangerous power. In fact, Nafisi's memoir issues just such a polarising statement, which only aggravates and fuels such tensions. My main concern about this book comes from the fact that, instead of embracing the complexity of the situation in Iran, Nafisi replaces a specific ideology with another one that diametrically opposes it. By embracing the US's life style and positing it as

[79] Nafisi repeatedly makes such a claim in her memoir. Nafisi, *Reading Lolita*, 25, 86, 108, 125, 127, etc.

an absolute solution she is simply contradicting herself, because she is using a similar rhetoric to that of the Islamic Republic of Iran – an either/or, a restriction of choice to binary options.

II.5 Narrative and Reader Response

As stated, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* is best described as a semi-fictionalised memoir. I have addressed how the ambiguity provides the foundation for Nafisi's rhetorical communication, whilst here I will examine the memoir and the novelistic components of the work in more detail in order to draw out the ideology inherent in the text. I will begin by addressing the explicitly novelistic component of the text: how it takes the form of a compilation of stories within a story that acts as a frame.

The frame is the tale that generates the tales, exhibiting its generative function, in a structure similar to the classic model provided by *A Thousand and One Nights*. While the main frame is specific, relating to the personal struggles the author goes through, it subsequently affects the tales within, and the characters involved. Hence, issues pertaining to the speaker's complex relationship with 'home' affect, one way or another, the character of the text as a whole. In other words, the characters, whether real or fabricated, or a mix of both, do not exactly share the predicament of the speaker – in *Reading Lolita* such characters do not necessarily share the same complex relationship with 'home' nor the same privileges – but they are narrated, nevertheless, through her alienation and so partake in it also.

The speaker also directly influences the female characters in the reading group, and arguably transfers her anxieties and estrangement to them as well. The narrator assumes a role similar to that of Scheherazade as she enters a mood of rescue saving whom she calls 'my girls' by reading Western novels in the context of their lives in Iran in order to 'help us

in our present trapped situation *as women* [my italics]'.[80] The girls, as described by the narrator, are impressionable and susceptible to influence: 'they have no clear image of themselves; they can only see and shape themselves through other people's eyes—ironically, the very people they despise. I have underlined *love yourself, self-confidence*'. (38) The narrator identifies her role clearly as a protector; she explains how her living room is a 'wonderland' (8) and 'we were in that room to protect ourselves from the reality outside'. (59) The novels they read, she elaborates, 'allowed us to defy the repressive reality outside the room—not only that, but to avenge ourselves on those who controlled our lives'. (57) In this text, it is not story-telling that 'saves' the characters, as it does in *A Thousand and One Nights*, but story-reading, and not just any stories. The saving of the girls is by means of reading Western classics that the narrator judges as the 'best fiction'. (94)

However, *Reading Lolita* does make many references to Scheherazade and the virgins she aims to rescue. The narrator writes of how before the arrival of Scheherazade in *A Thousand and One Nights*, the girls 'surrender their virginity, and their lives without resistance or protest. […] Scheherazade breaks the cycle of violence by choosing to embrace different forms of engagement. She fashions her universe not through physical force, as the king does, but through imagination and reflection'. (19) The narrator's Thursday kaffeeklatsches and *A Thousand and One Nights* appear to be similar in many ways. The narrator sounds very much like a Scheherazade who saves the virgins, 'my girls', from the oppression of the religious king, Khomeini, through the power of fiction. Although the use of Persian literature might sound empowering at first, the way it is presented in the text provokes Oriental fantasies. The narrator and the girls in the reading group are presented in parallel to Scheherazade and the virgins. This presentation is part of a recurrent issue in the

[80] Nafisi, *Reading Lolita*, 19.

narrative: it sexualises oppression. On another occasion, Khomeini is aligned with the protagonist of Nabokov's *Lolita*, Humbert Humbert:

> like all mythmakers, he tried to fashion reality out of his dream, and in the end, like Humbert, he had managed to destroy both reality and his dream. Added to his crimes, to the murders and tortures, we would now face this last indignity—the murder of our dreams. (246)

This equation of Khomeini and Humbert invokes the rape metaphor connecting the characters. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* as a title becomes a metaphor for a rape fantasy. The question of who, in this scenario, is Lolita and who is Humbert no longer haunts the narrative; a narrative that invites us to see the girls as sexualised subjects being raped by the autocracy in Iran. It becomes difficult not to see the contradictions prevalent in such images. The Scheherazade position of protection loses its empowering status as it promotes Orientalist fantasies. In this way, the text oppresses the girls in this representation, exploiting these women by way of the image of innocent, sexually susceptible, girls, rather than liberating them as women of strong self-determination. This is already implied in the earlier quoted passage characterising the women as only able to 'see and shape themselves through other people's eyes'; while they are said to mould themselves in the visage of the Iranian men in power – 'the very people they despise'. (38)

It is essential to emphasise that the choice of reading Western classics is not the issue being criticized in my interpretation. Instead, it is the way that the text extrapolates certain values from the novels that I identify as constituting the problematics of the narrative. For instance, Western classics in the text are always presented in opposition to an Iranian counterpart. For example, Nassrin, who, because he disapproves of the idea, lies to her father

regarding her whereabouts when she goes to the Thursday reading group, informing the group that her pretext is helping Mahshid in translating 'his Magnum opus, *The Political, Philosophical, Social and Religious Principles of Ayatolah Komeini*'. The narrator has Nassrin say:

> 'Did you know that one way to cure a man's sexual appetites is by having sex with animals? And there's the problem of sex with chickens. You have to ask yourself if a man who has had sex with a chicken can eat the chicken afterwards. Our leader has provided us with an answer: *No*, neither he nor his immediate family or next-door neighbors can eat of that chicken's meat, but it's okay for a neighbor who lives two doors away. My father would rather I spent my time on such texts than on Jane Austen or Nabokov?' (71)

Here, Austin and Nabokov are juxtaposed to Khomeini and his book, as if the latter comes to represent quintessential Iranian literature. This juxtaposition is interestingly voiced by Nassrin and whether the narrator uses Nassrin's voice or these are actually Nassrin's words, the paragraph emphasises the (east, west) dichotomy and demonstrates the way the girls absorb their teacher's values.[81] Also the reference to bestiality degrades the image of Iranians in an Orientalist way. The narrative fosters similar underlying dichotomies that feed into a discourse of stereotyping Iranian people/culture.

In another part of the text, the narrator explains how she refrains from the company of Iranian men during her years in the US because they have 'numerous illusions about a young divorcee's availability'. (83) But after a while she joins the Iranian Student movement because '[o]ne attraction was the fact that men in the movement didn't try to assault or

seduce me. Instead, they held study groups in which they discussed Engels's *Origin of the Family*, *Private Property, and the State* and Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*'. (85) Again, the narrator is protected by Western literature from the abuse of Iranian men; that this literature, even then, has the power to change Iranian men into a more, perhaps, 'civilized' version of themselves, where they do not harass divorced Iranian women. Such statements also promote misconceptions about Iranian men, and Iranians, who appear to be, according to this quotation, abusive; having the tendency to take advantage of women. This characterisation works to exclude Iranian men from US society in order to build herself up as an 'American'. This is also the case with Bharati Mukherjee's protagonist, Jyoti who, as we will see in the next chapter, similarly dismisses other ethnicities as being somehow less able to integrate, for the purpose of demonstrating that she can. Similar allusions are found all throughout the text and sometimes they are quite condescending in their underlying implications; such as the time when the speaker expresses how much she 'was longing to talk to someone who spoke English, preferably with a New York accent, someone who was intelligent and appreciated Gatsby and Häagen-Dazs and knew about Mike Gold's Lower East Side', as if people who appreciate Gatsby or know about Mike Gold do not exist in Iran. After all, she is an Iranian who does know of them, and surely not the only one, and if her knowledge of Western literature comes from the fact that she is 'very American', privileged, studied, and lived more than a decade in the US, then this is another way in which the narrator contradicts herself when she speaks in the name of Iranians and their plight.

It is in the manner in which Western classics are discussed that the ideological character of the text begins to reveal itself. Although the speaker situates herself as a rescuer, in the tradition of Scheherazade, ultimately it is the canon of Western classics that is posed as the saviour, and, most importantly, their value comes at the expense of demoting an Iranian

[81] Further, Nabokov's Lolita is also about Humbert who is a paedophile, so it is worth pointing to the bestiality

counterpart, as discussed previously. According to the text, 'the girls' discover their humanity while they read themselves through the narratives of Western fictional characters. Their sentiment is also shared by many readers, such as Michiko Kakutani, who describes the memoir in the *New York Times* as 'an eloquent brief on the transformative powers of fiction—on the refuge from ideology that art can offer to those living under tyranny, and art's affirmative and subversive faith in the voice of the individual'.[82] In response to Christopher Hitchens' accusation of her support for the neoconservatives plotting regime change in Iran, Nafisi announces: 'I do not want to advocate regime change by use of violence or foreign intervention; I want the progressive forces in the world to empathize with the plight of Iranian people'. Here, the phrase 'progressive forces in the world' advocates that the memoir is written to reach out to a wider audience, one that adopts the politics of human rights and would 'empathize' with the violations committed by the autocracy in Iran. In the same interview the author stresses that 'the question is how to make people realize that support of human rights is not merely compassionate, but pragmatic'. In other words, the text is not written solely for personal purposes but it also bears ideological foregroundings in its narrative to draw attention to issues pertaining to human rights violations, particularly those of women's rights. However, as argued, the human rights message the text attempts to deliver is bolstered by a narrative that exercises oppression via the sexualising of the female characters in both rape and Orientalist fantasies. The text harnesses a problematic trait in human rights representations which have a long history of presenting sexualized images of victims in order to cement the audience sympathy with their plight.[83]

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referred to in the passage. It almost feels as if Nassrin, or the narrator, is suggesting that one type of sexual deviance is better than another.

[82] Michiko Kakutani, "Books of the Times: Book Study as Insubordination Under the Mullahs." *The New York Times on the Web*, March 2, 2011, accessed April, 2012. http://www.nytimes.com/2003/04/15/books/books-of-the-times-book-study-as-insubordination-under-the-mullahs.html.

[83] Wendy S. Hesford, *Spectacular Rhetorics: Human Rights Visions, Recognitions, Feminisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011) and Shohini Chaudhuri, *Cinema of the Dark Side: Atrocity and the Ethics of Film Spectatorship* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

In 'Enabling Fictions and Novel Subjects: The *Bildungsroman* and International Human Rights Law', Joseph Slaughter outlines the ways in which human rights law and the *Bildungsroman* share rhetorical narratives.[84] He argues that the narratological alliance between the two demonstrates 'the complicity of cultural forms in disseminating and naturalizing the norms of human rights, in making them both legible and commensurable'. (1408) Slaughter also emphasises that it is not only the *Bildungsroman* that has such common ground with human rights, but that there are other forms that coalesce with such ethics as well. (1407) *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, in its context of the relationship between the individual and society, in its genre as a semi-fictionalised memoir, and in its narrative of an apprenticeship led by a narrator whose 'girls' develop into 'free' subjects/women through Western literature, shares the same rhetorical narrative that the *Bildungsroman* has in common with human rights law. It is in this way that the readers of this text are encouraged to demonise the Iranian government with its alienating practices in favour of endorsing the wider narrative of human rights, mostly ignoring any nuances of either component and the fallacies in this polarisation. Donaday and Ahmed-Ghosh argue 'that it was written exclusively in terms of an Iranian context, yet written for a U.S. audience that is not provided with the historical and political tools to understand the text other than in western terms'.[85] This narrative arguably uses alienation, implied in numerous intertextual echoes and the heart-breaking victimisation of the young women, to win over the reader. Readers might identify with the lives they read about empathetically by means of catharsis, especially given that the memoir borrows many elements from the sentimental novel.

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[84] Joseph Slaughter, "Enabling Fictions and Novel Subjects: The Bildungsroman and International Human Rights Law," *Modern Language Association* (PMLA) 121, no. 4 (October, 2006), 1407. He explains that the 'assumptions about subject shared by normative human rights law and the idealist Bildungsroman manifest themselves in a common conceptual vocabulary, humanist social vision, and narrative grammar of free and full human personality development. […] [They are] mutually enabling fictions: each projects an image of the human personality that ratifies the other"s vision of the ideal relations between individual and society'.

[85] Donaday and Ahmed – Ghosh, "Why Americans Love," 628.

The text is defined by its author as a memoir in books, and 'confessions' are a component of such a genre. The dimensions and meanings of the term/movement 'confessional' has been of ongoing debate in autobiographical writing, as there is more than one way to approach the term 'confessional'.[86] However, two characteristics have been established in confessional writing. Firstly, it has a healing effect, in the sense that it acts like a psychiatric experience; for example, M. L. Rosenthal in describing Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* says that confessional writing is 'impure art, magnificently stated but unpleasantly egocentric […] Its self-therapeutic motive is so obvious and persistent'.[87] Secondly, confessional texts have a 'productive and discursive' relationship with the reader, exercising a particular effect on them. In Nafisi's memoir, it seems that Nafisi feels the need to write, to give shape and order to what she has experienced, in order to come to terms with it and, above all, to grant it meaning in retrospect. 'I dated the entry June 23, 1997, and wrote beside the date: 'for my new book.' It took me one year [. . .] to think again about writing this book, and another before I could bring myself to take up my pen', reports Nafisi on when she first thought of writing this book, after her last visit to her 'magician',[88] before leaving Iran.[89] Dealing with a life-changing experience in a memoir entails engaging with: first, the experience of the self, second, the memory, and, third, the act of rearranging the arbitrary experiences and memories into form. In function, it is, on a personal level, redemptive. However, the stories in the book are cumulatively exhaustive in 'unveiling' life in Iran to the world, where 'everyday life does not have fewer horrors than prison'. (13) As such, despite being of the personal, confessional form, such an account on Iran as given in *Reading Lolita*

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[86] Please see Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses: Criticism, Theory, Practice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), Linda Anderson, *Women and Autobiography in the Twentieth Century* (London: Prentice Hall, 1997), and Liz Stanley, *The Auto/biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/biography* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992).

[87] M. L. Rosenthal, "Poetry as Confession," *The Critical Response to Robert Lowell*, ed. Steven G. Axelrod, (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1999), 64.

[88] The magician is Nafisi's role model as she says. He is portrayed as a liberated man of great knowledge about Western culture and education, often described with a glass of home-made vodka.

[89] Nafisi, *Reading Lolita*, 339.

feeds into and subscribes to the image of life in Iran that is already stereotyped in the west. This confessional is elevated to the political not in its speaking for other Iranian women, but in its endorsing of certain ideologies.

Another characteristic of the confessional writing style is the relationship between the narrative and the reader. Although the book is making public the very private events and feelings of Nafisi's life, on a certain level it communicates confidentially with the reader. The speaker confides in the reader who is asked to relate to her experiences. By repeatedly using the first person narrator, Nafisi wins her audience with sentimental appeals:

> I need you, the reader, to imagine us, for we won't really exist if you don't. Against the tyranny of time and politics, imagine us the way we sometimes didn't dare to imagine ourselves: in our most private and secret moments, in the most extraordinarily ordinary instances of life, listening to music, falling in love walking down the shady streets or reading Lolita in Tehran. And imagine us again with all this confiscated, driven underground, taken away from us. (6)

This kind of rhetoric, a melodramatic heightening of feelings, is frequently used in the text.[90] Here, the use of 'us' places more emphasis on the female bonding because it refers to the women in the reading group, creating a sense of an oppressed community and, thus, confiscation of women's rights. In addressing the reader this way, there is more of an appeal to their sentiment requiring, and even implicitly imploring, their sympathy than there is to logic or reason or even emotions of anger. In comparison with their women counterparts, male characters occupy very little presence in the narrative. It is the women who matter: heroic women like the speaker and the girls who defy oppression and fight reality through

[90] Pages: 26, 35, 39, 59, 74.

reading novels. This text is a tale, in short, that concentrates on the female experience under oppression, and in doing so, appropriates the techniques of the sentimental novel. Herbert Ross Borwn defines the 'new woman' in the US sentimental novel as the one 'who entertained ambitions outside the family circle [which] was regarded as 'the moral horror of the time.''[91] In this respect, Nafisi's narrative produces what seems to be the Iranian 'new woman' in the sentimental tradition, a woman who defies authority (familial and otherwise). The 'girls' assert and exercise their individuality, which is considered to be a moral horror by the Iranian autocracy, in the protection of the narrator's living room.

However, this image of 'the new Iranian woman' is simplistic, if not superficial, and it makes for another site of contradiction in the text. At the center of the narrative are those familiar protagonists of sentimental fiction: the young women confronting their destiny, where they make their way in a world of tyranny. 'The sentimental narrative dramatizes a struggle between social norm and desire, between obedience and transgression, in which an individual has to make a crucial choice', bringing a 'challenge to existing social and cultural hierarchies […] with an act of cultural empowerment'.[92] While the emergence of the 'new woman' in the US sentimental novel excited the public imagination with ideas of female freedom and female sexuality, the deployment of such a concept in Nafisi's text serves other purposes. There are numerous moments of pathos that centre on the reading group members: secret loves, police arrests, jail experiences, death scenes of friends and intellectuals, and a series of appeals to the reader. Some of this sentimentalism is clearly designed to move the audience to sympathy with the plight of the heroines. But some are more complex in effect, since the dynamic of the plot relegates those incidents, which in a conventional sentimental novel would be central to women's transition and liberation, to become problematic issues of

[91] Herbert Ross Brown, *The Sentimental Novel in America: 1789-1860* (Durham: Duke Universsity Press,1942), 282.

women's rights and feminist concerns. Because there, the girls become, more than anything, mere evidence of the autocratic control that excludes and oppresses women. Living in the Islamic Republic of Iran, as the speaker puts it, is like 'you're forced into having sex with someone you dislike'.[93] Again, the girls are sexualised in this rape metaphor in order to highlight the abuses of the regime, alluding to every girl in the text as another Lolita whose innocence and purity are defiled by the autocracy.

Interestingly, Margaret Atwood also makes this connection, yet she has a positive attitude towards the analogy; in Atwood's eyes Iranian women all become Lolitas abused and damaged by the Humbert of the regime:

> Reading Lolita provides us with a chilling account of what it feels like to live under such conditions: the heaviness, the constant weighing down – which is what we mean by 'oppression' – and at the same time a lightness, a sense of unreality – They can't be doing this! – and a feeling that one is becoming both invisible and fictional. Nafisi's reading group paid so much attention to Nabokov partly [. . .] because they saw, in the fate of the defenseless Lolita at the hands of Humbert, their own position reflected. Lolita was turned into a fantasy object, just as every woman in Iran had become a fantasy object for the regime – a regime that wanted to censor all narratives but its own.[94]

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[92] Winfried Fluck, "Novels of transition: From Sentimental Novel to Domestic Novel," *The Construction and Contestation of American Cultures and Identities in the Early National Period*, ed. Udo J. Hebel (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitatsverlag, 1999), 98.
[93]Nafisi, *Reading Lolita*, 329.
[94] Margaret Atwood, "A Book Lover"s Tale: A Literary Life Raft on Iran"s Fundamentalist Sea." *Literary Review of Canada*, September, 2003, accessed February 2012, http://reviewcanada.ca/magazine/2003/09/the-book-lovers-tale/.

It is of further note that this review of the book first appeared in the human rights magazine produced by Amnesty International. For accompanying the sexualisation of the girls that occurs within the text, Nafisi would promote the book in the context of human rights and women's rights, writing that: '*Reading Lolita* seeks to clarify the larger challenges of human rights, Islamic fundamentalism, and especially the status of women in a theocracy by connecting these critical issues to important literary themes'.[95] However, given the other above aspects from which the text cannot be divorced, this rights component only means that the girls are reiterated in the image of the alienated heroines of the 18th century genre of the sentimental novel and, by using such a technique, the narrator pushes the feminist clock two centuries back, discarding the accomplishments of Iranian women and culture in contemporary times and instead presenting them in the image of sentimental heroines. After all, for all the apparent secret meetings that would develop their intellect, the girls retreat to the domestic in the form of 'Thursday Kaffeekalatsches' which is another example of simulating the narrative of domestic fiction in the late 18th and early 19th century American novel.

Nafisi further employs the techniques of the sentimental novel in order to make the reader complicit in sharing the ideology of her text. Drawing on Linda Hutcheon's *Narcissistic Narrative* and Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, and in the context of analysing Anne Sexton works, Jo Gill emphasises that

> The language of the confessional text continues often to be read as 'transitive and referential', as a truthful representation of the lived experience of the author. […] [It] persists in being read as an

[95] Azar Nafisi, "Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books." *The Middle East Forum*, 6 June, 2003, accessed January, 2012, http://www.meforum.org/539/reading-lolita-in-tehran-a-memoir-in-books.

> expressive/realist mode, offering privileged and reliable insight into personal experience.

> Just as narcissistic narrative thematizes or mirrors its own processes of reception […] so too the confessional text takes as one of its subjects the complicity of its own audience in the generation of its meaning-in the 'completion' of its truth.[96]

Gill emphasises the way the reader has an integral role in the meaning generated in a confessional text, because such texts are inherently 'transitive and referential'. Through the reader's interaction with the text, they become complicit in the meaning/ideology the text communicates. The language used in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* communicates with the reader on an emotional level and, by means of catharsis and empathy, it also makes the reader complicit in the ideological character of the text. In a place of frustrated longings for 'freedom', linked with the fears of authority, that shape this narrative, the characters' self-esteem is now gained through a process of social interaction and intellectual exchange that derives its recognition from the reader through emotional intensity, including appeals of vulnerability and oppression, in the context of women's rights.

'Catharsis' is derived from the Greek word which is translated as 'cleansing' or 'purification'. In Aristotle's *Poetics*, the concept of catharsis refers to 'incidents arousing pity and fear' in the audience who gain relief from sharing and reliving these disturbances.[97] The 'horrors of everyday life' that the author/poet describes instigate pity and fear in the reader/listener who would relate to these horrors by means of empathy. Such an approach is

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[96] Jo Gill, "Textual Confessions: Narcissism in Anne Sexton"s Early Poetry," *Twentieth Century Literature*, 50, no. 1 (Spring 2004), 62-3.
[97] Aristotle, "The Poetics," *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 1460.

employed by Nafisi, whose narrator directly addresses the reader on many occasions in the text, 'I have asked you to imagine us, to imagine us in the act of reading […]', 'And so I will remain as long as you keep me in your eyes, dear reader'.[98] Such language – as used in the earlier quoted paragraph that begins, 'I need you, the reader, to imagine us, for we won't really exist if you don't' – implores the reader's attention and empathy and reaches out to them through their feelings, making the reader feel responsible if they do not. This responsibility implicitly makes the reader complicit in the ideology of the text.

II.6 The Language of Alienation in the Narrative

In this part of the chapter I will give a closer examination of how the narrator's alienation manifests itself in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. The narrator charts her alienating journey towards survival, rather than satisfaction or success, which is highlighted by the fact that all the group does is confined to a particular space which fails to enact any change in wider society. As stated earlier, the text focuses not so much on moments of particular brutality (although there are certainly many of them) as on the bitter and alienating daily burden of women under political and social oppression, which is exemplified by the experience of the narrator. In Tehran, the narrator is alienated from the city she once called 'home' by the ideological terms of the autocracy. She is also alienated from her work place, as well as work itself, because there is the obligation to wear the veil and the censorship of the curricula by the regime. She resigns from her post at the University due to her refusal to be forced into wearing the veil: 'I told the Revolutionary Committee that my integrity as a teacher and a woman was being compromised by its insistence that I wear the veil'. (125) She explains: '[n]ow I could not call myself a teacher […] I felt light and fictional, as if I were walking on air, as if I had been written into being and then erased in one quick swipe. This new feeling of

[98] Nafisi, *Reading Lolita*, 3 and 343.

unreality led me to invent new games, survival games I would now call them.' (167) After losing her academic post, the speaker feels alienated from a sense of purposefulness which, in turn, drives her to a feeling of effacement. She starts feeling estranged from her own self since she cannot practise the profession that defines her life – being a teacher – and, as a result, she loses coherence and retreats to the margins of society, into the safety of her living room. Alienation, in the text, then, is presented as a psychological condition. The narrator says:

> Perhaps it is only now and from this distance, when I am able to speak of these experiences openly and without fear, that I can begin to understand them and overcome my own terrible sense of helplessness. In Iran a strange distance informed our relation to these daily experiences of brutality and humiliation. There, we spoke as if the events did not belong to us; like schizophrenic patients, we tried to keep ourselves away from that other self, at once intimate and alien. (74)

The use of the term 'schizophrenic' suggests an oscillation between two states of being. The narrative style is also symptomatic of this 'schizophrenic' state of being, which is reflected in the oscillation of the 'I'.

As explicated above, *Reading Lolita* not only borrows aspects from the sentimental novel, but, as a self-designated memoir, the text is also written in a realist register. This semi-fictionalized memoir rehearses and reinvents both autobiographical writing and sentimental fiction at once in its romance and realism, creating two positions in the narrative that are especially clear in the narrator's use of 'I'. 'I' in the text is loaded and it begs the question: who is this 'I'?

The 'I' is made up of different components here—it is a complex 'I'. The narrator devises two tenses in her writing: there is the *narratin*g 'I' in the *past* tense, which historicises the events described, and the *experiencing* 'I' in the *present* tense, which gives an immediacy to the events as the reader sees how the narrator experiences the event through the re-living of her memory. Nafisi uses these different approaches to the 'I' interchangeably in the text. The following two paragraphs from *Reading Lolita* demonstrate this technique:

> And so it *happened* that one Thursday in early September we *gathered* in my living room for our first meeting. Here they *come*, one more time. First, I *hear* the bell, a pause, and the closing of the street door. Then I *hear* footsteps coming up the winding staircase and past my mother's apartment. As I *move* towards the front door, I *register* a piece of sky through the side window. Each girl, as soon as she *reaches* the door, *takes off* her robe and scarf, sometimes shaking her head from side to side. She *pauses* before entering the room. Only there *is* no room, just the teasing void of memory [my italics].

> More than any other place in our home, the living room *was* symbolic of my nomadic and borrowed life style. Vagrant pieces of furniture from different times and places *were* thrown together, partly out of financial necessity, and partly because of my eclectic taste. Oddly, these incongruous ingredients *created* a symmetry that the other, more deliberately furnished rooms in the apartment lacked [My italics].[99]

This kind of overlapping, of the narrating and experiencing 'I' and subsequently of tenses, happens throughout the book in successive paragraphs or sentences, as in the passage quoted

[99] Nafisi, *Reading Lolita*, 7.

above. This oscillation between the two 'I's and the tenses enriches the alienation effect by giving it another dimension – the schizoid split in the sense or representation of the self. This dimension is achieved as follows: the exchange between the two tenses creates a division within the narrator as an individual producing a separation in the 'self'; consequently it gives two elastic dimensions of the 'self' stretching within the span of memory rather than a single thread. Ipso facto, it is considerable to think of the constant shift throughout the text between past and present tense, between the narrating 'I' and the experiencing 'I', to some extent as schizoid.

The narrative distance is temporal-spatial – Nafisi migrated to the US on June 24, 1997 and published this book in 2003. There are several years between the migration from Iran and the writing about Iran, which enables a time and space distance in the narrative. This distance enables the narrating 'I' to talk about the life of the experiencing 'I', because the narrating 'I' physically separates the speaker from the experiences of the past. In the above quoted extracts, the speaker uses the past tense to establish for the reader the routine of receiving the girls in the living room, and the present tense in order to provide the emotive component of the scene, that is how she felt about, or, really, how she *feels* in reliving the memory of, such an event. In other words, she uses the past when she goes back in time in order to situate the reader in an event in the past, while the present stands for the memory in motion, giving the narrative a feeling of immediacy. What I am suggesting is that the distance guarantees some balance/sanity in remembering the past; such dissociation from the past is essential for the narrator's survival in reliving the alienation of those times. This distance allows the narrator to look back at the past and evaluate it sanely and lucidly.

As such, while the technique should be described as 'schizoid', given the attention that Nafisi gives it here, the speaker's narrative style is not even close to an erratic narrative style. On the contrary, the narrator is better characterised as having a clear, organised

mindset, and an attentive approach to language. Although the reader, due to the shift between present and past tense, might be given the illusion that sometimes the two 'I's merge and the narrating 'I' jumps forward in time to become the experiencing 'I' expressed in the present, there is a crystal clear polarisation between these two 'I's. It is essential that the narrator never betrays the distance in her narrative, because she needs to write about the alienation experience without engulfing herself in the trauma itself. By employing the past tense she can look back objectively and give us the trauma, whilst using the present tense she can elucidate how she feels about these past events from a de-alienated position. Thus, the writing vividly achieves the alienation effects of the past, yet the writing process sieves the immediate pain and saves Nafisi from reliving the past – consequently, enabling her to write lucidly of the past.

Language again plays a role in determining the alienation expressed in the text in yet another facet. The type of alienation and exile the narrator and her female students go through in Tehran is severe and encountered on many levels; thus, they all try to destroy the reality that is crushing them and attempt to survive it. The problem the characters encounter is that they cannot communicate with 'the other' in the same society they live in, that is the Iranian citizens who adopt different convictions in their lives. Language even seems to have lost its power of functionality; there might be communication between characters, but it is not at a functional level. It is rather a battle at an ideological level. The characters might be communicating within the Iranian society and using Persian language; nevertheless, this very same language makes sense to no one unless they belong to the same ideology. If the narrator is trying to communicate with a religious person by way of her secular stance, the language fails to fulfil its function. In this case, language is at loss; merely using the same signifier but reflecting a very different signified.

> What could he think? A stern ayatollah, a blind and improbable philosopher-king, had decided to impose his dream on a country and a people and to re-create us in his own myopic vision. So he had formulated an ideal of me as a Muslim woman, as a Muslim woman teacher, and wanted me to look, act and in short live according to that ideal. Laleh and I, in refusing to accept that ideal, were taking not a political stance but an existential one. No, I could tell Mr. Bahri, it was not that piece of cloth that I rejected, it was the transformation being imposed upon me that made me look in the mirror and hate the stranger I had become.
>
> *I think that day I realized how futile it was to 'discuss' my views with Mr. Bahri. How could one argue against the representative of God on earth?* Mr. Bahri, for the time being at least, *derived his energy from the undeniable fact that he was on the side of Right; I was at best a stray sinner*. For a few months I had seen it coming, but I think it was that day, after I left Mr. Bahri and his friend, that it first hit me how irrelevant I had become. [My italics]. (165)

Mr. Bahri is one of Nafisi's students at the University. He is a religious person and so a symbol of the system. He is a person who believes in the word of God and thus has the claim to condemn anyone different from him. The purpose of any 'discussion', for Mr. Bahri, is not to exchange ideas, to reach a better conclusion or to improve a situation; it is solely to convince the other of what he believes. In this scene, he is demanding Nafisi to wear the veil in compliance with the revolution's resolutions. She, by that time, has decided to resign rather than to wear it. Mr. Bahri is supposed to understand the reasons behind Nafisi's decision, but he does not. According to his ideology, which is the Islamic logic, he does not understand the 'fuss' over 'a piece of cloth' and 'this sort of behavior'. The narrator complains that she cannot possibly have a viable argument with him. Communication with him is impossible. Throughout his meeting with her, his eyes are fixated on 'a black fountain

pen, which he kept turning around and around in his hands' – symbolic behaviour, the pen in particular emphasises the linguistic aspect of this inability to communicate, and the 'piece of cloth' has the meaning of oppression to the narrator, and the meaning of normality to the student, thus demonstrating how the context of their understanding of what the item signifies fails to overlap. There is no eye contact or a handshake. All the aspects of simple communication with another person are absent. She finds herself leaving the conversation without making 'the mistake of trying to shake his hands', which he clamps behind his back, repeatedly saying '"please don't bother"'.

Other examples of such obstructed communication come in the form of other students that the speaker encounters. Throughout her lectures, Mr. Ghomi, the head of Islamic Jihad, always lifts his head with 'objections' to her presentations. The latter follows the narrator to the office, and she recounts the confrontation as follows, stating that he:

> lectured me, mostly about Western decadence and how the absence of 'the absolute' had been the cause of the downfall of the Western civilization. He discussed these matters with absurd finality, as facts that could not be argued. When I spoke, he paused respectfully, and as soon as I finished, he would go in the same monstrous way and continue exactly where he had left off. (193)

A further point is that, while these figures are another component of the alienating force of Iranian society, the protagonist is not really different from these oppressive characters. Although she operates from an entirely secular perspective, she, too, obstructs the communication of others. Again the text presents us with a dichotomy where both sides try to impose their ideology on 'the other'. It is understandable that the protagonist feels frustrated and alienated, as we are already informed that she is 'very American', but again she is doing

what the regime and its representatives do: instead of establishing a common ground and negotiating the two ideological positions, she instead demonises 'the other'.

A further component of language and alienation in this novel takes the form of the memoir's apparent polyphony, which appears to be employed in order to express alienation in the service of a wider ideological stance. Bound by the religious character of the Iranian society, the characteristics of the place reject the girls' true identity and push them to escape into the literary worlds of novels. The regime imposes a dual life style on its citizens, a life style split between the private and the public. There is a schism in their personalities and lives. Living in the Islamic Republic is like

> [Y]ou're forced into having sex with someone you dislike, you make your mind blank—you pretend to be somewhere else, you tend to forget your body, you hate your body. That's what we do over here. We are constantly pretending to be somewhere else—we either plan it or dream it. (329)

Apart from sexualising oppression in a rape metaphor, as discussed earlier, the use of 'we' and 'you' is also problematic here. On the one hand, the 'you' is directly addressing the reader who is asked to place themselves in a rape scenario, making identifying with the predicament of Iranian women an ethical and moral obligation. On the other hand, the use of 'we' throughout the text inadequately places every Iranian woman in this situation. This falsely generalises the experiences of women in Tehran – an issue raised earlier. Here I will explicate how exactly the narrator attempts to achieve such generalisation.

Mahshid stands as an example of the Muslim young woman of faith in the Thursday reading group, who wears the veil willingly. After a debate in the class, the narrator quotes from Mahshid's class diary:

> ‘Both Yassi and I know that we have been losing our faith. We have been questioning it with every move. During the Shah’s time, it was different. I felt I was in the minority and I had to guard my faith against all odds. Now that my religion is in power, I feel more helpless than even before, and more alienated.’ (327)

Mahshid engages in an argument with Mitra. She asks her, ‘“you don’t have any sense of belonging here? [. . .] I seem to be the only one who feels she owes something to this place”’. Mitra replies: ‘“I can’t live with this constant fear [. . .] with having to worry all the time about the way I dress or walk. Things that come naturally to me are considered sinful, so how am I supposed to act?”’ Sanaz interferes in this argument, addressing Mahshid, and implicitly alluding to the fact that she is religious by choice, ‘[m]aybe for you, it is easier’. Mahshid, agitated, interrupts Sanaz:

> ‘You think I have it easy? [. . .] Do you think people only like you suffer in this country? You don’t even know what fear is. Just because of my faith and the fact that I wear the veil, you think I don’t feel threatened? You think I don’t feel fear? It’s rather superficial, isn’t it, to think that the only kind of fear is *your kind* [. . .] what else do I have but my religion, and if I lose that . . .’.

There are a number of issues to investigate in the previous statements. First, it is possible that narrator is using the girls as puppets to pantomime her own thoughts. The speaker interestingly suggests through Mahshid that religious people in Iran are alienated as well. It is no coincidence that Mahshid alludes to her jail experience that left her with an impaired

kidney, through which the text seems to suggest that even religious people cannot escape the tyrannical clutch of the Iranian regime. She is not suggesting that all religious people are alienated; there is already the representation of Mr. Bahri, for example. Mahshid's words '*your kind*' suggest further divisions in the society and in Thursday's small community. One can see that she is alienated in the class; Mahshid is terrified because she feels that she is a misfit who belongs to a twilight zone. First, she, as a liberated religious young woman, does not belong to the secular girls' community of the class. Second, she does not belong to people of her own faith, because she does not adopt the attitude of rejecting the West as a source of decadence and evil – an attitude usually associated with religious people in Iran. So far, Nafisi's representation of Mahshid is plausible. However, throughout the book, Nafisi implicitly makes it look impossible to be religious and open-minded at the same time, as such, this is perhaps why she makes Mahshid and Yassi question their faith towards the end of the book.

Using the voices of the girls, like puppets, invites us to consider the Bakhtinian notion of polyphony in the novel, especially given that the narrator draws on this concept herself. Reading *Pride and Prejudice* with the group, the narrator describes the text as 'the most polyphonic of all novels', concluding that '[t]hese readings made me curious about the origins of the novel and what I came to understand as it's basically democratic structure'. (187-188) The speaker's statement that it makes up a democratic structure in the novel – and her general endorsement of democracy as freedom elsewhere in the text – suggests that she adopts the notion of polyphony in her own writing. By 'polyphonic' (or dialogic) form, Mikhail Bakhtin, refers to a 'non-author/itarian' structure of the novel;[100] where every character (voice) is treated as 'ideologically authoritative and independent' – an entity

[100] Raman Selden, Peter Widdowson and Peter Brooker, ed., *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, 5th edition (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2005), 40.

independent of its author.[101] In other words, the characters are 'not only objects of the author's word, but subjects of their own directly significant word as well'. (7) A polyphonic novel means that the character's voice attains integrity and freedom in expressing its viewpoint without the author's interference between the character and the reader. It is in this way that the narrator of *Reading Lolita* indirectly informs the reader that there is transparency and independence in her delivering of the girl's voices (quoting their class diaries, for example), and that what they say stands independent from her own ideology. However, how much polyphony is there in the text if all the characters subscribe, or come to subscribe, to the narrator's ideology. During the discussion of *The Ambassadors* by Henry James in the group, the narrator describes the character of Mrs. Newsome as: 'a tyrant much in the way of a bad novelist, who shapes his characters according to his own ideology or desires and never allows them the space to become themselves'.[102] Ironically, the narrator seems to be exacting the same kind of control over her characters by shaping them according to her own vision. As discussed earlier, the girls 'have no clear image of themselves; they can only see and shape themselves through other people's eye' – demonstrating and affirming that the girls first come to her without shape, it is the narrator who shapes them for herself. Such moulding of the other figures in the novel is also demonstrated in the previously quoted paragraphs concerning her male students. Mr. Bahri and Mr. Ghomi are not given the space to express their ideological stance freely; instead, their world view is presented according to the narrator's judgment. While polyphony in the novel 'leaves the author in a much less dominant position in relation to his or her own writing', here the protagonist's world view of Iran predominantly affects the ideological character of the text.[103] This is another site of contradiction where the text subverts the agency of freedom and democracy it claims to

[101] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 5.
[102] Nafisi, *Reading Lolita*, 249.
[103] Raman Selden, et. al., *A Reader's Guide*, 42.

advocate. And, in relation to this chapter on language and alienation, we find that the narrator is moulding Iran into a monologic world almost exclusively determined by her own feelings of alienation.

The protagonist narratively emerges through the voices of girls. For example, once Yassi and Mahshid, religious characters, weave themselves into the structure of the Thursday gatherings, their belief in their religion starts to shake, thus proving the narrator's conviction of the emancipatory power of literature. Their plight is merely expressed in order to demonstrate the narrator's ideological leanings; by merging her voices with theirs, the narrator tries to create the girls' characters in her own image, leaving them all to speak in her shadow. The girls suffer what she makes them suffer and they hope for what she believes is the best.

In this book, the narrator creates a small model of her own idea of a utopian society; where every girl in the course is character-specific and therefore serves as a representative of a possible type of citizen. 'I didn't take into consideration their ideological or religious background. Later, I would count it as a great achievement that [we had] such a mixed group, with different and at times conflicting background, personal as well as religious', the narrator writes. (11) Yet the diversity is, by the end of the novel, diminished in the service of the narrator's own stance. Much in the way of a bad novelist, to ironically quote the narrator, who 'shapes his characters according to his own ideology or desires and never allows them the space to become themselves'.

II.7 Traversing Spaces of Alienation and Ideology

Nafisi's narrator embarks on three movements in the book: the first is from public to private; when she decides to resign from the university to stay in the house and teach the private course to a selection of bright female students. And the second is from private to public

(house to the university); when she goes back to teaching again in the University of Tehran.[104] The third movement is from Iran to the US. Notably, the house is the base of all these movements.

Starting with the first movement from the university to the house, the following addresses its reasons and motives. The narrator does not belong to the ordinary conventional Iranian model of citizen and she does not conform to the herd mentality. Her position starts from a protest against a totalitarian regime. She is well educated, exposed to a higher wave of social structure, and has already lived the democratic experience by way of studying in the US. She does not only feel herself superior to the Iranian society, but above it as well. She is against the totalitarian aspect of religion and politics. She begins with demanding and calling for democracy and individual freedom. She is prepared to give this priority, even if it means she will never be able to integrate with her society – this is why the previously discussed experiencing self, or the experiencing 'I', of the narrative is important; it is a free self, an emancipated 'I'. Consequently, a person with as acute a sensibility as the narrator does not engage with secondary struggle (such as fighting with the university over her personal qualms). She quits teaching because,

> Teaching in the Islamic republic, like any other vocation, was subservient to politics and subject to arbitrary rules. Always, the joy of teaching marred by diversions and considerations forced on us by the regime—how could one teach when the main concern of university officials was not the quality of one's work but the color of one's lips, the subversive potential of a single strand of hair [. . .] what preoccupied the faculty was how to exercise the word *wine* from a Hemingway story, when they

[104] The university is the University of Allameh Tabatabai, Nafisi resigned "in the fall of 1995" (3), after she "had been teaching since 1987" (9).

> decide not to teach Emily Bronte because she appeared to condone adultery? (10-11)

She enjoys an apparent intellectual superiority and rational cleverness, which she uses to create a sort of fantasy in her life. This world of fantasy is encapsulated in the house, where she needs to reduce herself to an inferior, and a minority, the marginalised, in order to saturate herself with pain. She explains her withdrawal and return to the house as a mechanism to preserve individuality and uniqueness, and to defy the Islamic ideology:

> The worst crime committed by totalitarian mind-set is that they force their citizens, including their victims, to become complicit in their crimes. Dancing with your jailer, participating in your own execution, this is an act of utmost brutality. [. . .] The only way to leave the circle, to stop dancing with the jailer, is to preserve one's individuality, that unique quality which evades description but differentiates one human being from the other. (76-77)

Nafisi's initiative of the private course and of writing this very book itself is a protest from a woman who refuses to be reduced to a ruled object. The Iranian society, as a religious state based on Sharia law, conspires against one's subjectivity; it tames it and deprives it of its essence of uniqueness and turns it into an object. The narrator and her students do not accept this; however, they cannot demand their individual freedom. Such demand can cost them imprisonment and in some cases their lives. Consequently, they gather themselves in a group and practise their free 'selves' in the house. Clearly, in terms of boundaries, the house is a critical symbol in the alienation experience.

All the girls are characterised as one 'type' of person, which is that of the alienated. There is a deep abyss within them; a void that forms in the space between what they are and what they should be (in terms of the social expectations imposed by the political system). The fluctuation between these two divisions is intensive and happens on a daily basis. Returning to the narrator's aforementioned description of two photographs of the women in the group – one with their veils, and one without – it could be said that the two photographs placed side by side represent the two worlds of inside/outside and private/public. Hence these images are used to characterise their existence in the Islamic Republic as a 'fragile unreality'; '[o]ne cancels the other, and yet without one, the other is incomplete'. (21) In the first photograph, veiled, the women are figments of someone else's dream. In the other, unveiled and splashed with colour, the women are how they imagine themselves – but '[i]n neither we feel completely at home'.

The girls, being non-conformist individuals, constitute a taboo category in the society; as such, within Iranian society they find that interaction can only achieved by either replacing it with literature, and thus figuratively destroying it, or by becoming part of it and destroying themselves in the process. There is simply no place for non-conformism, which is practically an invitation for social suicide. This is a sentiment that Nafisi's narrator identifies strongly with Iran, and she conveys this through her teaching of Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading*. In this novel, Nabokov differentiates Cincinnatus C., his imaginative solitary hero, from those around him through his originality in a society where uniformity is not only the norm but also the law. Nafisi's narrator explains:

> What Nabokov creates for us in *Invitation to a Beheading* is not the actual physical pain and torture of a totalitarian regime but the nightmarish quality of living in an atmosphere of perpetual dread. Cincinnatus C. is frail, he is passive, he is a hero without knowing or

> acknowledging it: he fights with his instincts, and his acts of writing are his means of escape. He is a hero because he refuses to become like all the rest.

> Unlike in other utopian novels, the forces of evil here are not omnipotent; Nabokov shows us their frailty as well. They are ridiculous and they can be defeated, and this does not lessen the tragedy-the waste. *Invitation to a Beheading* is written from the point of view of the victim, one who ultimately sees the absurd sham of his persecutors and who must retreat into himself in order to survive.

> Those of us living in the Islamic Republic of Iran grasped both the tragedy and absurdity of the cruelty to which we were subjected. We had to poke fun at our own misery in order to survive. We also instinctively recognized poshlust[105]-not just in others, but in ourselves. This was one reason that art and literature became so essential to our lives: they were not a luxury but a necessity. (23)

Similarly, Nafisi's narrator creates a survival place in her own house, where she and 'the girls' retreat into their own minds every Thursday. Like Cincinnatus C., they refuse to accept reality and become like other Iranian citizens. Alienated outside the house, Nafisi appropriates her private house to fight this alienation and subvert the ideological influence of the Islamic regime upon its citizens.

For the purpose of procuring their own individuality, Nafisi and the girls situate themselves at a distance from mainstream Iranian society, placing themselves within a

[105] Nafisi quotes Nabokov's explanation of the word 'poshlust': '"is not only the obviously trashy but mainly the falsely important, the falsely beautiful, the falsely clever, the falsely attractive."' (23)

smaller community constituted by their own type of people. The 'self' loses its sensibility when it is in solitude standing on its own; because it is social, its relation to other individuals in a larger community plays a vital part in its construction.[106] In order to recreate the sense of the self, the girls join the narrator in her 'special Thursday mornings'. These mornings witness a collective communal spirit, which binds them together, allowing them to communicate freely with no restrictions: '[w]hen all the possibilities seem to be taken away from you, the minutest opening can become a great freedom. We felt when we were together that we were almost absolutely free. This feeling was in the air that very first Thursday morning'.[107] The Thursday classes in the living room are thus an example of the desired utopia, where presumably there is no ideology imposed upon its inhabitants and members are entitled to be individualistic expressing themselves without fear of being persecuted. (Though, as explicated above, its members are all arguably made to conform to the narrator's opinions and West-favouring ideology.)

The more conscious the narrator becomes of society's deprivation, the more deeply she sinks into herself, and the more ready she is to sink into the house altogether to escape this alienation. This house is the fortress of her solidity. However, it should be noted that though the narrator manages to respond to her alienation from the outside by appropriating the private place of her house in accordance with her own individual will, she is thwarted in some respects, for the religious sociopolitical hegemony extends its practice even into the private realm of one's own house and between the walls of one's private room, For instance, the system applies a sponsorship on guests. The narrator tells us that she could not host male students in her course because 'it was too risky'. (3) In other words, according to Sharia, the Islamic law adopted by the State, he who occupies no blood relation to a female must not be present with her in any private or public place; meaning, the only male relations a female can

[106] Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of*

engage with are that of a brother, a husband, or a son. If a citizen breaks this rule they risk getting arrested under the charge of adultery. Nima is the male sacrifice in the course of the Thursday ritual. He is excluded from the course because of his gender. He says that he will 'carry a bouquet of flowers and march in front of your [the narrator's] house during class hours, in protest'. (14) This is the private house, it is a place to draw boundaries from the public outside in order to be free of boundaries inside, but in the narrator's characterisation of Iran even this is not wholly possible. As such, it should be further noted that it is not just the house that becomes a symbol of the alienation experience – to be more specific, it is the compartmentalisation of the house.

The Thursday course takes place in the living room. The apartment is the Iranian society in miniature. The living room resembles the group. It is symmetrical with its chaotic pieces, which the narrator describes, in a reference to her alienated sense of belonging, as: 'symbolic of my nomadic and borrowed life'. (7) The 'vagrant pieces of furniture from different times and places' also relate to the unity of the girls in this room, for its 'incongruent ingredients created a symmetry that the other, more deliberately furnished rooms in the apartment lacked'. The paintings lean against the wall, the flower vases are on the floor and the windows are 'curtainless'. The room is characterised with a free style, which is challenging to the traditional, which is very much the function of the class. This room transforms itself to a place of transgression and insubordination. There is a certain psychological process underlying the in/out movements of the house. The house is the fortress of the girls' solitude. It is the place in which they are able to defy the outside, and to diffuse their sense of alienation; however, simultaneously and paradoxically, it intensifies their alienation because then they are cut out from the outer world. And, in respect to this,

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Knowledge (London: Penguin Books, 1991).
[107] Nafisi, *Reading Lolita*, 28.

although oppressed by the regime, and with an intense awareness of her degradation, it is possible to detect in the narrator a feeling of delight in her exclusion.

> As you imagine us in that room, you must also understand our desire for this dangerous vanishing act. The more we withdraw into our sanctuary, the more we became alienated from our day-to-day life, when I walked down the streets, I asked myself, Are these my people, is this my home town, am I who I am? (74)

The narrator knows that she is guilty according to the laws of society because of what she believes and thinks. Even her mother laments the narrator's way of life: 'I don't know if you belong to me'. (7) The narrator informs the reader that she 'never lived up to her expectations'. However, she the speaker feels superiority—she is more clever than most of the people around her. She resigns from her teaching post because of the 'declining quality of the university [. . .] The ever-increasing indifference among the remaining faculty and students [. . .] The daily struggle against arbitrary rules and restrictions'. (10) Her feeling of superiority does not conceal itself: 'I smiled [. . .] remembering the reaction of the university officials to my letter of resignation. They had harassed me and limited me in all manner of ways [. . .] it was of some *satisfaction* to me to find out [. . .] they in fact did boycott my replacement [my italics]'. She wants to teach 'students who are not handpicked by the government'. There is a particular type of pleasure that comes with her superiority. It unfolds itself when she teaches, through her confrontations with the people of the revolution, including students and staff—she repeatedly comments that they do not understand. It further can be called a patronising attitude on some level. She realises how oppressive the system is; nevertheless, she meets it with the very same attitude.

This need for immersion in solitude and pain does not only represent the position of a non-conformist; it allows her to become a mentor and a professor – a rightful protector, on her own terms. Hence the pleasure she derives from her exclusion: while outside she is helplessly inferior, she is superior inside the house, which is demonstrated through her dictating of her *own ideology*. The class, she says, is '[*t*]*he color of my dreams*. It entitled an active withdrawal from reality that had turned hostile'. (11) Her whole 'contact with the outside world will be mainly restricted to one room'. The narrator needs to compare herself to others in society in order to make sense of her existence; and she does this by situating herself at a distance from mainstream society whilst possessing a social role within the private space of her house. Thus, she exults in the Thursday classes – however, this triumph of self-determination results in her seeking a bigger social role. And so it becomes understood that the more the narrator inundates herself with pain and alienation, the more she possesses the urge to obtain a social role. Therefore, she would find a reason to move again from home to university. 'There was no way the Islamic regime could make us intellectuals vanish. In forcing us underground, it had also made us more appealing, more dangerous and in a strange way, more powerful'. (177) This is the attitude by which she confronts the authorities again; one can detect arrogance, superiority, and a craving for power. In 1987, the speaker returns to teaching because 'intellectuals, more than ordinary citizens either play scrupulously into their hands and call it constructive dialogue or withdraw from life completely in the name of fighting the regime'. (181)

Nafisi is fighting for rights and is criticising the regime of the Islamic Republic—attacking it on all levels. This kind of authority is what she rejects, so she chooses the opposite—represented in her adoption of the US model of freedom and democracy. However, her reaction is not moderate; she jumps from one camp to another, emphasising their differences. Instead of appreciating the complexity of the situation, and the relativity of the

social character, by trying to establish a common ground with her culture and history and then speaking of her prodigal search of freedom, she does not so much subvert the Islamic ideology but rather replaces it with its other 'extreme'. In fact, she adopts the same logic of the regime. Her narrative reinforces what she wishes to negate – the imposition of ideology upon individuals; she is not allowing the society to develop in its natural process in order to evolve into its own promise. Throughout the book, the narrator replaces the Islamic ideology with the ideology of the US. In other words, she does not only preach the values of the US, but she renounces the intellectual, cultural values and traditions of her own culture – which has turned most Iranians aware of the book, including those that oppose the Iranian regime, against her. 'We in ancient countries have our past—we obsess over the past. They the Americans, have a dream: they feel nostalgic about the promise of the future', the narrator writes. (109) She makes a clear cut distinction between 'we' and 'they' and portrays the hope to be the one in the American dream, explaining that if '[m]ost revolutionary groups were in agreement with the government on the subject of individual freedom, which they condescendingly called "bourgeois" and "decadent"', (108). The concept of ideology, which largely informs this chapter, conforms to Louis Althusser's seminal definition of the ideological as 'a "representation" of the Imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence'.[108] Ideology in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is narrative in its structure. This narrative involves two pivotal ideologies. First, 'the real' is the condition of living in Iran and both ideologies, the Islamic and the US, are the representations of the real produced by imaginary relationships to this real Iran. So most Iranians who partake in the revolutionary ideology impose this representation onto the reality of living there, and the narrator imposes the US ideology upon the reality of living there also, hence characterising Iran in a certain

[108] Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy* (London: New Left Books, 1971), 162.

way. Second is *Nafisi's ideology* which is a narrative of fantasy, because Nafisi redeems the Iranian reality through fantasizing about the US ideology in an almost hedonistic fashion.

When the narrator decides to emigrate the question becomes: What will happen to the girls then? They 'must resent the fact that while you're leaving this guy behind, they have to keep sleeping with him', says her magician friend, in yet another example of the rape analogy. (330) The girls have learnt from the narrator that if they are trapped living in Iran then the only way to achieve freedom is to leave. She has taught the girls (who are supposedly very dear to her) that their dreams of democracy and individual freedom will never come true, that their life of degradation, pain, and suffering will continue. They are like pawns on her chess board; the one capable of living the American dream is the queen. Nassrin left Iran through smugglers riding 'a camel or a donkey or a jeep across the desert'.[109] Azin believes 'she's [Nassrin] much better off where she's going, and we should be happy for her'. Manna declares, 'Nassrin has gotten the message from Dr. Nafisi [. . .] [t]hat we should all leave'. She explains that Nafisi 'sets up a model for us [. . .] that staying here is useless, that we should all leave if we want to make something of ourselves [. . .] I am not like Mahshid. I don't think any of us has a duty to stay. We have only one life to live'. (325) The girls believe that the Iranian dream is to attain a passport to leave the country. In other words, the narrator manages to communicate that the only hope is to leave Iran, just as she did, because the Iranian dream is not the American dream. And, affirming this, the narrator characterises her book as an extension to the United States Bill of Rights:

> I have a recurring fantasy that one more article has been added to the Bill of Rights: the right to free access to imagination. I have come to believe that genuine democracy cannot exist without the freedom to imagine and the right to use imaginative works without any restrictions. To have a

> whole life, one must have the possibility of publicly shaping and expressing private worlds, dreams, thoughts and desires, of constantly having access to a dialogue between the public and private worlds. How else do we know that we have existed, felt desired, hated, feared? (339)

By characterising her writing as exemplifying a worthy article for inclusion in The Bill of Rights, she concludes her book reinforcing the American dream as an epitome of freedom – the US being the anti-Eastern promised land where one can breathe freedom in the air.

II.8 Reading *Reading Lolita in Tehran* in the Context of the War on Terrorism

In the context of The War on Terrorism, Nafisi and other authors have arguably contextualised within their narratives the justifications for the US's hostile attitude against Islamic countries. Such authors include: Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Somali-born naturalised American, the bestselling author of *Infidel* (2006) and *The Caged Virgin: An Emancipation for Women and Islam* (2008) who was named by *Time Magazine* in 2005 as one of 'world's top 100 most influential people';[110] Betty Mahmoody with her famous memoir *Not Without My Daughter* (1991), which was made into a film; and the Afghan-born naturalised American author Khalid Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007). These books have a particular theme in common: they all depict stories about the captivity and abuse of women under Islam, in their respective countries of origin. While such narratives attempt to establish a transnational feminist ethics, they indirectly participate in a larger sociopolitical discourse.

The ideological narrative in these texts stretches to practices outside as well as inside the US's borders. Paul Gilroy explains that 'the Islamophobic belligerence of post-September

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[109] Nafisi, *Reading Lolita*, 324.

11 environment is not usually inclined to be overt. The crudest expressions of racial antipathy are still redolent of imperial and colonial domination'.[111] In other words, the US's context of the War on Terrorism produces as well as relies on racial antipathy and accommodates colonial ideas pertaining to hostile initiatives against countries that presumably propose Islamic terrorism/threats. Meanwhile, Henry A. Giroux discusses the ramifications of the US's discourse of the War on Terrorism upon the domestic order within the US. He explains how it shapes the discourse of nationalism and patriotism in the US:

> [T]here is a growing discourse of racist invective directed towards Mexican immigrants, Arabs, Muslims, and others who threaten the 'civilizational' distinctiveness of American culture, take away American jobs, or allegedly support acts of terrorism directed against the United States. […] [T]he country has become more and more obsessed with national security [justifying] extralegal practices to defend barbaric acts of torture, abuse and disappearance. […] Couple this particularly insidious abuse of human rights with the aforementioned anti-democratic tendencies, an expanding hypernationalism, and the emergence of an unbridled militarism, and the counters of an ascendant authoritarianism become more visible in the United States.[112]

The narratives in the texts mentioned earlier work to justify and prepare the audience of Western readers for US-led intervention, under seemingly legitimate pretexts, in other counties. For example, the US invasion of Iraq was presented as a necessary action and a logical act in the course of the events that were taking place at the time. Giroux also focuses

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[110] Time Magazine, "The 2005 Time 100: The Lives and Ideas of the World's Most Influential People." *Time*, April 18, 2005, accessed March, 2012, http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/completelist/0,29569,1972656,00.html.
[111] Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 141.
[112] Henry A. Giroux, "Dirty Democracy and State Terrorism: The Politics of the New Authoritarianism in the United States," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 26, no. 2 (2006), 173.

on how cultural artifacts function as 'pedagogical sites'. He draws our attention to the way meaning can be located within these cultural artifacts: they do not stand as fixed symbols of meaning, but meaning is rather generated in the ways such artefacts are 'aligned and shaped by larger institutional and cultural discourses'.[113] It is in this way that context is central to interpretation. It can steer the reader's attention and leads to what Hans Robert Jauss describes as 'horizons of expectations' – the assumptions the reader has formed on the basis of such information, whether consciously or not. Through the media and academia, the war on Iraq was prepared for and insinuated into public consciousness, as a necessary act against terrorism.[114]

And in respect to Nafisi's work in the context of the War on Terrorism, it is notable that Reuel Marc Gerecht cites *Reading Lolita in Tehran* as a weapon that serves as a reason for initiating a first US military strike against Iran—a cultural catalyst perhaps. He comments: '[a]lthough some Western female journalists have tried to depict Iranian women as liberated under their head scarves and veils', 'the phenomenal and global success of Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* has also made it more difficult to view the Islamic Republic's internal ethics, particularly regarding women, benignly'.[115] Although it is difficult to blame a text for how it is subsequently used, Gerecht's view point is stated here to shed light on the how the text is configured by critics in this particular context.

Nafisi's critics do not only consist of those who criticise her foreign policy discourse, but also those who challenge her on feminist grounds. Under the subheading 'Selective Omissions', Saba Mahmood accuses Nafisi of lacking a 'nuanced' understanding of Post-

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[113] Henry Giroux, "What Might Education Mean After Abu Ghraib: Revising Adorno's Plitics of Education," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 24, no. 1 (2004), 9.
[114] Nicholas J. O'Shaughnessy, *Politics and Propaganda: Weapons of Mass Seduction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).
[115] Reuel Marc Gerecht, "To Bomb, or Not to Bomb: That Is the Iran Question." *The American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research* (AEI), April 24, 2006, accessed March 2014, http://www.aei.org/article/foreign-and-defense-policy/regional/middle-east-and-north-africa/to-bomb-or-not-to-bomb/.

revolutionary Iranian Politics and a 'simplistic view of "gender apartheid"'.[116] Perhaps, the authors suggest, her success came from her 'pretensions and invocation of 'great Western Classics''. According to Mahmood, Nafisi's fundamental message in her memoir is that 'Islamic societies are incapable of thought, reflection and creativity'. For them, 'this image of Iranian life is ruthless in its omissions'. (86) They point to what Rowe, Dabashi, and other critics, disapprove of; how *Reading Lolita in Tehran* 'fits the Orientalist paradigm', because it reproduces and affirms the expectations of the Western audience as to what Iran's culture and political history are. (87)

Catherine Burwell, Hilary E. Davis, and Lisa K. Taylor, in their article 'Reading Nafisi in the West: Feminist Reading Practices and Ethical Concerns', aver that Nafisi's position and depiction cannot be read as 'neutral'.[117] It leads to the circulation of 'Islamophobic discourses' and subjects Muslim women to a 'neo-Orientalist pity, fear and fascination'. (64) The discourses that shape the perception of Nafisi's memoir are those that confirm the 'Clash of Civilizations' [mostly influenced by Bernard Lewis] and 'global sisterhood'. (65) The teaching sessions with the girls, for instance, are used to express her 'visceral distaste of Iranian cultural life—both contemporary and historical', rather than to 'denounce clerical political rule'.[118] Mahmood also poses the question: are there not more aspects to women in Iran other than their stoning and headscarves? What about, for example, their highly successful family planning, and the fact that female university students outnumber male ones by at least 10%? (87) In this respect, Mahmood quotes Roksana Bahramitash who explains how before the revolution there was a very small percentage of female students in universities. (87) Under the Islamic rule the literacy rate for women has

[116] Saba Mahmood, "Religion, Feminism, and Empire: The New Ambassadors of Islamophobia," *Feminism, Sexuality, and the Return of Religion*, ed. Linda Martin Alcoff and John D. Caputo (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2011), 85.
[117] Catherine Burwell, Hilary E. Davis and Lisa K. Taylor, "Reading Nafisi in the West Feminist Reading Practises and Ethical Concerns," *TOPIA* 19, (2008), 63.
[118] Saba Mahmood, "Religion, Feminism, and Empire," 85.

increased from 35.5 percent in 1976 to 74.2 in 1996, and more than 60 percent of higher education students are women. This is due to the 'affirmative action' law passed by the government of Iran after the revolution, a law that made it mandatory for at least half of the new students in certain fields to be females.[119] It is only fair to mention that this procedure was mandatory in order to emphasise the segregation between men and women in Iranian society. The Islamic Republic wanted females to be taught by females and to be checked by female doctors. In other words, this is a policy of the Islamic Republic towards building a parallel female world isolated from any male intervention. Nevertheless, that is an improvement in the education of female Iranians that cannot be ignored. Additionally, Nafisi is contrasted to Shirin Ebadi, the Nobel Peace Prize winner (2003), who along with other women led their own human rights movement without appealing to the Americans for help with regime change.[120] The importance of the article 'Reading Nafisi in the West: Feminist Reading Practices and Ethical Concerns' comes from the fact that its main concern is to interrogate, as the authors put it, 'our own [in USA and Canada] pedagogical practices and desires'.[121] They examine how this memoir is being taught and what approaches have been adopted in teaching it. In a *google* search they list the courses which *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is part of: the course syllabi across North America cut across the disciplines of Women's Studies, International Relations, English Studies and Anthropology, with course titles such as 'Understanding Totalitarianism', 'Understanding Culture and Cultural Difference' and 'Women and Islam'. (64) The authors' discoveries serve as evidence that supports the accusations that Nafisi is an 'agent' serving an agenda, given that the memoir is mostly taught within anti-Islam and anti-Iran discourses.

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[119] Roksana Bahramitash, "The War on Terror, Feminist Orientalism and Orientalist Feminism: Case Studies of Two North American Bestsellers," *Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 14, no. 2 (2005).
[120] Negar Mottahedeh, "Off the Grid".
[121] Burwell, Davis, Taylor, "Reading Nafisi".

In 2006, the Columbia professor Hamid Dabashi wrote an extended essay about *Reading Lolita in Tehran* for *Al Hram*, a Cairo based newspaper, which he later included and expanded in his book *Brown Skin White Masks*. Dabashi accuses Nafisi of being adopted by a US empire project, which banks on a 'pedigree of comprador intellectuals, homeless minds and guns for hire'.[122] Dabashi contextualizes Nafisi within the project of the US empire. He argues that politically expedited '*collective amnesia* accompanies a strategy of *selective memory*' in the context of the US War on Terrorism.[123] According to him, Nafisi is directing American public opinion (and, by extension, that of the whole world) towards a legitimate concern against Iran. For Dabashi, Nafisi has committed to acting as a 'key propaganda tool' at the disposal of Bush's administration during the most critical time of war against Muslim countries – such as Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) –to him, she is a 'native informer' and indeed she is a well-informed one as well, possessing the language to speak to the international feminist ethics of women's rights. Dabashi identifies the notion 'native informer' as a 'potent component of neoconservative ideology.' (12) He explains that 'informers are more effective in manufacturing the public illusions that empires need to sustain themselves than in truly informing the public about the cultures they denigrate and dismiss'. (13) In his analysis of *Reading Lolita*, he offers Nafisi as 'the character type—theoretical template—of the native informer, which has served as a major device for legitimizing neoconservative ideology in the American empire'. (15) It is notable in this respect that, in his review of Nafisi's book, Christopher Hitchens suggests the author to be a friend of Paul Wolfowitz, one of the architects of the War on Terrorism.[124] Hitchens draws this connection with Wolfowitz from the acknowledgements of her book: 'Paul (thank you

[122] Hamid Dabashi, "Native Informers and the Making of the American Empire." *Al-Ahram*, no. 797, 7 June 2006, accessed August, 2014, http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2006/797/special.htm.
[123] Dabashi, *Brown Skin*, 45.
[124] Christopher Hitchens, "Hurricane Lolita." *The Atlantic Monthly*, December 2005, accessed January 2011, http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2005/12/hurricane-lolita/304386/.

for introducing me to *Persecution and Art of Writing*, among many other things)' – a relation which Nafisi has neither denied nor acknowledged.[125]

Dabashi also accuses her of manipulating the image of Iranian women to fit the oriental sexual fantasy that is already stereotyped in the West, an 'Orientalized pedophilia', as he puts it.[126] He finds that the book's cover provides an 'intriguing twist to Roland Barthes' binary oppositions between the *denoted* and *connoted* messages of a photograph and its captions'. (75) The cover of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* shows two young Iranian women in black cloaks and whose veils are casually pulled about three inches to the back, revealing a few strands of their black hair. Their heads are looking down as if they are engrossed in reading or looking at something but the reader cannot see the object of their gaze.

In fact, the cover image is taken from a reformist newspaper called *Mosharekat* (meaning 'participation') issued during the parliamentary elections in Iran that took place in the year 2000. The newspaper that is the object of the women's gaze is cropped from the photo. Taken out of its sociopolitical context and putting the title *Reading Lolita in Tehran* on top of the image in a manner suggesting that the young women are actually *Reading Lolita* in Tehran is described, by Dabashi, as 'an iconic burglary from the press, distorted and staged in a frame for an entirely different purpose than its original circumstances'. (75) Moreover, *Mosharekat* is one amongst the 16 reformist newspapers that were forcibly closed in 2000 by Ayatollah Khamenei, who described the Iranian press as 'journalistic charlatanism'.[127] Hossein Shahidi quotes Khamenei during the meeting he had with the publishers of the newpapers. Justifying his decision to shut down the newspapers that exemplify what he calls the 'deviant tendency in the press', Khamenei says:

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[125] Nafisi, *Reading Lolita*, 346.
[126] Dabashi, *Brown Skin*, 74.

> [They are] causing anxiety and disturbing the public's mind, avoiding the people's main issues and problem […]. The approach adopted by some friends towards this deviant trend is wrong and inefficient and in effect makes it possible for the enemies of the system to abuse the press. Therefore, it is necessary to review this approach.

Thus, the cover image of *Reading Lolita* does not only subscribe to a Western Orientalist fantasy (as described by Fatima Mernissi[128]), but also by twisting the activity of the young women (in the cropped picture) from political participation or interest in a reformist newspaper into two Lolitas reading *Lolita* in Tehran emphasises the poverty of Nafisi's attitude towards Iranian women. While, on the one hand, one might suggest that Nafisi, or, at least, her publishers, are conflating the political content of *Reading Lolita* with the political content of the original image, given that the original image will be unknown to most Western readers it is arguable that the book cover instead works to confiscate the voices of the women involved. Thus, just as with the narrator's approach in the content, the cover of the book itself is doing exactly what the autocracy in Iran is being criticised for.

The Orientalist legacy inscribes the East and the West as a dichotomy. In the Western imagination the Orient highlights by contrast the rationality, science, development, economic growth and prosperity of the West. In other words, the elements that establish the superiority of the occident are all lacking in the Orient. The Orientalist vision constructs Islam as barbaric, violent, medieval, and backward. Edward Said in his book, *Orientalism*, explains

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[127] Hossein Shahidi, "'The Second Spring of Freedom' (1997-2000)," *Journalism in Iran: From Mission to Profession* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 68.

[128] Mernissi, author of the monographs *Beyond the Veil* (1975) and *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Islam* (1987), talks of how: 'The French and German publishers of my books always insist on having the word "harem" on the cover and a photo of a veiled woman. When I protest, they tell me that this makes it sell better, even if the content of the book contradicts this image. It is time to unveil women on the covers of books that sell in the West.' Raja Rhouni, *Secular and Islamic feminist critiques in the work of Fatima Mernissi* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 133.

how the typology of Orientalism informs and instructs the Western anti-Islamic discourse and the colonial policies that are used as a subordinating discourse.[129] Concepts of Islamic civil society and Islamic political ideologies, as well as of modern Islam, by many scholars, such as Samuel Huntington and Benjamin Barber, have often been polemical.[130] Other scholars, however, contest the Orientalist stereotypes of the veil and have exposed its political implications. Katherine Bullock, in *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil,* identifies the 'anti-veil discourse' of the West, and how the veil's association with Islamist movements acts as a pretext/leverage for Western political intervention in Muslim countries.[131] She argues insightfully that while the US administration, and other Western powers, have no real objection to Muslims or Islam as a religion, the 'public rhetoric demonizing Islam' is important as a 'part of the Western maintenance of its global hegemony'; that 'ideas about Islam's oppression of women and the role of the veil in that oppression are part of this discourse'. (xxxiv) *Reading Lolita* partakes in such a discourse as the text, on the one hand, associates autocratic oppression of women with the veil, and on the other hand, associates freedom with the Western life style; thus the veil becomes a symbol of the oppression itself. As argued earlier, such a register is dualistic and simplistic, erasing any areas of reconciliation and similarities between the East and the West, and feeds into this Orientalist discourse that emphasises the superiority of the West and inferiority of the East.

[129] Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 25th ed. (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2014), xxvii.
[130] Benjamin Barber, "Jihad Vs McWorld." *The Atlantic Monthly*, March, 1992, accessed June 2014, http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1992/03/jihad-vs-mcworld/303882/.
[131] Katherine Bullock, *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil: Challenging Historical and Modern Stereotypes* (London: The International Institute for Islamic Thought, 2002), xxxv.

II.9 Conclusion

In conclusion, it is, of course, legitimate to criticise the regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran, but there are different ways to fulfil this end than those offered by *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. What opens Nafisi's memoir to criticism are two complementary factors that align with the two poles of Orientalist discourse. The first concerns her omissions regarding, and deprecation of, Iranian culture, the second concerns her constant celebration of iconic Western symbols and references, from small things like chocolate to the Western literary canon, which she poses as the saviour of Iranian women. As Dabashi puts it, Nafisi 'pushes the clock back for about a half century by a singular and exclusive praise for the Eurocentricity of the literary imagination'.[132] It is notable that other successful Iranian women have in fact pointed out the calamity of the clergical practices through projects of cultural resistance that are purposeful of restoring dignity and hope to the nation. For example, one can examine the work of the photographer and video artist Shirin Neshat.[133] Based in New York, her art is very daring and challenges the Islamic Republic, yet it does not simply degrade Iranian culture in favour of Western aesthetics. Her work aims at representing the barrier of fear that exists between the West and the Islamic East. It is rich with images of how the West perceives the East, and vice versa, attempting to illustrate where such misunderstandings emerge. This is demonstrated in her series of photography *Women of Allah* (1990), the video *Turbulent* (1998), and the narratives in her film *Women Without Men* (2009). Neshat is trying to bridge a gap rather than burn bridges between the two poles (East/West) – a discourse that simply does not exist in Nafisi's writing.

[132] Dabashi, "Native Informers and the Making of the American Empire".
[133] Shirin Neshat, "Gladstone Gallery." Accessed, August 2014, http://www.gladstonegallery.com/artist/shirin-neshat/#&panel1-1.

III Chapter Three: Exploiting the Fluidity of the Immigrant Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

III.1 Introduction

Bharati Mukherjee has not only been described as a well-recognised voice in North America, but also as the '*Grand dame*' of diasporic Indian literature.[134] Her personal biography, similar to her body of work, is described as 'a kind of perennial immigration'.[135] Most of her literary production explores the fluidity of the identity of the South Asian woman immigrant between the country of origin and the United States: as such, it will be contextualized in this chapter within cross-cultural narratives of assimilating into US society. She aspires in her work to create 'a revisionist theory for contemporary residency and citizenship' in the US.[136] '[R]evisionist' because she claims to challenge the traditional narratives of 'pure culture' rejecting fixed conceptions of a 'single origin' in the United States.[137] Similar to the US's 'pioneering European' ancestors who 'gave up the easy homogeneity of their native countries for a new version of utopia',[138] Mukherjee feels the urgency 'to discourage the retention of cultural memory [. . .]. We [immigrants] must think of American culture and nationhood as a constantly re-forming, transmogrifying "we"'.[139] By 'retention of cultural memory' Mukherjee is arguing that the experience of diaspora interferes with the cultural narratives

[134] Bradly C. Edwards, ed., "Introduction," *Conversations with Bharati Mukherjee* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), xi.
[135] Timothy Brennan, "Cosmopolitans and Celebrities," *Race & Class* 31, no. 1 (1989): 2.
[136] Bharati Mukherjee, "Imagining Homelands," *Letters of Transit: Reflections on Exile, Identity, Language and Loss*, ed. Andre Aciman (New York: The New Press, 1999), 69.
[137] It is worth clarifying that Mukherjee emphasizes the 'pilgrim' narrative in the US; about the US being a place of refuge and a new way of living and that it is built on immigrant pioneers. This is very important to her own ideology.
[138] Bharati Mukjerjee, "American Dreamer." *Mother Jones*, January/February, 1997: 2, accessed 12 June, 2014, http://www.motherjones.com/politics/1997/01/american-dreamer.
[139] Mukherjee, "Imagining Homelands," 69.

that write the immigrant identity and womanhood in the host country.[140] According to Mukherjee, immigrants 'must' open up their identity for the dominant culture to re-shape their identity. In an attempt to define the immigrant's relationship with the adopted country, she accommodates the experience of modern dislocations, of place, within the four narratives of expatriation, exile, immigration and repatriation. As an immigrant person herself, she finds in repatriation the most empowering narrative of dislocation: 'I had to decide how to describe myself—Asian-American, Indo-American, unhyphenated American? I claim myself an American in the immigrant tradition'.[141] She rejects hyphenating the immigrant identity because she refuses 'to categorize the cultural landscape into a centre and its peripheries; it is to demand that the American nation deliver the promises of its dream and its Constitution to all its citizens equally'.[142] Fighting against the paralysis of both the immigrant's exilic state of mind and position on the periphery of society, Mukherjee claims to embrace the cultural diaspora of the United States. *Jasmine* (1989) is her novel about becoming 'American'. The eponymous undocumented immigrant heroine successfully assimilates into US society *not* by participating in the *cultural diaspora* of her fellow migrants but by internalizing the *dominant culture* of the White US, through the process of metamorphosing her identity. Although Mukherjee's immigrant aesthetics pose legitimate concerns about the plight of immigrants in the US, *Jasmine* puts this predicament squarely at the service of the US ideology of 'nationalism'[143] feeding into the notion of the US as being a unique and liberal place that offers freedom and agency through migration. There are critics, such as Inderpal Grewal and Gurleen Grewal, who criticize *Jasmine*'s discourse of nationalism within the frame of

[140] Susan Koshy, "The Geography of Female Subjectivity: Ethnicity, Gender, and Diaspora," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 3, no. 1 (1994), 69.
[141] Mukherjee, "Imagining Homelands," 69.
[142] Mukherjee, "American Dreamer."
[143] On the concept of "nationalism," there are other terms that can be used in the context of the ideology tackled in the text; for example, American "exceptionalism." However, this term/topic is subject to a constant discussion and due to the limited space of this thesis the discussion confines itself to the term "nationalism". For more please see Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996).

participating in the US 'melting pot' and find the novel problematic in the way it highlights successful assimilation as the responsibility of the immigrant. This reading draws on these issues while it simultaneously offers new insight in terms of analysing the narrative structure and engaging with underlying ideological discourse in the novel. I also provide a more comprehensive analysis in relation to other perhaps overlooked aspects of the novel; linking them, for instance, to feminist concerns and imperial implications.

III.1.1 Mukherjee's Immigration Narrative

The first part of my discussion addresses Mukherjee's canon of works and offers a brief summary of the author's cultural background and a panorama of her immigration/s. This helps with both examining the author's treatment of the identity of the South Asian woman migrant in the US and understanding where *Jasmine* fits within the evolution of the immigrant identity of her characters. The author's own immigrations are significant for the analysis of her woman protagonist/s as Mukherjee's immigrant identity itself is a narrative that intersects with her fictions.[144] Mukherjee was born in Kolkata[145], India, in 1940 to an upper-middle-class Brahmin family. In India, she was educated at the hands of Irish nuns in a Loreto Convent school, while also being educated in England and Switzerland at other points of her childhood. The year 1961 marks the first time Mukherjee would come to the US, '[t]o Iowa City, to be precise – on a summer evening'.[146] She recalls, with rather romantic language: 'I feel very American [. . .]. I knew the moment I landed as a student in 1961 [. . .] that this is where I belonged. It was an instant kind of love'.[147] She attended the Writer's workshop at the University and received an M.F.A. in Creative Writing and a Ph.D. in English and Comparative Literature. In 1966 she married the writer Clark Blaise in a

[144] As such, this section makes extensive use of quotations in order to highlight the sentiment with which the author recalls or describes events in her life.
[145] It was "Calcutta" before the name changed into "Kolkata".
[146] Mukjerjee, "American Dreamer."

lawyer's office; an act that, she reveals, 'cut me off forever from the rules and ways of upper-middle-class life in Bengal, and hurled me into a New World life of scary improvisations and heady explorations'.[148] She moved afterwards to Blaise's home country Canada, where she lived first in Toronto, and then Montréal, as a Canadian citizen. In 1971 Mukherjee published her first novel, *The Tiger's Daughter*, which concerns her experience in Canada as an immigrant. The text's narrative demonstrates the 'expatriate consciousness' as the protagonist Tara Banerjee struggles to reconcile her identity between two countries. Tara's characterization mirrors Mukherjee's feelings at the time, for 10 years into her marriage she still felt 'as an expatriate Bengali permanently stranded' in Canada. She says, 'My first novel, *The Tiger's Daughter,* embodies the loneliness I felt but could not acknowledge, even to myself, as I negotiated the no man's land between the country of my past and the continent of my present'. In Canada, Mukherjee explains, 'I was frequently assumed to be a domestic, praised by astonished auditors that I didn't have a 'sing-song' accent. The society itself, or important elements in that society, routinely made crippling assumptions about me, about my "kind"'.[149] Her expatriation in Canada is also reflected in her early short story collection, *Darkness* (1985), where the immigrant characters are accounts of 'lost souls, put upon and pathetic [. . .] adrift in the new world, wondering if they would ever belong', and suffering from a deliberately fostered 'Olympian detachment', as stated in the collection's introduction. The series of personal humiliations and racially motivated attacks, both physical and verbal, against her and South Asians in general during this period, she believes, were condoned by the official Canadian government policy of multiculturalism.[150] Race-related harassments

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[147] Bill Moyers, "Interview with Bharati Mukherjee," *A World of Ideas: Conquering America*, Videocassette (Princeton: New Jersey, 1994).
[148] Mukjerjee, "American Dreamer."
[149] Bharati Mukherjee, *Darkness* (Ontario: Penguin Books, 1985), 2-3.
[150] The multiculturalism Act as an official policy of Canada was passed during the time of Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau and implemented in 1971. This initiative was considered as one way for Trudeau to oppose the demands of Québécois who thought of Canada as bi-cultural (English and French). Ratna Gosh, "The Liberating Potential of Multiculturalism in Canada: Ideals and Realities," *Canadian Issues: Diversity and Education for Liberation: Realities, Possibilities, and Problems*, (Spring, 2011).

triggered a reaction in Mukherjee against Canada and its policy of multiculturalism—the difference between the Canadian mosaic multiculturalism and the US's melting pot is that in the former migrant groups maintain their ethnic distinctiveness while functioning as part of the whole, whereas in the latter migrants have allegedly fused to make new people.[151] This reaction puts into sharp relief her romanticised sentiment towards the US and its melting pot policy: 'Canada politicized me and deepened my love of the ideals embedded in the American Bill of Rights'.[152] Thus, her admiration for the US ideals predates her life there and seems to be largely informed by her romantic predictions rather than a crystallized emotion/attitude from experience. It is romantic because Mukherjee expresses her feelings for an imagined ideal version of the US. Her position in her political essays and literary writings concerning immigrants assimilating into US society is forthrightly sentimental, her language being suffused with words such as 'love' and 'married'. Susan Koshy, for instance, argues that Mukherjee's 'celebration of assimilation in the United States is written from her bitter disillusionment with the implied racism of the official Canadian multiculturalism policy of the mosaic'.[153] In 1980 Mukherjee 'forced [her] husband and two sons' to immigrate to the US and began teaching in New York City. In 1981 she put her Canadian restlessness to rest in a polemic titled 'An Invisible Woman'.[154] In 1988 in a civil ceremony in a lawyer's office, similar to the way she married Clark, Mukherjee became a naturalized American citizen: 'I'm one of you now. It's a civil ceremony, a municipal marriage without a fancy wedding'.[155] In 'Two Ways to Belong in America', published in *The New York Times* (1996), she reiterates her love with the US in matrimonial language: 'America spoke to me – I married it – I

[151] For more please see: Howard Palmer, "Mosaic versus Melting Pot? Immigration and Ethnicity in Canada and the United States," *International Journal* 31, no. 3 (1976), Will Kymalicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), and Koshy, "The Geography of Female Subjectivity".
[152] Mukjerjee, "American Dreamer".
[153] Koshy, "The Geography of Female Subjectivity: Ethnicity, Gender, and Diaspora," 74-5.
[154] Bharati Mukherjee, "An Invisible Woman," *Saturday Night* 96, March (1981), 36-40.
[155] Edwards, *Conversations with Bharati Mukherjee*, x.

embraced the demotion from expatriate aristocrat to immigrant nobody, surrendering those thousands of years of 'pure culture', the saris, the delightful accented English'.[156] In 1989 *Jasmine* was published, a novel outlining the ambitious endeavor of a South Asian illegal immigrant claiming her 'American self'. Currently Mukherjee teaches in the English Department at the University of California, Berkeley.

Mukherjee's literary project seems to be symptomatic of her personal emigration narrative. This explains the thematic shift in her works. For example, her literary standpoint in relation to V. S. Naipaul's literary model of immigration puts this issue into perspective.[157] In *Darkness* (1985), the story collection concerning her Canadian experience, she states:

> Like Naipaul, in whom I imagined a model, I tried to explore state-of-the-art expatriation. Like Naipaul, I used a mordant and self-protective irony in describing my characters' pain. Irony promised both detachment from, and superiority over, those well bred post-colonials much like myself, adrift in the new world, wondering if they would ever belong.[158]

While during her expatriation period in Canada Mukherjee shared Naipaul's postcolonial anxiety, she disaffiliated with him later during her repatriation in the US. In *The Middleman and Other Short Stories* (1988),[159] a collection that reflects Mukherjee's American experience, she repudiates Naipaul's poetics of immigration, directly challenging his postcolonial world in the short story 'Jasmine'. In an interview she explains:

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[156] Bharati Mukherjee, "Two Ways to Belong in America," *Away: The Indian Writer as an Expatriate*, ed. Amitava Kumar, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 273.
[157] For more on V.S. Naipaul please see: Feroza F. Jussawalla, *Converstations with V.S. Naipaul, Literary Conversations Series* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997).

> And I very deliberately set the story in V. S. Naipaul's birthplace because it was my 'in' joke, challenging if you like, Naipaul's thesis of tragedy being geographical. Naipaul's fiction seems to suggest that if you are born far from the center of the universe, you are doomed to an incomplete and worthless little life. You are bound to be, if you're born like a Jasmine, an Indian in the Caribbean, a comic character, you come to nothing. So I wanted to say, 'Hey, look at Jasmine. She's smart and desirous, and ambitious enough to make something of her life'.[160]

Mukherjee's works correspond to her personal immigration and create narratives that respond to what she encounters and experiences. The US represented a greener pasture than Canada, and a life-affirming dream; it was a match already made in heaven rather than a place yet to be experienced. In Mukherjee's writings, there is much about Canada being a 'hostile country to its own citizens' but her US appears to be a better place in which immigrants having the desire and will, just like in 'Jasmine' and *Jasmine*, to re-invent their identities within the frame of the dominant culture, can realize their potential.

III.2 Jasmine and the Narrative Form: the Bildungsroman and the Folk-Tale

Jasmine is a text that has been widely read and since its release in 1989 it has enjoyed a steady presence in South Asian migration and women's studies. The story is told in a non-linear narrative with flashbacks and flash-forwards by the first person narrator Jyoti, a Hindu girl living in Punjab, India. Her bourgeois family was flung into rural Punjab in the aftermath of the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. Jyoti is born 'eighteen years after the partition riots' and her 'whole world was the village of Hasnapur'[161] until, at the age of 15, she marries

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[158] Mukherjee, *Darkness*, 2.
[159] Bharati Mukherjee, *The Middleman and Other Short Stories* (New York: Penguin, 1988).
[160] Jessie Grearson, Michael Connell and Tom Grimes, "An Interview with Bharati Mukherjee," *The Iowa Review* 20, no. 3 (1990): 21.
[161] Bharati Mukherjee, *Jasmine* (London: Virago Press Limited, 1991), 44.

Prakash and migrates to the city of Julundhar, where she becomes 'Jasmine'. Jyoti's/Jasmine's life in India is cast in difficult circumstances of political unrest and depravity. There, she is portrayed as 'an anomaly among other young women', dissatisfied and unfulfilled, always striving against deplorable conditions that are revealed to be the plight of every woman in Punjab. After the death of Prakash at the hands of a Sikh terrorist during the Khalistan Movement, Jyoti decides to perform Sati, self-immolation, in the name of her dead husband on the campus of Florida International Institute of Technology, where he had intended to study. Escaping the tyrannical clutch of feudal India and armed with the fantasy of hope (to fulfill her husband's dream and join him in death), Jyoti spends all the money Prakash left her on fake documents and travels to the US. After landing on the shores of Florida, the 17 year old Jasmine is raped by a white man known as 'Half-Face', one of the paid agents who traffic immigrants. Minutes after the rape she murders Half-Face and instead of carrying out her mission to perform Sati, she changes her mind and decides to settle in the US. It appears that her success in overcoming this ordeal makes her feel she can enact the self-determination she was denied in India. She says: 'I had not given even a day's survival in America a single thought'. (120) So she metaphorically performs Sati on the package she carries across continents and that symbolizes her life in India. She lays the suitcase in a 'rusty metal trash bin' and lights it on fire. From this moment onwards, Jyoti gradually blossoms into an "American". By sheer luck, she gets picked up from the streets by Lillian Gordon, a Quaker lady who re-names Jyoti as 'Jazzy', on account of Jyoti being 'Jazzy' and 'different' from other immigrants. Jazzy continues to meet benevolent people in the US. She becomes, renamed, 'Jase' by Taylor, a professor in an area of subnuclear particle physics, the father of the child she was hired to look after in Manhattan, who falls in love with her. During a picnic in Manhattan Park the sight of an Indian hotdog vendor interrupts her romance with Taylor. She explains to him: '[t]hat was the man who killed my husband'. (188) Motivated by her

fear of the Sikh terrorist, she leaves Taylor and Manhattan to live in Iowa with Bud Ripplemeyer, a bank owner who also falls in love with her at first sight and divorces his wife. Bud re-invents 'Jase' in the name of 'Jane', and together they adopt a Vietnamese boy called Du. The text suggests that the US provides Jyoti with the agency necessary to develop into a butterfly metamorphosing from an egg, to a caterpillar, to the chrysalis, to, finally, an adult butterfly; as she transmogrifies her identity from an ignorant peasant girl (Jyoti) and a helpless immigrant (Jasmine) into a confident working woman (Jazzy and Jase), a pregnant[162] girlfriend (Jane) and finally, indicating a continuum in the process, a reckless lover who 'stopped thinking of [herself] as Jane'. At the end of the novel, 'greedy with wants and reckless from hope' and pregnant with Bud's child, the twenty-four year old Jane elopes with Taylor, joining him in the ultimate American tradition of heading West, to California. (241) Thus, by emerging at the end of the story as an adult butterfly the protagonist has now completed her transformation into an 'American' who is ready to fly and explore the world. She becomes a pioneer figure as she announces: 'adventure, risk, transformation: the frontier is pushing indoors through uncaulked windows'. (240)

There is a lot of controversy concerning the narrative form in *Jasmine*. Since this chapter addresses the ideological concerns within the text, it is necessary to examine the mode of representation in relation to the construction of the immigrant's national identity. The novel is about the transition from rural India to the US and then becoming an American in terms of personality and citizenship. As will be addressed, the novel is described for instance as a postcolonial text, a new form of feminocentric fiction, a romantic novel in the Horatio Alger tradition, a Western Gothic based postcolonial novel and a realist one. There are two elements, however, that best define the text due to thematic and structural similarities. The novel invests allusions from 'folklore' which includes 'mythic' and 'fairy-

[162] Just to clarify that Jyoti and Bud adopt a Vietnamese boy and also Jyoti gets pregnant by means of artificial

tale' elements,[163] while at the same time, it bears structural similarities to the *Bildungsroman*. This chapter demonstrates the role of the *Bildungsroman* and folk-tale paradigms in *Jasmine* and in constructing the identity of the heroine.

Firstly, here is a brief review of various critical interpretations of the form of literary representation in *Jasmine*. Analysing the representational aesthetic techniques used in *Jasmine*, Megan Obourn argues that the novel utilizes aspects of 'American sentimental and realist fiction' in order to engage the reader in a world that is familiar.

> *Jasmine's* aesthetic is representational and atomistic (multicultural and liberal) in that the reading experience might be shared across different bodies in different positions revealing a common similarity behind various geographic, ethnic, and racial differences that one might encounter in real life.[164]

Although Ahmad Gamal thinks of *Jasmine* as a postcolonial text, he highlights what he considers to be the Western Gothic trope and argues that they are appropriated in the narrative in order to represent native subject matter and perspective without slipping into the dominant discourse.[165] Kristen Carter-Sanborn identifies the text as a postcolonial bildungsroman and is critical of its mode of representation on the basis of its narrative similarity to that of *Jane Eyre*.[166]

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insemination from Bud.

[163] According to Vladimir Propp, folklore is not only literary but also a 'historical phenomenon'. It is the source of fairy tales; however, a fairy tale may or may not be a folk-tale. In a similar fashion, mythology can be considered folklore and it has fairy tales. Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. Laurence Scott (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009).

[164] Megan Obourn, "Academic Investments in Liberal Multiculturalism: Bharati Mukherjee's Representational versus Distinctive Aesthetics," *Reconstituting Americans: Liberal Multiculturalism and Identity Difference in Post-1960s Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 135.

[165] Ahmed Gamal, "Postcolonial Recycling of the Oriental Gothic: Habiby's Saraya, The Goul's Daughter and Mukherjee's Jasmine," *Transnational Literature* 5, no. 1 (November 2012), 1.

[166] Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre* (New York: Norton, 2001).

> Just as we must consider whether Jane Eyre, in her search for a new female domestic identity, is implicated in the violent repression of colonial subjectivity as figured by Bertha Mason, we also need to ask whether [Jasmine's] 'discovery' of an American selfhood covers up a similar complicity in the elision of the 'third world' woman Mukherjee's narrator purportedly speaks as and for.[167]

In contrast, Robyn Warhol argues that the narrative discourse of *Jasmine* suggests the novel is 'a critique of the bildungsroman tradition', and considers it an experimental form of feminocentric fiction.[168] These structural-related tensions in *Jasmine* make it difficult to reach a satisfactory conclusion regarding the position of the text in relation to its genre.

The *Bildungsroman* dates back to Johann Wolfgang Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* 1795-96, and it has enjoyed a steady presence as well as a quality of elasticity in terms of definition ever since. In the words of Ross Murfin and Supryia M. Ray, it is a 'novel that recounts the development (psychological and sometimes spiritual) of an individual from childhood to maturity, to the point at which the main character recognizes his or her place and role in the world'.[169] One of the ways this genre has evolved is in its ability to accommodate the concept of ethnicity. Pin-chia Feng, for example, regards 'any writing by an ethnic woman about the identity formation of an ethnic woman, whether fictional or autobiographical in form, chronologically or retrospectively in plot, as a *Bildungsroman*'.[170] In opening the first-person narrative of the now twenty four year old protagonist, with her

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[167] Kristin Carter-Sanborn, "We Murder Who We Were: Jasmine and the Violence of Identity," *American Literature* v. 66, no. 3 (1994), 574–75.
[168] Robyn Warhol-Down, "Jasmine Reconsidered: Narrative Discourse and Multicultural Subjectivity," *Contemporary Women's Writing* 2, no. 1 (June 2008), 42.
[169] Ross C. Murfin and Supryia M. Ray, *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1997), 31.

childhood, Mukherjee seems immediately to position her novel as a female Bildungsroman. One particularly enlightening anecdote from the novel is as follows:

> Lifetimes ago, under a banyan tree in the village of Hasnapur, an astrologer cupped his ears—his satellite dish to the stars—and foretold my widowhood and exile. I was only seven then […] 'No!' I shouted […] the astrologer crackled. 'What will happen will happen'. Then he chucked me hard on the head. I fell. My teeth cut into my tongue. A twig sticking out of the bundle of firewood I'd scavenged punched a star-shaped wound into my forehead. I lay still. The astrologer re-entered his trance […] The star bled. 'I don't believe you', I whispered. The astrologer folded up his tattered mat […] 'Fate is Fate. When Behula's bridegroom was fated to die of snake bite on the wedding night, did building a steel fortress prevent his death? A magic snake will penetrate solid walls if necessary'.[171]

This paragraph identifies an early identity-split in the protagonist as a child who at the age of seven rejects her native/cultural identity. The split is illustrated in her refusal to believe in 'fate' as dictated by the astrologer, utterly denying it, considering it insane and completely refusing to accept it. The split anticipates a sense of journey/quest for Jyoti who sets out to find her yet-to-become identity, one that suits her and is not characterised as 'crazy'. So the reader encounters a heroine who is born with a desire to transform her self from a receiver to a maker of her own fate. Thus, *Jasmine* is a coming of age/identity cross-cultural narrative, and it draws on a female *Bildungsroman* structure. The narrative however simultaneously demonstrates symptoms from folklore such as the prophecy of destiny and Behula's story.

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[170] Pin-chia Feng, *The Female Bildungsroman by Toni Morrison and Maxine Hong Kingston: A Postmodern Reading* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), 15.
[171] Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 3-4.

Behula, Lakshinder's wife, is the heroine in the Manasamangal genre of Bengali medieval epics. Her story describes the epitome of a wife's devotion, loyalty and love. Chand, Lakshander's father, is a wealthy merchant who unfortunately omitted in his prayers the Monasā puja, for which serpent goddess Bishahori/Manasa was offended. In a dream he sees that his son will die from snakebite on his wedding day. Thus, he builds an iron/stone palace completely sealed so no snake can enter. Despite all the precautions, Lakshinder dies from snakebite on his wedding day. The most important part of the story, which to a large extent resembles that of Jyoti's, is Behula's grave journey. She places her husband's dead body on a raft and sails with him to heaven in order to get his life back. Behula faces serious dangers and difficulties until she reaches heaven, where she impresses the gods with her dance and in return they agree to give back Lakshinder's life.[172] This folk-tale lays forth the plot in *Jasmine*. Jyoti's wish to perform Sati in honour of her husband's death is her motivation to travel to the US. She, a faithful wife like Behula, puts her husband's suitcase on a boat, enclosing all his books and clothes—symbolic of his body, and journeys across the seas in order to deliver him to the American University at which he wanted to study. Throughout her voyage, the reader is informed about the hardships she faces in boats, cars and motel rooms on her way until she reaches the US.[173] Once she is in the US and just like Behula's dance Jyoti's beauty charms Taylor and Bud who in return give her what she wants. The implication of the story is about women achieving/attaining their ultimate desires and for Jyoti this concerns her sense of identity.

Furthermore, the significance of the scar inflicted on Jyoti's forehead lies in the way she deals with it.

[172] P. R. Gordon, "An Assamese Nur Jahan by S. K. Bhuyan," *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, no. 3 (Jul., 1926), 611-615.
[173] Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 127.

> 'What happened?' my sisters shrieked as they sponged the bleeding star […]. 'It's not a scar', I shouted, 'it's my third eye.' In the stories that our mother recited, the holiest sages developed an extra eye right in the middle of their foreheads. Through that eye they peered into invisible world. 'Now I'm a sage'.[174]

The heroine subverts the mark of fate from a scar to a star. The power implied in the figure of the sage is the agency that inspires young Jyoti and enables her to ascribe a different meaning/power to the scar on her forehead. According to Indian tradition, the etymological root of the word 'Rishi' or 'sage' means 'to go, to move'.[175] In Vedic scripts, there are stories of sages who possess a higher power/knowledge and are able to move between worlds. The 'fairy' element implied in the Indian folk-tale is thus transferred to Jyoti, metamorphosing her scar into a third eye and transforming her from a victim of fatalism into a sage. As Jyoti's third eye announces her ability to 'peer out into invisible worlds' and move freely, she becomes a sage heroine. The forms of literary representation adopted in *Jasmine*, whether in its *Bildungsroman* or folklore aspects, undergird in its thematic content as they both anticipate the protagonist's uniqueness in her ability perform the thematic cross-world movements and identity transformations.

III.2.1 Bildungsroman as Maximalist Assimilation

The previously quoted opening scene portrays the vivid imagination and desire of Jyoti, a rebellious child. This established will and desire in the character of Jyoti recalls Mukherjee's passionate description of the immigrant figure and their strong resolution to assimilate into US society. On Americanization Mukherjee says:

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[174] Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 4-5

> Mine is a clear-eyed but definitive love of America. I'm aware of the brutalities, the violences here, but in the long run my characters are survivors; they've been helped, as I have, by good strong people of convictions. Like Jasmine, I feel there are people born to be Americans. I mean an intensity of spirit and a quality of desire. I feel American in a very fundamental way.[176]

It is this 'intensity of spirit' that is revealed in Jyoti the child and it indicates her successful Americanization that is to follow. Giving Jyoti the 'quality of desire' is to empower the protagonist in an attempt to dismantle fixed and marginalised discourses of the Asian American woman immigrant in US society.

For, in terms of assimilation, the tension between individualism and an intersubjective sense of self is central in the Asian American female *Bildungsroman*, says Patricia P. Chu. She defines the source of this tension in the disparity between the Asian sense of the self as rooted in family and community, and the American sense of the self as an autonomous being, free to move from one place to another.

> Part of assimilation, for Asian American writers, is the invention of a bildungsroman that describes a subject who combines independence, mobility and outspokenness with a deep sense of affinity with familial and communal others; as a group, these texts work to affirm that both halves of this equation are American and both are Asian.[177]

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[175] Vaman Shivram Apte, *The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, accessed December, 2014, http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/apte/.
[176] Walter Gobel, "Bharati Mukherjee: Expatriation, Americanality and Literary Form," *Fusion of Cultures?* Ed. Peter O. Stummer and Christopher Blame (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), 115.
[177] Patricia P. Chu, *Assimilating Asians: Gendered Strategies of Authorship in Asian America* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), 18.

The protagonist of *Jasmine* however does not experience this tension nor works by this dialectical ideal in her Americanization process. Her quest for a new identity operates instead according to what the author identifies as a 'maximalist'. The dream of belonging to the nation requires the immigrants to be 'maximalists' in their approach. In her article 'Immigrant Writers: Give Us Your Maximalists!'[178] Mukherjee describes the maximalist characters as having 'shed past lives and languages, and travelled half the world in every direction to come here and begin again [. . .]. They've lived through centuries of history in a single lifetime - village-born, colonized, traditionally raised, and educated'. Jyoti sketches out this journey of the maximalist immigrant's transformation. She does not negotiate the aforementioned tension but rather discards, from the first page, her Indian identity and goes through a process of identity metamorphoses until she becomes 'American'.

Mukherjee's forthright standpoint in relation to the position of the immigrant's native culture defines her recipe of assimilation and this is something as an author, she is entitled to express. Jyoti for example makes a crystal clear distinction between her Americanisation and Du's (her adopted Vietnamese son): '[m]y transformation has been genetic; Du's was hyphenated. We were so full of wonder at how fast he became American, but he's a hybrid' – although it is worth mentioning that there seems to be a kind of hierarchy of assimilation which is ironic given the hierarchy of the Hindu caste system where Jyoti comes from.[179] This assimilation recipe moreover becomes extremely problematic when it demonises the native culture of the protagonist. The text is riddled with negative stereotypes caricaturing Indian women. This issue is discussed later in the chapter but here is an image to make a case in point: '[v]illage girls are like cattle; whichever way you lead them, that is the way they will

[178] Bharati Mukherjee, "Immigrant Writing: Give us your Maximalists," *The New York Times Book Review*, 28 August, (1988), 28-9.
[179] Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 222.

go'. (46) Here we see how the protagonist's uniqueness is highlighted in contrast to, and to the detriment of, the rest of the Indian girls in the village.

Chu locates the problem with the literary presentation of the text in its portrayal of US culture and Indian culture in the manner of a binary. She argues that *Jasmine*'s failure as a 'realist' or 'domestic' novel lies in the ideological limitation of its adopted genre. Her reading of *Jasmine* exposes issues related to the ways in which Jyoti's assimilation is grounded in allusions to the English Bildungsroman. She interprets Jyoti's narrative discourse as Americanisation through romance, accomplished with the help of white men. To win their support, Jyoti, Chu explains, 'must submit to their alienating and sanitizing preconceptions of her, [and] thereby renounces the very past that renders her unique'.[180] In other words, martial romance in the English novel of education is appropriated in *Jasmine* as interracial immigrant romance. This appropriation, however, does not take into consideration the subjectivity of the Asian American woman and, as such, the author cannot 'entirely escape the genre's tendency to equate feminist consciousness and agency with first world women and fatalist or passive positions with third world women'. Thus, whether it is in the mode of literary representation or in the aesthetics of the 'maximalist', the novel demonstrates how form and content correlate and both discriminate against the Indian part of the Indian American identity of the protagonist.

The novel presents a fairly optimistic vision of the commensurability of the immigrant intensity of spirit (maximalists) and Americanization, narrating the progressive absorption/assimilation of the protagonist by the dominant culture of US society through the harmonization of the protagonist's 'maximalist' desire and US social reality within the world of the novel. This harmonization is achieved by, firstly, removing the protagonist's ethnic culture. In the US Jyoti, apart from her racialized beauty and her occasional cooking of

[180] Patricia P. Chu, "Assimilating Asians," 21.

Indian food, does not demonstrate or employ any Indian cultural practices. Even religion is absent from the narrative. Secondly, in the US, she is re-created in an identity that permits others to perceive her in relation to accessible and familiar images from the dominant culture, in such a way that she can easily pass as a middle class white American woman as well as successfully occupy the status of a banker's girlfriend. Granting Jyoti such characterization through this kind of harmonization does indeed grant her the accessibility to the dominant culture and allow her to resist marginalization; it nevertheless also works to empower the American component in the Indian American woman immigrant identity—recalling here how Jyoti insists that her transformation is, unlike Du's hyphenation, complete. Therefore, unlike the dialectical ideal between the individual and society imagined in the bildungsroman, Jyoti's encounter with the US culture and society results not in reconciliation through negotiation but in assimilation through romance (whether this romance is with men or with the US dominant culture itself, terms the author herself has expressed, as stated earlier)—meanwhile US society remains unaffected by the undocumented immigrant that moves within its space, culturally assimilated but without having access, as a legal citizen, to its institutional structure as a nation state. Additionally, this kind of commensurability begs another problem, one that discards the difficulties the immigrant figure might face in the new society. Admittedly, Jyoti's story is not meant to be representative of that of every immigrant, but posing the dilemma of assimilating/integrating into US culture as solvable by having 'intensity of spirit' is rather disputable.

The novel narrates the transitive process of its heroine along many of the conventional axes of the traditional *Bildungsroman* plot but in a cross-cultural context: the physical and psychical displacement of the rural by the city and of the third world of India by the first world of the US. The striking similarities between the levels of analogy described are a demonstration of Joseph Slaughter's definition of the idealist *Bildungsroman*:

> [It] is a literary artefact from the historical period of social evolution that sociologists of modern Europe describe, 'in many idioms', as the 'The Great Transition': 'the transition from feudalism to capitalism, the emergency of market society, the emancipation of civil society from the state, the increasing division of labour, and the rationalization of the modern world'. Positioned 'at the transition point from one to the other', the plot and form of the classical *Bildungsroman* bridges the transition from ritual, feudal, agricultural, and cyclical time to modern, secular, historical time, when evolution itself becomes the dominant hermeneutic for plotting human social events and establishes the syntactical patterns by which similarity and difference may be identified across time.[181]

At the heart of Jyoti's desire to travel to the US with Prakash is to have a better life or, as she says, 'real life'. Life in the US is portrayed as 'real' and fascinating because it is modern. The plot in *Jasmine* delivers the genre's historical promise: the transitive bridge of its protagonist from feudal to modern society. This transitive bridge imbricates personal, racial, and national *Bildung* in terms of Jyoti's identity re-construction, and because the novel is a cross-cultural narrative the transition includes her movement from rural India to the US. The major events in Jyoti's bibliography – the many relocations: from rural to urban, from India to the US, from Florida to New York, and then to Iowa; falling in love with a much older University professor (Taylor); her out of wedlock pregnancy with a paraplegic banker (Bud), and her final decision to leave him and join Taylor in his quest towards the west (California) – intersect with national events be it in India or in US: the separation of India and Pakistan after the lifting of the British colonial rule in India, the Khalistan movement during which India

[181] Joseph R. Slaughter, "Becoming Plots: Human Rights, the Bildungsroman, and the Novelization of Citizenship," *Human Rights Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative, Form, and International Law* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 109.

went through a 21-month national emergency, and the Immigration, Reform and Control Act in the US (1986).

Jyoti's husband Prakash, whose character introduces the theme of modernization, facilitates Jyoti's first movement from the rural to the urban. Their relationship is best analysed through the intertextual reference made to Bernard Shaw's Professor Higgins from his play *Pygmalion*:

> My husband, Prakash Vijh, was a modern man, a city man. [. . .] Pygmalion wasn't a play I'd seen or read then, but I realize now how much of Professor Higgins there was in my husband. He wanted to break down the Jyoti I'd been in Hasnapur and make a new kind of city woman. To break off the past, he gave me a new name: Jasmine.[182]

Henry Higgins in Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* is a professor of phonetics who takes up, in a bet, the task of educating and training Eliza Doolittle, a common girl, so she can pass as a duchess. Eliza succeeds in her quest, and eventually emancipates herself from Professor Higgins, and continues her journey in life as an independent woman. This intertextual reference made by Jyoti is significant in various aspects. It does not only reflect the modernization implied in Prakash's character, but also reveals a particular awareness of the protagonist's self-peception. To Jyoti, Prakash is her Higgins; Higgins transforms Eliza the flower girl into a duchess, and so does Prakash in transforming Jyoti to Jasmine. There is a scene in the novel that simulates the relationship between Higgins and Eliza. Jyoti forgets whatever English she learnt at school and Praksh instructs her: 'study the technical textbooks and manuals I bring home everyday'. (84) Having no English-learning books, she sits by him while he works and starts reading from the English manuals of the electrical pieces. The

characters in the text understand the notion of modernisation as technological advancement. '[W]hat excited Prakash about electronics. It was the *frontier* [my italics]'. (88) In *Jasmine*, Prakash is not only described as modern, but also his modernity is portrayed through his passion for and prowess in technology; he is known to be the person who can fix any broken machine. Prakash is smart, modern and a good technician who, as described by other characters in the text, 'isn't a dunderhead like us. He'll [thus] move to America in a year or two'. (68) It is in this way that modernization becomes synonymous with Americanization positing India by contrast as a place of feudalism. This transition to modernization is thus another element in the *Bildungsroman* that highlights how the form is complicit in the ideological character of the text.

Jyoti emancipates herself from Prakash just as Eliza does with Higgins, albeit in a more complex fashion. Moreover, the heroine, while narrating in hindsight, is self-reflecting through Western literary classics such as (Pygmalion) and Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. Describing her relationship with Bud, Jyoti says: 'I think maybe I am Jane with my very own Mr. Rochester'. (236) This demonstrates how the character has internalized and processed the identity of Western literary heroines. Michael Worton and Judith Still argue that the use of textuality in *Jasmine* 'is an attempt to struggle against both complicity and exclusion – perhaps something, some shifting of barriers, can thus be achieved'.[183] In posing Jyoti in the place of Eliza Doolittle and Jane Eyre, the author portrays the protagonist in familiar images to the reader, who can relate to these heroines and therefore relates to Jyoti by association. This technique however has advantages as well as disadvantages, for while it makes the protagonist accessible through images of Western heroines, it simultaneously distances the reader from the ethnic identity of the illegal protagonist, because it operates on the basis of

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[182] Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 76-7.
[183] Michael Worton and Judith Still, "Introduction," *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices, ed. Michael Worton and Judith Still* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 33.

processing her identity in Western images rather than acknowledging and integrating her Indian identity.

The last element to examine in the *Bildungsroman* before proceeding to the fairy-tale paradigm in the text is the fashion in which the novel ends. Jyoti's narrative of 'becoming American' delivers the genre's incorporative historical work of nationalizing the marginal subject to such an extent that Jyoti comes to regard her journey as a natural chronotopia (spatial-temporal frame) of her biography.[184] This is well symbolized in Jyoti's biology as the novel ends with the image of the protagonist pregnant by artificial insemination and embarking on a new journey. The pregnancy is wrapped in mystery not only in its artificial insemination (which is both technological/modern as well as fairy-tale like) but also in its connotations of the journey's continuity: Jyoti becomes a new entity pregnant with possibilities and ready to follow in the American tradition of moving west. The novel celebrates Jyoti's historical emergence as a "Third World" immigrant subject in the "First World"; this emergence is metaphorically communicated through the narrative itself birthing its protagonist in a new identity. The fact that the novel finishes with Jyoti pregnant with Bud's child implies that Jyoti has internalized her Americanness and is willing to continue her journey as a new entity: she reaches her full potential as a woman (through pregnancy) along with becoming American. The narrative tense further participates in this interpretation. The series of episodes that constitutes the narrative of *Jasmine* are told in the past tense—except for the period Jyoti spends in Elsa County, Iowa, where her journey is communicated with the immediacy of present tense interventions. The events narrated in the present tense are chronological and they end the novel's narrative at a moment in which the protagonist is at a cross road addressing the future: 'watch me position the stars […] time will tell' – informing the reader that her journey is still in progress. (240-241)

III.2.2 An American Fairy Tale

In examining the folklore allusions, the novel does not only reference folk-tales but narratively draws upon many such genre elements in almost every critical conjuncture in the heroine's journey. These elements can be identified according to the fairy-tale frame proposed by Vladimir Propp in *Morphology of the Folktale*. Propp lists thirty-one functions for dramatis personae, six of which can be easily located in the narrative of *Jasmine*.

> XI. The hero leaves home.
>
> XII. The hero is tested, interrogated, attacked, etc., which prepares the way for his receiving a magical agent or a helper (the first function of the donor).
>
> XIV. The hero acquires the use of a magical agent (provision or receipt of a magic agent).
>
> XV. The hero is transferred, delivered, or led to the whereabouts of an object of search.
>
> XVI. The hero is given a new appearance (transfiguration).
>
> XXXI. The hero is married and ascends to the throne.[185]

In *Jasmine,* the heroine is told a prophecy about her own destiny, one of widowhood and exile. The journey is characterised by upward mobility and the narrative is connected through a series of episodes. Each episode has a similar structure: it happens in a new place, with the assistance of a helper, the heroine re-creates her identity and is re-named. With the help of

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[184] Bakhtin, Mikhail, "Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel," *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

Prakash, she leaves rural Hasnapur for urban Julandahar and her identity transforms from Jyoti to Jasmine. Jasmine faces the tragedy of her husband's death, and because she realises that she cannot acquire the identity she desires in India, the heroine decides to leave home for the US. At this point, the prophecy of her widowhood and exile is fulfilled. The journey to the desired destiny/destination is full of challenges. On the shores of Florida, she is raped in a motel room. After the rape, the text portrays the protagonist in the image of goddess Kali, the fierce aspect of goddess Durga (Parvati), sitting on top of her rapist with her tongue sliced, blood pouring out of her mouth and stabbing him to death. This transformation to a Hindu goddess links with the sage episode as the protagonist borrows what might be described as fairy-power in times of need. Jyoti's journey is enabled by many helpers/donors, such as: Prakash, Lillian Gordon, Mother Ripplemeyer, Kate, Bud and Taylor. They all help her in different ways. Lillian Gordon, Kate and Mrs. Ripplemeyer all appear in moments of distress as if they are fairy godmothers to the protagonist.

In Florida, Lillian randomly appears after the rape incident and rescues Jyoti from the street. She takes her in, treats her wounded tongue, giving her 'healing food',[186] teaches her how dress, talk and walk like an American; and renames her as Jazzy, sending her off to continue her journey in a fashion very similar to the fairy godmother in the 'Cinderella' story. This episode, with Lillian Gordon, emphasizes another point regarding the depiction of the worlds of India and the US in the novel as binary opposites. Gordon appears in the text as the saviour Jesus Christ, but in a female form. 'Lillian Gordon, a kind Quaker lady who rescued me from a dirt trail about three miles east from the Fowlers Key, Florida', says Jyoti. (127) Gordon salvages female illegal immigrants: she takes them into her home and offers them redemption and deliverance by training them to be 'domestics' so they can sustain themselves as free individuals in the new world. Later, she is punished for her good deeds, saving the

[185] Vladimir Lakovlevitch Propp, "The Functions of Dramatis Personae," *Morphology of the Folktale*, 2nd edition (Austin: University of Texas, 2009).

wretched women immigrants, and put in jail by the authorities for not telling on the identity and whereabouts of her women subjects. Gordon who 'has a low tolerance for reminiscence, bitterness or nostalgia' advises Jyoti: '[l]et the past make you wary, by all means. But do not let it deform you', and, metaphorically, christens Jyoti into 'Jazzy'. (131) The sequence charting Jyoti's movement from the avatar of goddess Kali to the arms of the saviour re-incarnated in Lillian Gordon is significant because it is reminiscent of colonial legacies: the Indian/Eastern/Old/traditional divinity ends with the beginning of a new age in the hands of the American/Western/New/Modern one.[187] So Jyoti's journey of erasing the Indian self in the US starts with juxtaposing the two worlds.

Furthermore, the valorization of Jyoti's racialized beauty in the US starts with Gordon who says, '"Jazzy, you don't strike me as a picker or a domestic [. . .]. You're *different* from these *others* [immigrants]. I better put on my thinking cap and come up with something. [my italics]"'.[188] Although the heroine's race and beauty attributes are not explicitly mentioned, they are implied in the passage. Jyoti henceforth receives differential treatment, starting with Gordon granting the narrator an exclusive use of her daughter's old room, distancing her from the Kanjobal women who are also illegal immigrants. (127) They too are aware of Jyoti's uniqueness: 'The Kanjobal women looked at her intently, nodding their heads as if they understood'. (134) Koshy comments: '[t]he Kanjobal women form the ground for a claim of Jasmine's exceptionality; thus, they are simultaneously central to the formulation of her difference and entirely peripheral to it'.[189] Gordon teaches Jyoti how to give up the 'Third World heels', '[w]alk American', lose the 'shy sidle' the walk Gordon links to 'one of those Trinidad girls, all thrust and cheekiness'.[190] She reminds her: '"If you walk and talk American, they'll think you were born here. Most Americans can't imagine anything else [. .

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[186] Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 133.
[187] Grewal, "Born Again America," 186.
[188] Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 134.
[189] Koshy, "The Geography of Female Subjectivity," 79.

.]. You're a very special case, my dear"'. (134-5) The narrator in India was already aware of her beauty and in the US she realizes its exotic (sexualized) aspect and this becomes her agency through which she passes undetected in US society. Thus, the text seems to mis/represent race as almost a privilege and this is a polity Jyoti signs, a racial one that implies using racial-beauty attributes in return for mobility.

The next stop, Flushing (the Indian Ghetto in New York) is a set-back in the heroine's quest, as is clear in the theme as well as the structure of this episode: Jasmine receives help from Professor Vedhera but it is not the type of generosity she desires,[191] and her identity is static as her name remains Jasmine, unchanged. Kate, a "magical agent", delivers the heroine to her fourth stop, New York. There, Taylor, who falls in love with the heroine, rescues her from the suffocating stagnation she experienced in the Indian Ghetto, Flushing, and with him she becomes Jase. Upon her arrival to Baden, helpless and broke, Mother Ripplemeyer delivers her to Bud. Her episode with Bud also resonates with the plot conventions and motifs in the Disney version of "Beauty and the Beast". Bud is rendered paraplegic after being shot by one of the farmers who could not pay back the loan to Bud's bank and lost his land thereby. Bud needs re-humanizing by Jane, who, like a fairy-like heroine has the power to accomplish this task. Her love also does the same with Taylor, whose wife leaves him after her illicit affair. Bud gives Jyoti a job in his bank, falls in love with her and they live together; she becomes Jane with him. After a period of boring and unexciting time with her paraplegic lover (Bud), Jyoti says:

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[190] Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 133.

[191] The generosity offered by professor Vedhera can be described as an Indian one in the sense that the work and shelter he gives her are confined to an Indian setting (in the ghetto) as if they were in India rather than the potential and freedom in the US style of life that the protagonist desires. While they are associated with the past because they hold on to the memory of Prakash, she wants the future that is away from everything Indian, 161.

> I realize I have already stopped thinking of myself as Jane. Adventure, risk, transformation: the frontier is pushing indoors through uncaulked windows […].
>
> 'Ready?' Taylor grins.
>
> I cry into Taylor's shoulder, cry through all the lives I've been given birth to, cry for all my dead. Then there is nothing I can do.[192]

Taylor comes to the rescue and the plot ends with both the pregnant heroine and Taylor embarking on a new journey, pregnant with possibilities. The journey finally transforms Jyoti from a sage (Indian) heroine to a frontier one (American).

Examining the fairy tale elements and references operating in the mode of writing in relation to the content of the text, there is little doubt that *Jasmine* is an American fairy tale, in the Disney sense, that is almost synonymous with magic and fantasy. The novel creates a rather magical image of the world of US – a wish factory if you will – that operates at the pleasures of those who have the agency of desire and will. Yet for all its success, this world is not magic for everyone. In the context of cross-cultural migration, Jyoti's fairy tale does not reflect that of every illegal immigrant whether they have or do not have desire to guide and lead them to successful assimilation. For the disenfranchised individual/groups who have no access to means of self-representation, *Jasmine* paints a very problematic image of illegal migration.

III.3 Problematizing the Fluidity of the Immigrant Identity in Jasmine

The following analysis briefly contextualizes *Jasmine* within the succession of Mukherjee's major fictional publications in order to point out the difference in her treatment of the fluidity

of the immigrant figure. This is important in order to examine the author's best narrative of assimilation, that is the narrative in which the protagonist succeeds on the basis of the fluidity of the migrant identity. The identity of the Indian woman immigrant constitutes the primary site of performance in Mukherjee's works. Whether it is in *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971), *Wife* (1975) or *Jasmine* (1989) the protagonist, an Indian woman immigrant, who is situated in the US at the time of narration, navigates her identity across variable borders of alienation. Although they share points of departure and arrival, they differ in one vital factor, which is subjectivity – how fluid/flexible the identities of the protagonists are. From Tara's discourse of the postcolonial expatriate consciousness in *The Tiger's Daughter* to Dimple's discourse of a consciousness split between accepting or resisting the dominant culture in *Wife*, Mukherjee finally stretches the fluidity of the immigrant identity to its maximum in Jyoti's discourse of assimilation. According to *Jasmine,* the character of Jyoti is genetically[193] wired to be just like her writer—'one of you now', an 'American' among 'Americans'.

Jyoti says: 'I haven't spoken to an Indian since my months in Flushing. My transformation has been genetic; Du's was hyphenated. We were so full of wonder at how fast he became American, but he's a hybrid'.[194] Jasmine's immigrant consciousness is no longer haunted/hyphenated by the indefinable sense of identity between Indianness and Americanness like Tara and Dimple. Instead, she consciously performs annihilation of her Indian self and celebrates metamorphosing into a fully-fledged American: '[t]here are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself. We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams'. (29) The trajectory of fluidity in the immigrant identity reaches its zenith in the character of Jyoti. Mukherjee in *Jasmine* offers her best narrative of assimilation to the character that is willing to belong, embrace and celebrate becoming

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[192] Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 240.

[193] It is worth clarifying that "genetically" here does not imply determinism or fatalism; it rather suggests that the migrant identity is fluid in terms of change, to the degree that this identity is flexible in terms of transforming itself.

'American'. Although the author argues that the US is a country that accepts all kind of immigrants, it would appear that the terms of acceptance in the US culture are 'participation in the dominant culture of the American nation'.[195]

The use of the word 'genetic' implies mutation from an Indian Self to an 'American' one. This mutation is contingent upon obliterating the protagonist's Indian Self. In a cross-cultural narrative, such as that of Jyoti, one would expect a process of negotiating an identity in conjunction with the native culture and the host one, rather than a process of re-writing the code of the Indian DNA into a mainstream 'American' one.[196] Moreover, the novel suggests that this new 'American' code is ameliorative, despite the fact that Jyoti, as an illegal immigrant, does not have access to the United States' legal rights as a citizen. Whether intentional or not, the text designates the status of an undocumented alien in the US to a citizen in India, revealing a rather hostile attitude towards the latter and advocating, even with limited access, the US culture. Gurleen Grewal concurs: '[t]he erasure of the immigrant's Indian past would not seem a loss because this quintessential "Third World" occupies the negative term in the binary of First and Third World'.[197] This proposed narrative of 'Americanization' that conditions the renunciation of the Indian cultural anamnesis in favour of US 'cultural citizenship',[198] turns the text into a bio-political project that is complicit in the ideological foregrounding of the US as a superior culture.

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[194] Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 222.
[195] Indepal Grewal, "Becoming American: The Novel and the Diaspora," *Transnational America: Feminisim, Diaspora, Neoliberalisms* (London: Duke University Press, 2005), 69.
[196] As Patricia Chu suggested earlier.
[197] Gurleen Grewal, "Born Again America," 186.
[198] 'Cultural citizenship' is used here to differentiate from legal citizenship since, as an illegal immigrant, Jyoti has access to the nation state in the form of the culture-abiding citizen, as opposed to the law-abiding. For more on the limitations of 'cultural citizenship' please see: Arjan Reijerse, Kaat Van Acker, Norbert Vanbeselaere, Karen Phalet and Bart Duriez, "Beyond the Ethnic-Civic Dichotomy: Cultural Citizenship as a New Way of Excluding Immigrants," *Political Philosophy* 34, no. 4 (2013). Please also see: Lawrence Pawley, "Cultural Citizenship," *Sociology Compass* 2, no. 2 (March 2008), 594-608. Pawley's article is on cultural citizenship beyond multiculturalism and rights in the realm of linguistic and ideological citizenship. Toby Miller, "Cultural Citizenship," *Matrizes Ano* 4, no. 2 (San Pablo, Brasil 2011), 57-74. Miller discusses how cultural citizenship is exercised in the media. Aihwa Ong, "Cultural Citizenship as Subject-Making: Immigrants Negotiate Racial and Cultural Boundaries in the United States," *Current Anthropology* 37, no. 5 (December 1996), 737-762. Ong discusses the role of cultural citizenship in the reformation of immigrant communities in North America (1996).

III.3.1 National Identity in the World of the Novel

Jasmine's transformation into an "American" is nationalist in the conservative sense of nationalism.[199] Upon its release, the novel was hailed as a locus classicus of 'what it is to become an American'.[200] It allows '"us to see 'ourselves as others see us"',[201] in other words, for Americans to understand how the rest of the world sees them. It was also perceived within the frame of American freedom and individualism as 'a story of a transformation of an Indian girl, whose grandmother wanted to marry her off at 11', but who triumphantly emerges as '"an American woman who finally thinks of her self"'. Some critics read *Jasmine*'s narrative of assimilation as 'empowering',[202] describing it as an 'uncompromising quest for identity and a sense of belonging'[203] and consider it the epitome of the successful immigrant's ability to survive.[204] In this light, it would be tempting to interpret the authorial intention as an attempt to undermine the legitimacy of US nationality as being determined by virtue of birth on the principles of *jus soli* (place of birth) and *jus sanguinis* (the citizenship of parents), given that the novel gives an example of how a new immigrant like Jyoti can attain equal, if not superior, forms of American legitimacy.[205] This however poses a major concern about the novel. According to such an interpretation, the culture of the US is not treated as a living set of social relations but as a timeless and static trait contradicting therein Clifford Geertz's

[199] In order to define nationalism, one must define and problematize the concept of the "nation" across the world. Due to limited space in this chapter, "nationalism" is used here as the source of national identity. A. Popan Cristina Bradata, R. Melton, "Trans-Nationality as a Fluid Identity," *Social Identities* 16, no. 2 (2010).
[200] Michael Gorra, "Call It Exile Call It Immigration." *New York Times Book Review*, no. 10 (September 1989), accessed December, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/1989/09/10/books/call-it-exile-call-it-immigration.html.
[201] Quoted in Anupama Jain, "Re-Reading Beyond Third World Difference: The Case of Bharati Mukherjee's Jasmine," *Weber Studies* 15, no. 1 (1998), 118.
[202] Sandra Ponzanesi, *Paradoxes of Postcolonial Culture: Contemporary Women Writers of the Indian and Afro-Italian Diaspora* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004), 41.
[203] Andrea Dlaska, *Ways of Belonging: The Making of New Americans in the Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee* (Wein, Austria: Braumuller, 1999), 123.
[204] Brinda Bose, "A Question of Identity: Where Gender, Race and America Meeting Bharati Mukherjee," *Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Emmanuel Nelson (New York: Garland, 1993).
[205] Peter J. Spiro and Charles Weiner, *Beyond Citizenship: American Identity after Globalization* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

argument that the nature of culture is continuously contested.[206] Thus, this 'change' is unidirectional, whereas the US, in Randolph Bourne's words, as quoted by Christina Bradata:

> [A]s a country of immigration is a nation of 'trans-nationals' rather 'nationals' in the European sense, a nation where many different cultures weave into a multicultural thread rather than into a melting pot. Immigrants should be left to bring their own, specific contribution to the American life, and their perspectives need to be incorporated into a new American culture [. . .] transnationalism [. . .] is a more modern and progressive perspective on immigrant integration. Instead of the full assimilation demanded in the past [. . .].[207]

The novel suggests that for Jyoti to access US society, she has to re-formulate her identity within the frame of US national cultural identity. This means that she (as an immigrant who erases her Indian past/self) has no means or power to contribute to the socio-political body of US society. This leaves the immigrant as a powerless figure rather than an active living member in the on-going metamorphosis/evolution of 'culture'. The other question here is if successful 'Americanization' entails giving up one's own culture, does it mean that immigrants who do not want to do that can never be 'Americans'?

On the fluidity of the immigrant identity, Thomas Faist argues that it is problematic to expect immigrants to wipe away their own unique, cultural background and to replace it with an Anglo-Saxon American one. Cristina Bradata, Rachel Melton and Adrian Popan distinguish between diasporic and transnational immigrants. While diasporic people's lives have little or no mixing with their country of adoption due to their inability to return, transnational identification depends not only on 'the group, host country and historical period

[206] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

but also on the combinations between these three elements'; thus, 'the transnational identity implies the concomitant identification with two different national groups'. (10-12) Considering this, interestingly, Jyoti belongs to neither of the categories defined. Her complete transformation to 'American' sounds rather problematic and that is why Li probably best describes the novel as 'romantic'. The protagonist is the opposite of a diasporic immigrant because she neither affiliates with India nor wants to go back there, although she can. Neither is she transnational given that she establishes no identification with the Indian community in the US at all. On the contrary, in the seven years she spends in the US, for the brief time (three months) she lives in Flushing, an Indian ghetto, she completely rejects it.

> In this apartment of artificially maintained Indianness, I wanted to distance my-self from everything Jyoti-like. To them, I was a widow who should show a proper modesty of appearance and attitude [. . .]. Of course, as a widow, I did not participate [in any activity]. I felt myself deteriorating [. . .]. I was spiralling into depression behind the fortress of Punjabiness. Some afternoons [. . .]. I would find myself sobbing from unnamed, unfulfilled wants. 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.[208]

She not only disaffiliates with the Punjabi community but also finds it stifling and longs to leave it: 'I wanted to distance myself from everything Indian, everything Jyoti-like'. (145) Later in the text (quoted previously) with no sense of nostalgia she casually notes: 'I haven't spoken to an Indian since my months in Flushing', and proudly states '[m]y transformation has been genetic'. If social identity is created and maintained through social contacts, the

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[207] Cristina Bradata, "Trans-Nationality as a Fluid Identity," 172.

character of Jyoti would not be able to claim a transnational identity. Even if *Jasmine* indicates a transnational history, her character, Schlund-Vials argues, 'is decidedly more invested in a national – and not transnational – citizenship project'.[209]

Jyoti's statement – '[a]n imaginary brick wall topped with barbed wire [. . .] kept me from breaking into the future. I was a prisoner doing unreal time' – links to what has been discussed in the previous chapter on Azar Nafisi. Speaking about Iran in relation to the US, she says, '[w]e in ancient countries have our past – we obsess over the past. They, the Americans, have a dream: they feel nostalgia about the promise of the future'. Both authors share a similar vision identifying the US as a place that promises a brighter future, one that also establishes the United States as a geopolitical centre of freedom, choice, and feminist empowerment, all in opposition to the "Third World" of their characters. They foster nationalist and imperialist fantasies of the US that offer a discourse of modernization and the sentiment of rescue that otherwise are not and will not be available in the country of origin.

When she narrates her mother's attempt to choke her at birth Jyoti explains: 'I had a ruby-red choker of bruise around my throat and sapphire fingerprints on my collarbone. [. . .] I survived the snipping. My grandmother may have named me Jyoti, Light, but in surviving I was already Jane, a fighter and adaptor'.[210] This confession does not only reveal how she believes she is born to be American (in her spirited survivalist ability), but also it gives the impression that survival is not Indian. It is from this reason that *Jasmine* harvests 'national' readings, the novel produces opposing images of India and the US. Her desire and commitment to belong to the US as a nation surpasses, if not obliterates, any national

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[208] Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 145-8.
[209] Cathy J. Schlund-Vials, "Reading and Writing America: Bharati Mukherjee's Jasmine and Eva Hoffman's Lost in Translation," *Modeling Citizenship: Jewish and Asian American Writing, Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 131.
[210] Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 40.

attachment she ever felt to India. Thus, it is this persistent opposition between India and the US that makes the novel's narrative of assimilation biased against India.

The answer to the previously asked question regarding the destiny of the immigrant who would not want to entirely give up their Indian self lies in the character of Dimple. In *Wife*, Dimple's cultural negotiation ends with her disintegration into utter madness as she stabs her Indian husband in the neck until his head rolls down on the floor.[211] In an interview, Mukherjee explains to Geoffrey Hancock: 'Dimple's decision to murder her husband is a misguided act of self-assertion [. . .] so turning to violence outward rather than inward is part of her slow and misguided Americanization'.[212] Murdering the husband is emblematic of murdering the Indian culture. There is a lesson to learn from Mukherjee writing Dimple's character in terms of insanity. The character meets this destiny because she fails to locate her antagonism: it is not the outward symbol of the Indian culture but rather the inward Indian self that needs to be destroyed. The Indian self must be consciously executed and replaced by an 'American' self, just as Jyoti does and only then, according to Mukherjee, it is not 'misguided Americanisation'.

Jyoti exterminates her Indian self and this is made clear in the symbolic ritual of burning her suitcases, the ones she carries from India across continents to the US. When she arrives in Florida, she kills Half-Face who rapes her in a motel. The scene is written in dramatic language as it depicts Jyoti's ritualistic rite of passage into the New World of hope. The narrator describes how 'I extended my hand and he nearly ripped it off pulling me into the room. His leg flew waist high in a show of kick and the door thumped close',[213] 'Half-Face stood, totally naked. He was monstrously erect [. . .] he whooped, 'Oh, God!' (155-6) After the rape, Jyoti dramatically metamorphoses into Kali, the fierce avatar of goddess

[211] Mukherjee, *Wife* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1992).
[212] Geoffrey Hancock, "An Interview with Bharati Mukherjee," *Conversations with Bharati Mukherjee*, ed. Bradly C. Edwards, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 24.
[213] Mukherjee, Jasmine, 111.

Parvati: 'I extended my tongue, and sliced it'. She sits above him 'naked, but now with my mouth open, pouring blood, my red tongue out [. . .] slapping at his neck while blood [. . .] rushed between his fingers'. (118) After the murder, it is not entirely clear why the protagonist changes her mind about performing Sati. In fact, the configuration of Sati in the text fosters misconceptions for the Western reader who might mistakenly think of it as a matter of choice for Indian widows—especially given that we learn from the text that Jyoti's mother is also a widow but she does not immolate herself.[214] Jyoti however takes her suitcase, a metaphoric menagerie of her life in India containing her predicted fate of 'widowhood and exile' (the widow's white sari and Prakash's suit and papers), and burns it in a rusty trash bin behind the motel.[215] Along with it, her Indian package/self is burnt and she emerges from the fire a phoenix and from the scene a tabula rasa on which she is ready to inscribe an American Self. Koshy comments: '[t]he moment of Jasmine's initiation into America is symbolized by her incarnation as Kali, the uncontained divine female energy of destruction and creation'.[216] Although the narrator's performance in this scene is of an ambivalent nature, poised between resisting the US dominant culture (as murdering Half-Face might suggest) and being complicit in its ideological foregrounding, the overall reading of *Jasmine* disambiguates this ambivalence. As Jyoti figuratively seals her Indian self, she signs a social contract with a nationalist polity by making a pledge to dominant white 'American' culture on the account of retaining a social life at some remove from the US society – bearing in mind that Jyoti is an illegal immigrant whose access to the state is limited to social life.

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[214] Grewal, "Born Again America: The Immigrant Consciousness in Jasmine," 188.
[215] For more about the paradox of Sati please see: Gayatri Spivak Chakrabarty, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. L. Grossberg C. Nelson (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988).
[216] Susan Koshy, "Sex Acts as Assimilation Acts: Female Power and Passing in Bharati Mukherjee's Wife and Jasmine," *Sexual Naturalization: Asian Americans and Miscegenation* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004), 141-2.

The nationalist polity, sanctioned by the author, provides Jyoti with a space to develop a social life upon swearing *national* allegiance to the US. Jyoti's revenge crime is written as an empowering act and in a way that solicits sympathy and even evokes the complicity of the reader who might not want to question the way the rape scene is deployed in the narrative at large. It is important and necessary to point out the literary craft with which the protagonist's far-from-pleasant entry into the US is written. One can consider it as an ambiguous site of performance because it creates a catch-22 situation. It compels the reader, overwhelmed by the melodrama of the rape scene, to sympathize with the "Third World" narrator, therefore overlooking the crime that she commits. It also acts as leverage for the forthcoming successful journey of assimilation. The protagonist is never slow to remind the reader at every happy station of her "Americanization" of the brutality of her first one, the Florida motel. In other words, the successful re-shaping of Jyoti's immigrant identity is written in the shadow of the disturbing image of Half-Face and the savage rape scene. 'Half-Face', 'Florida' and other reminders of Jyoti's violent welcome to the US are mentioned more than 25 times in the novel which is 241 pages in total, bearing in mind that the rape appears on page 115. Thus, the constant reminder of the narrator's defilement enjoys the powerful and steady function of camouflaging the implausibility of the ease with which the peasant "Third World" subject ascends, as the novel maps, to a "First World" pioneering figure – and this is discussed later. The point in question here is what message does the novel communicate if it celebrates Jyoti's empowerment, as opposed to Dimple's, upon endorsing US nationalism? It disseminates images of the US as the land of freedom and agency where immigrants can re-invent their identity if they are willing to adopt the dominant culture. In other words, the novel, whether intentionally or not, feeds into a discourse of propaganda in favour of the US. Dimple does not have Jyoti's will, subjectivity or fluid identity to become "American" and so she fails in her becoming "American". Grewal critiques the author's

ratification of 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'.[217] Cathy J. Schlund-Vials argues that the novel 'evocatively and troublingly uncovers asymmetrical global politics, second-wave feminism, and established U.S. expansionist narratives'.[218] *Jasmine* is tantalizing to the US sentiment of "exceptionalism"[219] because it reiterates that the US as a unique and liberal nation available only for those who are eager to believe in it. Thus, Mukherjee exploits the fluidity of the immigrant identity and creates new hegemonies in writing selfhood in the US.

III.3.2 Colonization of the Self

Jasmine's discourse of "Americanization" promotes the propaganda of American freedom and democracy domestically in the US and worldwide, via the power of literature. Sadly though, this happens at a time when decades of struggle by postcolonial, Asian, black and "Third World" feminists, scholars and activists have finally succeeded in introducing to the US a modicum of attention to world and local politics. Gayatri Spivak's self-definition is an empowering statement in its defiance:

> I have two faces. I am not in exile. I am not an immigrant. I am a green card carrying critic of neo-colonialism in the United States. It's a difficult position to negotiate because I will not marginalize myself in the United States in order to get sympathy from people who are genuinely marginalized.[220]

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[217] Grewal, "Becoming American: The Novel and the Diaspora," 69.
[218] Schlund-Vials, "Reading and Writing America," 129.
[219] Banerjee investigates the rhetoric of American "exceptionalism" in Jasmine. Suchismita Banerjee, "Interrogating the Ambivalence of Self-Fashioning and Redefining the Immigrant Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's Jasmine," *Asiatic* 6, no. 1 (2012).

Under the title 'Flag Waiver', Mari Matsuda, professor of Law, Georgetown University Law Center, Washington D.C. comments on Mukherjee's posting of a picture of herself wrapped in the American flag, on top of her article 'American Dreamer' in the online magazine *Mother Jones*:

> It is sometimes difficult for members of my own generation of Asian-Americans to wrap ourselves in the American flag, as Bharati Mukherjee quite literally does . . . It is the same flag, after all, that presided over the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II, the bombing of Hiroshima, and the massacre at My Lai. There can be progressive impulse behind claiming the flag and the appellation 'American', but there is work to do before we can make either of those symbols stand unambiguously for justice.[221]

Matsuda's words stand in sharp contrast to Mukherjee's socio-political statement: 'I am fascinated by people who have enough gumption, energy, ambition to pull up their roots [. . .] my stories are about conquests and not about loss'.[222] Indeed, within *Jasmine*'s narrative of assimilation lies an ideological conquest narrative of US imperialism.

An analysis of the historical narratives imbedded in the novel would require us to consider the protagonist's complicity in the ideology of US imperialism. The following interrogates the historical socio-political events that link India to the US, by way of Jyoti's cross-cultural movement and narrative of assimilation.

Jyoti at the moment of narration is situated in the US, but the location of the narrative is split between her life in India and her life in the US; the novel is thus a combination of two

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[220] Quoted in *Interpreting Homes in South Asian Literature*, ed. Malashri Lal and Sukrita Paul Kumar (Delhi: Pearson Education, 2007), 87.

[221] Mari Matsuda, "Flag Waiver." *Mother Jones*, March/April, 1997, accessed August, 2014, http://www.motherjones.com/toc/1997/03/backtalk.

stories that take place in two different countries and cultures. In India, Jyoti's life is influenced by both the partition of the country, and the conflict in Punjab. Jyoti's parents survived the country's partition; the once rich family was uprooted from Lahore, where they had lived for centuries, and was flung to a village of 'flaky mud huts', in Jyoti's words. 'In Lahore my parents had lived in a big stucco house with porticoes and gardens. They had owned farmlands, shops'. Jyoti's father and mother are captivated by the loss of 'home', status and wealth. The father would tune in to the Pakistan radio broadcasts from Lahore, the narrator says, 'the names of those singers and actors from the Pakistan side were more familiar to me, growing up, than their Indian counterparts. Otherwise, he *detested Urdu and Muslims*, which he naturally associated with the loss of our fortune [. . .]. Pitaji [her father] had been cast adrift in an *uncaring, tasteless, corrupt, coarse, ignorant world* [my italics]'. He says: 'the Punjabi you heard a beggar mutter by the trash pits of Lahore was poetry compared to the crow-talk Punjabi of the richest merchants in Julundhar and Hasnapur'.[223] Jyoti's mother too is alienated from life in Hasnapur as she was snatched from her fine life and luxurious environment. She 'never came with us [the neighbourhood women to the 'Ladies' Hour' when only the women of the village meet and chat]. She was a modest and superior Lahori woman', Jyoti explains. (53) Here the state of the narrator's family's miserable existence of struggle and poverty is blamed on Muslims who, in her perspective, violated their lands and looted their properties. The history of the parents speaks of the end of the British rule in 1947 when they arrived in India's Punjab district as refugees after the partition riots of the same year. The parents are trapped in that moment of history and cannot and will not forget; Jyoti says: 'Lahore visionaries, Lahore women, Lahore music, Lahore ghazals: my father lived in a bunker'. (42) This part of Indian history is told from the limited scope of displaced privileged Hindu family members, and for the reader who is not familiar

[222] Edwards, *Conversations with Bharati Mukherjee*, 149.

with this historical event, the way it is portrayed in the novel might foster misconceptions regarding the Muslim community—how in its 'essentialized' violence it is solely responsible for uprooting the narrator's family into the 'ignorant world' of India's Punjab—when the partition of India and Pakistan is a political event more complicated than this unilateral perspective.

In Lahore, 'even the Sikh, according to my father, were men of culture'. (50) The text communicates by implication that not only the Muslims but also the Sikhs in Punjab are savage barbarians. Jyoti's life in Hasnapur (the village where she grew up) and Jalandhar (the city where she moved after marrying Prakash) is impacted by a Sikh gang called 'the Khalsa Lions': 'as lions of purity, the gang dressed in white shirts and pyjamas[224] and indigo turbans, and all of them toted heavy kirpans on bandoliers. They had money to zigzag through the bazaars on scooters […] we assumed the money […] came from smuggling liquor and guns in and out of Pakistan'. (49) They terrorized the village throwing sticks and stones at everyone everywhere. 'Hooligans!' Jyoti's father describes them, 'next month they'll throw bombs!' Pitaji's prediction is fulfilled as the text reveals how 'Sikh nationalists had gotten out of hand […] The Khalsa Lions were making bombs […] Kalashnikov- and Uzi-armed terrorists on mopeds were picking off the moderates, the police, innocent Hindus […] Vancouver Singh's farm was a safe-house for drug pushers and gunmen'. (63) Even in Hasnapur things escalated, 'a transistor radio blew up in the bazaar. A busload of Hindus on their way to a shrine to Lord Ganpati was hijacked and all males shot dead at point-blank range'. (46) There is a scene that precisely exposes the mentality of fanaticism and terrorism of the novel's Sikhs. Jyoti's brothers receive a messenger, one of the Lions from the village, to warn them:

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[223] Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 42.

[224] It is worth mentioning here that what the lions of purity wear are not really called "pyjamas;" the use of this word perpetuates stereotypes as its connotations fall in the category of orientalist terms just as "ragheads" and "Paki" are.

> The Khalsa, the Pure-Bodied and the Pure-Hearted, must have their sovereign state. Khalistan, the Land of the Pure. The impure must be eliminated. My brothers laughed. 'How, Sukkhi? You're not going to kill brothers from your own village.'
>
> 'You must leave, then. Leave or be killed. Renounce all filth and idolatry. Do not eat meat, smoke tobacco, or drink alcohol or cut your hair. Wear a turban, and then you will be welcome.'
>
> 'What kind of choice is that? That's worse than the Muslims gave.'
>
> 'Is there anything else you want us to do Sukkhi?' asked Arvind-prar
>
> 'Yes. Keep your whorish women off the streets.' (65)

Sukkhi, who later kills Prakash and whose presence threatens Jyoti in the US, adopts the rhetoric of religious fanaticism as he is willing to kill his friends and fellow village people if they do not comply with either his belief or vision of Punjab. He also calls all Hindu women 'whores', all Hindu men 'rapists' and considers the sari a sign of prostitution.

Although it is tempting to read the representation of Sikhs and Muslims as the author's political statement against those who commit terrorism and violence in India, the treatment of Sikh activism as a whole appears to be rather 'monochromatic' – all Sikh activists are reduced to the image suggested by the text.[225] Most interestingly, Sukkhi affiliates himself with another 'violent' community/culture, when he says: 'Pakistanis were Hindus who saw the light of the true god and converted. So were Sikhs. Only bloodsucker

[225] Debjani Banerjee, "'In the Presence of History': The Representation of Past and Present Indias in Bharati Mukherjee's Fiction," *Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Emmanuel Nelson (New York: Garland, 1993), 170.

banyas and untouchable monkeys remained Hindu'.[226] The image of Sikhs aligning with Muslims against Hindus is also a problematic statement because it straightforwardly poses and circulates notions of Muslims and Sikhs as essentially violent. In this narrative, 'it is not any state that was responsible for poverty and violence, but rather some communities and cultures that were seen as essentially violent'.[227] The post-partition Hindu-Sikh conflict, which claimed hundreds of thousands of lives between 1981 and 1993, was caused by the contestation between Khalistan groups and the Indian State. The Khalistan movement, however, was the result of a complex network of political events including the Indo-Pak war of 1965, the National Emergency in 1975-77, Punjabi insurgency (which started in the late 1970s), the massacre of the Sikh Temple (the anti-Sikh riots) in 1984, the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984 and the anti-Sikh riots of 1984. The Khalistan movement was in part a reaction to Indira Gandhi's large-scale suppression of civil disobedience and social unrest. During 21 months of what is known as 'the Emergency', Gandhi's crack-down policy suspended civil liberties, used and censored media for state propaganda, and carried out forced sterilization in rural and working class areas.[228] Timothy Ruppel comments on the effect of Mukherjee's failure to contextualize the historical and political events of India regarding the Hindu-Sikh conflict and argues how in *Jasmine* the 'complex historical forces are reduced to simple binary oppositions'.[229] The depiction of both Jyoti's widowhood and exile as a victim of a Sikh terrorist, and her 'cultured' Hindu family as a victim of both violent Muslims and Sikhs adopts the hegemonic discourse of the Indian state at the time. Inderpal Grewal avers, '[r]elying on the Indian State's repressive discourse during the 1980s and 1990s, of the 'terrorist' as a Muslim or Sikh, Mukherjee's narrative endorses […] the

[226] Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 67.
[227] Inderpal Grewal, "Becoming American: the Novel and the Diaspora," 66.
[228] N. Jayapalan, *History of India* (from National Movement to Present Day), vol. 4 (Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Dist, 2001).
[229] Timothy F. Ruppel, "'Re-Inventing Ourselves a Million Times': Narrative, Desire, Identity, and Bharati Mukherjee's Jasmine," *Collage Literature* 22, no. 1 (1995), 190.

Indian state's hegemonic discourse of law and order and security'.[230] Mukherjee's novel produces confirmations of simplistic ahistoric narratives that reinforce the mainstream media representations of the 'Third World', including that of Sikh and Islamic communities as morally deficient and essentially violent, so that the only possible way to survive and pursue one's dreams is by leaving and acquiring a 'real life'[231] elsewhere—the US being the dream land for immigrants, as the novel suggests. This idea is made clear in the course of Jyoti's relationship with the character Prakash.

Jyoti marries Prakash and moves from rural Hasnapur to urban Julundhar. Prakash is a graduate engineer who is portrayed as a progressive character with a liberal mind and a modern consciousness. 'Prakash Vijh, was a modern man, a city man. He did trash some traditions, right from the beginning', says Jyoti. Her brothers also establish the fact that he is exceptional as a person, as previously quoted: 'Prakash isn't a dunderhead like us. He'll move to America in a year or two'.[232] Despite his modernness, Prakash dominates Jyoti because he wants to modernise her according to his own terms and conditions. He starts by re-naming her, establishing by that her path of liberation and the first step in the course of her identity metamorphosis. She says: '[h]e 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'. He would say '[w]e aren't ignorant peasants!' (77) so 'stop regressing into the feudal Jyoti', 'You are Jasmine now'. (92) He is the new/modern Indian man as opposed to the old/traditional type: '[f]or uncle, love was control, respect as obedience. For Prakash, love was letting go. Independence, self-reliance'. (76) He succeeds in changing Jyoti who with slight hesitations manages secretly to find a part time job thereby proving her growth into an independent woman, which she hides even from Prakash: '[h]e was a modern man. Still, I

[230] Grewal, "Becoming American," 66.
[231] Prakash and Jyoti say that they want to go to America and have a 'real life'.
[232] Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 68.

wasn't sure how he would react to my having my own kitty'.[233] Prakash, an embodiment of modernization in India, is thus a male agency of modernization but with limitations. In other words, the text suggests that India's version of modernity is not enough to pursue its feminist ends.

Prakash is an ambitious man who does not want to settle for a life in feudal India. He aims to be an electronic engineer because, according to the text, electronics is the 'frontier; and that is why he aspires to open his own electronic store, 'Vijh & Wife', in the country of the 'frontier'. (88) He says, '"[l]isten to me, Jasmine. I want for us to go away and have a *real life*. I've had it up to here with backward, corrupt, mediocre fools"'. (81) For him, even 'the mediocre are smart enough to get away [. . .]. We'll go to America'. (84) This vision embraces and recycles the notion of the American dream, of the US being the promised land of freedom and potential where he can progress and achieve his dream-wish 'Vijh & Wife'. This optimistic view of the US as a place where 'real life' happens is not achieved in the text benignly; as stated earlier, the US as the New World of hope and growth is portrayed in contrast to the old world (India) of stasis and oppression. The representations implied here are consumed by a discourse of binary oppositions: old/ new, modern/traditional, and mediocre/exceptional. Prakash applies to Florida International Institute of Technology to continue his studies with the help of professor Vadhera who is a resident immigrant in the US. Vadhera, who taught Prakash in India, writes to him: '[w]hen will I see my truly best student blooming in the healthy soil of this country?' This line suggests India is a sick soil that limits good people whereas the US is the place where the best blooms. Eventually, in fact, India kills the modern Prakash. Prakash is present during the previously cited conversation with Sukkhi and tries to enlighten the Sikh messenger: 'Sukkhi there's no Hindu state! There's no Sikh state! India is for everyone'. (66) A few years later, Prakash is killed in

[233] Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 79.

a terrorist attack by a bomb Sukkhi throws at him, although the bomb intended to kill Jyoti.[234] His death is significant in the plot not only because it conveniently gives the narrator a reason to migrate, but also because it makes clear why some communities in India are essentialized in the text; and it 'serves as a horrible footnote to patriarchal oppression: Sukkhi the extremist cannot endure that Jasmine is a 'modern' female who violates the strict gender roles'.[235] In examining the cluster of the three characters, the text registers a number of anxieties: first, the protagonist undergoes gender oppression in India (she is twice oppressed, by Prakash and then Sukkhi). Second, the Sikhs are represented as violent fundamentalists who, by rejecting Prakash's peace proposal, appear to be the enemies of modernity and represent the repressive forces of feudal India (dominating their surroundings though terrorizing innocent people). Third, in the novel what happens to Prakash gives the impression that the Indian society cannot host modernization: modern Prakash does not and cannot survive in feudal India and so, tragically, he dies before he can make the transition to the US. Finally, all these factors put together serve in setting India and the US as binary opposites. Inderpal Grewal further critiques the de-historicising of the South Asian woman immigrant in the novel, as she says:

> The novel's lack of any specificity regarding the lives of South Asian women in a particular period, or of the complexities of the history of modern south Asia, allows the discourse of tradition and modernity to replace the complex histories of postcolonial India as well as the problematic of historiography.[236]

In defending herself against charges of misrepresenting India, and the historical inadequacies of the text, 'Mukherjee claimed that she wrote fiction and not "pure and

[234] Jyoti narrates the incident: '[t]he Lions had left their music box just inside the door [. . .]. Sukkhi guns the motor, shouting "Prostitutes! Whore!" [. . The bomb was meant for me, prostitute, whore', 93.

exclusive sociology.'"[237] However, once all the aforementioned historical narratives are put forward within an accessible and popular medium, 'Mukherjee cannot shove them back into the bottle'.[238] Plus if *Jasmine* is read in the light of Edward Said's notion that 'texts are worldly [. . .] even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of a social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located', the conspicuous absence of the historical, as suggested by Mukherjee, turns the novel into a complacent connivance of the literary that forwards US hegemony.[239]

Furthermore, the issue of terrorism extends and stretches across continents to reach the US. Schlund-Vials suggests that *Jasmine* 'links terrorism to illegal immigration'.[240] Jyoti writes an anonymous letter to the INS notifying them of a Sikh terrorist who bombed her flat and killed her husband in Jalandhar. The Sikh bombing, says erin Khuê Ninh, is not part of the historical arc that will

> yield the al-Qaeda attack on the Twin Towers. Yet decades of experience have told us how feebly such distinctions register in the social reading of terrorism—how ineffectively the subject may insist that she is Hindu and not Sikh, or Sikh and not Muslim, or Indian and not Thai or Filipina. Thus, while *Jasmine*'s publication pre-dates 9/11 by a decade, the anxieties it registers uncannily anticipate the present climate.[241]

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[235] Sambhaji Mahadev Sirsath, "Resistance, Transformation and Gender: A Study of Bharati Mukherjee's "Jasmine" as an Indian Diasporic Novel," *New Man International Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies* 1, no. 7 (2014), 18.
[236] Grewal, "Becoming American: The Novel and the Diaspora," 70.
[237] Quoted in Grewal, "Becoming American: The Novel and the Diaspora," 70.
[238] Anthony C. Alessandrini, "Reading Bharati Mukherjee, Reading Globalization," *World Bank Literature*, ed. Amitava Kumar (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 273. He comments that the novel is 'an array of historical experience: Communal violence, politics of the diasporic communities in US, American society dealing with the after effects of war in Vietnam, class conflicts on NY, the tensions between farmers and banks in the midwest'.
[239] Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), 4.
[240] Schlund-Vials, "Reading and Writing America," 138.
[241] Erin Khuê Ninh, "Gold-Digger: Reading the Marital and National Romance in Bharati Mukherjee's Jasmine," *Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.* 38, no. 3 (2013), 152.

Therefore, the text's representation of the 'terrorist' subscribes to and feeds into a metanarrative on "terrorism", one that is based on simplistic notions and stereotypes leading to generalizing ideas not only about India but also about the whole "Third World".

In reporting Sukkhi to the INS, Jyoti has become an INS 'informant', says Schlund-Vials, who reads 'Jasmine's naturalization vis-a-vis amnesty'.[242] It turns Jyoti into a character complicit in the ideology of US imperialism, not in terms of political activism but in the form of practices that are based on an implicit licensed union contingent upon the protagonist's loyalty to her new/dream nation-state. It further reiterates Gayatri Spivak's argument about '[w]hite men saving brown women from brown men', in 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' – as illustrated later in the chapter. This notion of 'the informant'[243] agrees with Hamid Dabashi's notion of the 'native informer', previously mentioned in the first chapter, on Azar Nafisi who contributes to the making of American empire.[244] Although Dabashi's term is directed at the authors themselves whose writing is servicing a neoconservative ideology, the character of Jyoti in her image of the adopted country, which is very much white-identified is not very different from that of Nafisi's. Also, Jyoti's characterization as a migrant figure, whose agency for successful assimilation is her strong desire and intensity of spirit, subscribes to a neoconservative ideology – something that will also be encountered in my third chapter on *Brick Lane*. If we cross examine Cathy Schlund-Vial's and Dabashi's notion of the "native informant" we find that Jyoti's letter to the INS single-handedly achieves: (1) a very subordinate clause, in a politically problematic manner, implying a social contract between

[242] Schlund-Vials, "Reading and Writing America: Bharati Mukherjee's Jasmine and Eva Hoffman's Lost in Translation," 137-8.
[243] Shazia Rahman also argues for Mukherjee's position as 'native informant' in the context of 'Orientalism'. She notes that most of her fiction 'is marketed with covers displaying photographs or stylized drawing of south Asian women in south Asian dresses' – images that appeal to an orientalist discourse of desire. She draws an analogy between Mukherjee's picture on the back cover of The Tiger's Daughter and the protagonist's one on the front cover and they appear to be almost identical. Thus, Rahman argues that the reader trusts the author because she is native like her heroine and herein a 'native informant'. Shazia Rahman, "Cosmopolitaniam, Internationalism and Orientalism: Bharati Mukherjee's Peritexts," *Journal of Post Colonial Writing* 49, no. 4 (2013).
[244] Hamid Dabashi, *Brown Skin*, 12, 13, 14.

Jyoti and the US that grants Jyoti what can be described as cultural amnesty, since she remains an illegal immigrant throughout the novel, in exchange for information about Indian terrorists home and abroad; (2) by doing so Mukherjee has denigrated a complex history of Indian culture, one of revolution and resistance, to a history of representations of terrorism and "Third World" backwardness; (3) the letter seeking revenge against the Sikh terrorist suggests that domestic terrorism in India can only be answered/punished by the US domestic immigration policy, through notifying the INS. This assumption recycles notions/myths that place the US as an imperial power capable of restoring justice and defeating the evils of the "Third World", and participates, whether intentionally or not, in the discourse of the US legitimizing its interference in other countries under the pretext of the "war on terrorism".

Although *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and *Jasmine* deal with different 'home' countries, they meet in their underlying assumption of US exceptionalism that promotes the ideological foregrounding of US domination at home and abroad. Both texts exemplify the systematic abuse of legitimate causes and in *Jasmine* it combines three causes: terrorism, feudality and oppression of women in India. Dabashi says:

> This empire thrives on the stories it tells itself about liberty and democracy or about 'the end of history' or 'the clash of civilizations'. These stories need exotic seasonings, and the native informants provide them. They are the byproduct of an international intellectual free trade, in which intellectual carpetbaggers offer their services to the highest bidder, for the lowest risk.[245]

Regarding the historical context of Jyoti's life in US, the text was published in 1989 during a particularly belligerent period of US history towards illegal immigrants. It was released in the immediate wake of large-scale immigration reform laws such as the 1986

Immigration Reform and Control Act, and also, on the other hand, in the middle of a global concern about minority rights. In 1965 the US Congress abolished the 1920's system (the National Origin Act) that favoured immigrants of Western European origins and established the 'open door system' Asian Immigration policy of the Immigration and Nationality Act. However, this policy placed numerical restrictions and in effect only led to an increase in the number of illegal immigrants. Thus, to address illegal immigration, Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA), which was intended to act as a 'three-legged stool'. IRCA's first law was sanctions against employers who knowingly hired unauthorized workers, including fines and criminal penalties intended to reduce the hiring of unauthorized immigrants.[246] Hence, Jyoti ought to face the consequences of these regulations and confront difficulties that would naturally arise from this Act. However, the text obscures Jyoti's admission in US society by repeatedly giving her a status such as 'caretaker', 'caregiver', and 'au pair'; when in reality she is an illegal worker who does not have access to the US society as a state-authorized citizen. Thus, and despite Mukherjee's claim that *Jasmine* is a novel about the post-1965 US immigration experience, giving the protagonist a smooth and unimpeded narrative of assimilation along with '[t]he rapid climb of Jasmine from a peasant girl into a white middle class American family is (il)logical'.[247]

It is necessary to interrupt the argument here and critically assess the author's own endorsement of the dominant US culture given that it is problematically entangled with Jyoti's "Americanization". It has already been discussed how Mukherjee's literary works are indicative of her personal experience as an immigrant (the thematic change of her literary model in relation to Naipaul's, and her ardent love for US ideals, which permeates her language on the subject). In this regard, Feroza Jusawalla comments:

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[245] Dabashi, *Brown Skin, White Masks*, 128.
[246] Bill Ong Hing, *Making and Remaking Asian America through Immigration Policy: 1850-1990* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 79-95.
[247] Grewal, "Born Again America," 183.

> Bharati Mukherjee definitely seems to have found her 'haven' in the United States, but with this comes an obsequiousness, a pleading to be mainstreamed. [. . .] This new generation of South Asian writers are ex-colonials, twice colonised, like the twice born Brahmins, oppressed by their European education and by their hunger to be Americanised.[248]

It is this predicament from which Mukherjee cannot easily disentangle either herself or her literary characters, because in *Jasmine* her romance seems to be transferred to the protagonist Jyoti. It is not problematic however for Mukherjee to believe in this; it is problematic for her literary project as her character does not share the same class benefits as the author. The narrator's ultimate dream is to get out of feudal India, hoping the 'American nation delivers its promise to all its constituents'. She believes: '[i]f we could just get away from India, then all fates would be cancelled. We'd start with new fates, new stars. We could say or be anything we wanted. We'd be on the other side of the earth, out of God's sight'.[249] David Leiwei Li, who solidly argues that the novel is a 'quintessential "American romance"', assents to considering Jasmine's 'Americanization' symptomatic of Mukherjee's and contends thereof that it is 'unrealistic' – because it is performed by an Indian immigrant who does not share the author's privileges. He says:

> In her attempt to inscribe a survivalist immigrant epic, Mukherjee has enthusiastically universalised her own autobiographic ascent in the narrative of Jasmine, her immigrant everywoman; the result is a liberal

[248] Suchismita Banerjee, "Interrogating the Ambivalence of Self-Fashioning and Redefining the Immigrant Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's Jasmine," *Asiatic* 6, no. 1 (2012), 13.
[249] Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 85.

> fusion of authorial class confidence and educational privilege with the rather limited consciousness and condition of the character. [250]

The help of Gordon shields Jyoti from the "Third World", and arms her in the form of the 'American' Jazzy who leaves Florida and heads north. Arriving in New York, she is approached by beggars, on the account that she is looking all American. In the taxi, she says, 'I could have spoken to him [the taxi driver who is from her part of the world] in Urdu or Punjabi, but I didn't. I wanted distance from all his greed and suspicions', and spoke to him in English instead.[251] She observes her new surroundings saying, '[w]e took the bridge into Queens. On the streets I saw only more greed, more people like myself. New York was an archipelago of ghettos seething with aliens'.(140) Queens, an archipelago of ghettos, is described by Jyoti as "Third World" in miniature, in opposition to the romantic fantasy of the US 'whose gas emissions look "like a gray, intricate map of unexplored island continent."' (107) Jyoti says:

> It is by now only a passing wave of nausea, this response to the speed of transformation, the fluidity of American character and the American landscape. I feel at times like a stone hurtling through diaphanous mist, unable to grab hold, unable to slow myself, yet unwilling to abandon the ride I'm on. Down and down I go, where I'll stop, God only knows. (138-9)

From the above passage Polina Mackay elaborates on the protagonist's transition from India to the US by assessing the influence of the American landscape on Jyoti during her journey to

[250] David Leiwei Li, "American Romances, Immigrant Incarnations," *Imagining the Nation: Asian American Literature and Cultural Consent* (Stanford, California: Stanford UP, 1998), 94-5.
[251] Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 139.

New York. Mackay compares the image of 'fluid' and 'protean' America as standing out very distinct from its 'static' and 'unchangeable' parallel (India). To Mackay, *Jasmine* suggests that 'such an India is far easier to manage, negotiate, and ultimately leave behind'.[252] Ironically, Jyoti has internalized a racist attitude, being American Jazzy now, towards people who come from the same world. She does not talk to nor shows any emotion towards the taxi driver, who tells her about his life as a doctor in Kabul. Jyoti adopts the racist superiority complex of the whites in her dismissing the Americans who populate Queens as 'greedy', as if people of colour are not partaking in the American Dream. This attitude is further emphasized in the brief time she spends in Flushing with the Vadhera family.

'Flushing, with all its immigrant services at hand, frightened me', says Jyoti, 'I who had every reason to fear America, was intrigued by the city and the land beyond the rivers'. This reveals how terrified and anxious she is to be in what she perceived as little India, Flushing—as opposed to the 'foreign' land of America Flushing's inhabitants feared. She describes the environment at the Vadhera's house as 'the fortress of Punjabiness'[253] where '[t]hey had kept a certain kind of Punjab alive, even if that Punjab no longer existed. They let nothing go, lest everything be lost'. (162) She comments on the relationship of the couple she lives with. They follow, she says, 'an *ancient* prescription for marital accord [he]: silence, order, authority. So was she: submission, beauty, innocence [my italics]'. (151) Flushing is thus the place that is the embodiment of the narrative of 'pure culture' and 'fixed origins' that Mukherjee rejects in her aesthetics. It is used in *Jasmine* as a warning for immigrants who refuse "Americanisation", Jyoti complains, 'I felt myself deteriorating'. (148) The text, therefore, does not only embrace a unilateral view about identity re-formation, but also in its representation of Flushing (as another traditional, backward and stifling India) creates

[252] Polina Mackay, "Re-Inventing of Self in Bharati Mukherjee," *Rites of Passage in Postcolonial Women's*

inadequate homogeneous notions about communities based on race or ethnicity – something that will also be explored in the next chapter on Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*. Jyoti flees Flushing in a panic attack:

> [S]omething came over me [. . .]. I picked up my bags and my pocketbook and took the train out of the ghetto. One more night and I would have died. Of what? I might have said then, of boredom, but boredom is only a manifestation of something worse.
>
> Can wanting be so fatal? (142)

There is sarcasm in her rhetorical question, as if she is addressing the people in Flushing "would it kill you to leave the ghetto?" The adventurous and ambitious narrator leaves because she is deteriorating and bored in the fortress of Pujabiness. The character of Jyoti suggests, by way of contrast, that immigrants who live in immigrant communities have no ambitions or desire for self-improvement because this traditional fortress is inertial and impenetrable to modernization. Furthermore, the text does not have a problem with non-Asian immigrant communities because the protagonist thrives in Baden, a 'basic German community'. (11) She does not seem to have trouble with the idea of an ethnic enclave, but rather with being part of *her* ethnic community. In other words, the underlying assumption of accepting a white ethnic enclave, albeit a conservative and orthodox one, is rather racist. She describes people in Baden: '[t]hey aren't Amish, but they are very fond of old ways of doing things. They are conservative people with worldly outlook'. In other words, the good US is the white US.

Writing, ed. Gina Wisker and Pauline Dodgson-Katiyo (New York, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), 122.
[253] Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 148.

Jasmine's Flushing has a critical problem other than the negative representations of the "Third World" India as static, feudal and regressive and their transference to the Indian community in New York. The problem is in the novel's discarding the role of the immigrant community in providing a safe environment and helpful networks for the new arrivals. Inderpal Grewal draws attention to the way in which the narrative ignores the history of 'transnational connectivities'. She argues that for the privileged, middle or upper classes in India with English education and benefits from the élite educational system in or out of the country, such as Mukherjee herself, migration could be a matter of selective melting into the US, but it is not the case for the ones who come from strained circumstances, such as the peasant Jyoti. Grewal says: '[o]ver a century of migration from Punjab was made possible through community networks, intensely connected groups of relatives, neighbors and villagers who provide support, money, information and the means to travel'.[254] In *Jasmine* however, these networks are made insignificant (Jyoti flees from the Vadheras) and the transnational community is represented as abusive and toxic (Jyoti, we learn, sleeps on a floor mat and works as a housekeeper for hardly any pay).[255]

Maybe Jyoti acknowledges at some level that Professorji (Vadhera) was good to her; he nonetheless does not match up to the American Patron Saint of illegal immigrants: 'Professorji is a generous man [. . .] His kind of generosity wasn't good enough for me . . . it wasn't Lillian Gordon's'. (143) In fact, she cannot hide her sarcasm – 'The Almighty Him' – nor disappointment when she finds out that 'Professorji was not a professor. He was an importer and sorter of human hair'. (151-2) Professorji is not working at Queens College as the narrator thought. Although the fact that the demoralized University professor of electronics works in a basement sorting imported Indian women's hair would invite the reader to question the predicament of immigrants in the US, he is instead severely criticized,

[254] Grewal, "Becoming American," 68.

stigmatised and belittled by Jyoti. In other words, the novel does not invite us to question the predicament of Professorji. After all there are ways in which a text can distance the reader from the character, critically assessing or considering a particular point, such as in this scene, but the main focus here is the perspective of Jyoti and it aims to highlight Flushing as a stagnant ghetto where the heroine experiences this hypocrisy of a man she used to regard very highly. Flushing is a setback in Jyoti's upward mobility. Next, she moves to Manhattan to baby sit for an American family and falls in love with Taylor whom she calls a 'true' professor. (166)

III.3.3 The 'We' and the 'I'

Jyoti's ostensible use of 'we' in describing her affiliations is a problematic site of performance in the novel. Firstly, its signifier is ambiguous and, secondly, its implications are problematic in term of soliciting sympathy. Koshy comments on Mukherjee's use of 'we' in her short story 'The Management of Grief'. The protagonist Shaila moves from the specific 'I' to the representative 'we', producing therein dubious connections in the story.[256] Similarly, in *Jasmine,* Jyoti moves from the 'I' to 'we' to include herself in the collective painful experience of other displaced minorities. She says: 'Kwang, Lui, Patel I've met them all. Poke around in a major medical facility and suddenly you're back in Asia, which I find very assuring. I trust only Asian doctors, Asian professionals. What *we've gone through must count for something* [my italics]'.[257] In another scene, 'Du and I' are watching an episode on television about twenty INS agents raiding a lawn furniture factory in Texas. Jyoti reports this event in a dramatic description:

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[255] Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 142.

> The man in charge of the raid called it a factory, but all it was was a windowless shed the size of a two-car garage. We got to hear agents whisper into walkie-talkies, break down a door, kick walls for hollowed-out hiding places [. . .] there were two Mexicans in the shed. They ducked behind the chaise longue that was only half-webbed. One minute they were squatting on the floor webbing lawn furniture at some insane wage—I know, I've been there—and the next they were spread-eagled on the floor. The camera caught one Mexican throwing up. The INS fellow wouldn't uncuff him long enough for him to wipe the muck off his face [. . .] *Du and me were the ones who didn't get caught* [my italics]. (27-8)

Throughout her journey, Jyoti does not undergo the harsh conditions that illegal immigrants usually are subjected to, like the Mexican ones here. She is not busted as an illegal labourer toiling in inhumane conditions. Instead, she is always cast in a romantic scenario where there is love potential with a white man who, infatuated by her exotic beauty, often falls in love with her at first sight, like Bud does. He says 'Oh God, I love you so much [. . .] I have never seen anyone so beautiful'. (36) When she speaks about Du, the Vietnamese boy whose family was butchered in front of his eyes, faced starvation, and survived the refugee camp when his brother did not, it is always 'Du and I' – 'we' – as if they are the same kind of immigrants. This does not only 'erase crucial differences between the passages of refugees like Du, illegal entrants like Jasmine, and the post-1965 wave of middle class, highly educated professionals from Asia',[258] but also blurs the lines around Jyoti's personal experience and draws the sympathy of the reader. This argument is not to undermine what the character goes through but to highlight how the narrative evokes sympathy in the audience who might feel complicit

[256] The dubious connections, mentioned above, refer to the affiliations implied by the use of the pronouns; while Shaila uses "I" when she wants to establish herself as a superior expatriate since she lives in the West and is more modern than her fellow compatriots who spent all their lives in India, the "we" is used in moment of weakness in the story when Shaila wants to join her voice with those who are undergoing injustice. Koshy, "The Geography of Female Subjectivity," 70.
[257] Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 32.

in the injustices committed against illegal immigrants if they did not sympathise with the experienced "Third World" narrator, in a very similar fashion to the notion of empathy discussed in Azar Nafisi's text.

Speaking on behalf of the alienated, Jyoti says: '*we* are *refugees* and *mercenaries* and *guest workers* [. . .] *we* are the *outcasts* and *deportees*, strange pilgrims visiting outlandish shrines . . . *we* . . . [my italics]'. (100-1) The text however does not portray her as an alienated refugee in the US. If anything, she is as joyful as she has ever been. When the au pairs, or 'day mummies', are complaining about their lives, she feels exuberantly happy. Jyoti says, 'I was a professional, like a schoolteacher or a nurse. I wasn't a maid-servant [. . .]. I prayed my job as Duff's 'day mummy' would last forever', but '[t]here were *the other* day mummies in the building [. . .] [and] Jamaica [. . .] cried her heart out [. . .] I felt lucky. My pillow was dry [. . .] [and] the money was piling up'. (175-9) There is hardly any estrangement in the book apart from Jyoti's time in Flushing, which is primarily portrayed as a bad experience to demonstrate the consequences of living in an immigrant community, and the Half-Face experience, which is used symbolically to represent Jyoti's rite of passage, her initiation, experience into US culture. Mukherjee herself says: 'I don't think about my fiction as being about alienation. On the contrary, I mean for it to be about assimilation [. . .] my stories are about conquests and not about loss'.[259] In *Jasmine*, and unlike *Reading Lolita* and *Brick Lane*, it is very difficult to encounter the sensibility of estrangement and nostalgia that one expects in a novel about an illegal immigrant.

As such, though her use of 'we' suggests that Jyoti is joining the voice of other oppressed minorities, this is not the case. 'We' is temperamentally mis/used in the novel as it is only present in the parts where the narrator is including her suffering in the collective pain of others – so the reader sympathizes with Jyoti, rather than Jyoti sympathizing with other

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[258] Koshy, "The Geography of Female Subjectivity," 79.

immigrants. It has been discussed already how Jyoti wholly disaffiliates from and looks down at the ghetto, Flushing, while other women immigrant characters in the text are peripheral to the "extraordinary" Jyoti, such as the Kanjobal women and the other day care mummies. Du recognizes this also; his sentiment that: 'you are meant to have pretty things',[260] implies that she is exceptional. Jyoti's "exceptionalism" requires the other immigrants to be "dehumanized". Similar to what the narrator does in *Reading Lolita*, Jyoti dismisses other ethnicities as being somehow less able to integrate, for the purpose of demonstrating that she can. Erin Khuê Ninh criticizes the 'cyborg' imagery of the brown woman in white western homes in *Jasmine*. To her:

> The thrust of this dehumanizing expression is twofold: one, the cheapness and expendability of third-world labor and the other, that placement within the middle-class US home does not amount to being family. It is, in other words, an expression of misogyny and racism specific to displaced transnational women, '[d]efined', in the hegemonic imagination, 'by their labor, Third World poverty, and frantic upward mobility'.[261]

Although the text is lobbying for the idea that Americanization lies outside ethnicity, the protagonist is quite selective when it comes to her own. For instance, ethnicity is positive in New York with:

> Educated people [who] are interested in differences; they assume that I'm different from them but exempted from being of 'them' [. . .] alien

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[259] Suchma Tandon, *Bharati Mulherjee's Fiction: A Perspective* (New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2004), 149.
[260] Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 30
[261] Ninh, "Gold-Digger," 149.

> knowledge means intelligence [. . .] professors would ask if I could help them with Sanskrit [. . .] they had things they wanted me to translate, paintings they wanted me to decipher. They were very democratic that way. (33)

However, in rural Baden with farmers who have no need of her ethnic expertise:

> In a pinch, they'll admit that I might look a little different, that I'm a 'dark-haired-girl' in a naturally blond country. I have a 'darkish complexion' (in India, I'm 'wheatish'), as though I might be Greek from one grandparent. I'm from a generic place, 'over there', which might be Ireland, France, or Italy.

Thus, Jyoti's configuration of ethnicity is generally obscured yet highlighted in a selective manner. In other words, the text circumvents ethnicity in a way that appears to be for the narrator an "option" to be used when needed and otherwise discarded, depending on the incident at hand. There is 'difference and there is power', June Jordan says and 'who holds the power shall decide the meaning of difference'.[262] If for most of the novel Jyoti's ethnicity is concealed, but made visible only when she needs to access US culture through men, then she is giving the power to this society: it is the members of the dominant US society that choose how to valorize Jyoti's beauty, and so this is not empowering for the woman immigrant.

The following analysis interrogates subjectivity/agency of the woman immigrant identity in *Jasmine*. Hypothetically, according to the author and many readings of the text, Jyoti demonstrates a narrative of successful assimilation because she metamorphoses her

[262] June Jordan, *Technical Difficulties* (Boston: Beacon, 1994), 197.

identity into the shape and colour of the US dominant culture. While it is mentioned earlier how Jyoti's Americanization is a compromised reality, a more comprehensive analysis of this idea shows how the protagonist's assimilation relies more on her racialized beauty as an Indian woman than female subjectivity and agency.

The narrator knows of her monetary limitations, being a bride without a dowry; she says, 'I was born a sister without a dowry, but I didn't have to be a sister without prospects'.[263] She is aware of her beauty and she makes use of it, seducing her way through her journey to 'Americanization'. When she initially likes Prakash, she asks her brothers about him and they inform her of his modern character and ambition to go to the US. She specifically asks if he speaks English, because, to her '[t]o want English was to want more than you have been given at birth, it was to want the world'. (68) She asks her brother to fabricate a set up in order to meet Prakash as a prospective groom. On this first meeting, Jyoti reflects, 'I have no idea how I looked that night [. . .] but I know how I felt. A goddess couldn't have been surer' – this powerful goddess-like feeling is reiterated throughout the text with different men. (71) She puts on her dark glasses to look 'movie-starrish' as she scans the tables looking for Prakash. (72) Beauty enables Jyoti's will to marry Prakash and he in turn enables her first step on the path of liberation, and eventually his death offers her the money and the pretext to immigrate.

For example, 'Bud calls me Jane. Me Bud, you Jane [. . .] Jane as in Jane Russell, not Jane as in plain Jane. But plain Jane is all I want to be. Plain Jane is a *role*, like any other. My genuine foreignness frightens him'. (26) The word 'role' reflects how the narrator thinks of her self. She consciously takes on the 'exotic' role with men when needed. When she meets Taylor, she says:

[263] Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 70.

> I fell in love with his world, its ease, its careless confidence and graceful self-absorption. I wanted to become the person they thought they saw: humorous, intelligent, refined, affectionate. Not illegal, not murderer, not widowed, raped, destitute, fearful [. . .]. I didn't want to live legally if it also meant living like a refugee. (171)

Jyoti wants things all the time, wants English, wants Prakash, wants the US, wants to leave Flushing, wants Taylor's world and wants Bud's money and security. Aware of her exotic beauty she assumes the role of an exotic "Other" worker because it works to attain her desires.

III.3.4 The White Washing of Feminist Narrative

Jyoti in the text is sometimes associated with, and at other times associates herself with, Western feminist female characters. Bud calls her 'Calamity Jane'. As stated earlier, there is also the Jane Eyre reference: 'I think maybe I am Jane with my very own Mr. Rochester'. (236) There is also a Tarzan reference in the previously quoted line '[m]e Bud, you Jane', which posits Jyoti as Jane the civilized, more civilized than the man. In her attempt to engage with a feminist discourse that empowers the woman immigrant by subverting their role from that of a meek, marginalized and helpless victim, that is representing Jyoti as an exotic sex goddess – Mukherjee subverts her own intention. Jyoti says: The day I came into Baden and walked into his [Bud's] bank [. . .] looking for a job [. . .] six months later, Bud Ripplemeyer was a divorced man living with an Indian woman'. (14) The heroine's dependency on gaining power through men and through her use of her Self as the exotic 'Other' makes it problematic to define her as feminist heroine. For the narrative of Jyoti's Americanization underplays the tensions and conflicts of this fraught racial stratification in exchange for a celebratory account of cross-racial coalitions between a beautiful South Asian woman and a series of white American men.

'Bud calls me Jane'.

'Lillian called me 'Jazzy'.

'Taylor called me Jase'. (26, 133, 176)

On the act of 'naming', T. Minh-ha says: '[n]aming is part of the human rituals of incorporation, and the unnamed remains less human than the inhuman or sub-human. The threatening Otherness must, therefore, be transformed into figures that belong to a definite image-repertoire'.[264] Jyoti in her infamous metamorphoses of identities is not writing her own life; instead, she allows her self to be re-written in "white" names. Bharvani argues that '[i]n spite of every new guise, all that changes of Jasmine is merely exterior, there is no corresponding growth in depth and maturity'[265] This much celebrated identity metamorphosis is but an ideological complicity that allows Jyoti to be accepted in the white dominated culture of the US. And by attempting to erase ethnicity from Jyoti's course of Americanization and re-birthing her in the image of a white "American" woman (self-made, free and sexually liberated) the text tends to become a parody of the Anglo-American feminist subject, thus revealing its ethnocentric/nationalist underpinning.

Norma Alacrón's description of the most popular subject of Anglo-American feminism supports this idea; she says: it 'is an autonomous, self-making, self-determining subject who first proceeds according to the logic of identification with regard to the subject of man, a notion usually viewed as the purview of man, but not claimed for women'.[266] Although Mukherjee has often stipulated her rejection 'of the imperialism of the feminists,

[264] Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Women, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1989), 54.
[265] Bhavani Shakuntala, "Jasmine: An Immigrant Experience?" *The Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee*, ed. Rajinder Kumar Dhawan (New Delhi: Prestige, 1996): 180.

American, and perhaps European', it would not be the first time that she interferes with her own authorial intention.[267] In an interview she says:

> I think a resistance does run through my work. For some non-white, Asian women, our ways of negotiating power are different. There is no reason why we should have to appropriate—wholesale and intact—the white, upper-middle-class woman's tools and rhetoric. Especially rhetoric [. . .] Reviewers loved the story ['Jasmine'] [. . .] but they saw Jasmine as an exploited young woman, and the white male, her employer [. . .] taking advantage of her [. . .]. Whereas I meant for Jasmine to know exactly what it is she wants and what she is willing to trade off in order to get what she wants. She is in charge of the situation there. Jasmine is a woman who knows the power, is discovering the power of her sexuality.[268]

However, apart from valorizing her racially and stigmatizing her country of origin, where in the text does the fact that Jyoti is a woman of colour configure in her identity trans-formation? Feminist scholars like Minh-ha points out how '[d]ifference does not annul identity. It is beyond and alongside identity'.[269] But in *Jasmine*, on the contrary, the protagonist is denied an opportunity to negotiate her identity as a woman immigrant alongside her native ethnicity and culture identity. Instead, the text embraces an 'American' feminist discourse of emancipation and growth about an Asian woman who constructs her liberation within a hegemonic feminist narrative.

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[266] Norma Alarcon, "The Theoretical Subjectts of This Bridge Called My Back and Anglo-American Feminism," *Criticism in the Borderlands: Studies in Chicanpo Literature, Culture and Ideology*, ed. Jose Davod Saldivar and Hector Calderon (London: Duke UP, 1998), 29.
[267] Shazia Rahman analysis illustrates how 'Mukherjee's peritexts are clearly in opposition with her epitext'. She argues how Mukherjee's book covers are designed to appeal to an orientalist discourse of desire, even though she openly resisted these discourses. Please see Rahman, 407.
[268] Michael Connell, "An Interview with Bharati Mukherjee," 22-3.
[269] Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Women, Native, Other*, 104.

In another interview, Mukherjee explains the meaning of the sexual power in *Jasmine* (the novel). She says:

> Jasmine is a woman who hopes. [. . .] Also she wants to please. That's the feminist quality in her that does not jibe with American feminist rhetoric. Yet she is the one who, unlike. [. . .] or far more than Wylie [Taylor's wife], or any other American woman, manages to leave a futile world, make herself over, pick up men, discard men, and make money. She's an uneducated village girl. [. . .] [who] can make a life for herself. So she's an activist – or a woman of action – who ends up being far more feminist than the women in Claremont Avenue who talk about feminism. (270)

Mukherjee's description of agency in the South Asian woman immigrant relies on images of the "Third World" as the "Other". In Edward Said's theorization of Orientalism, he states:

> Reflection, debate, rational argument, moral principle based on a secular notion that human beings must create their own history, have been replaced by abstract ideas that celebrate American or Western exceptionalism, denigrate the relevance of context, and regard other cultures with derisive contempt.[271]

Mukherjee's main criterion of measuring her protagonist's success lies in the fact that she comes from a backward world. Jyoti, in the mind of her reader, is forever linked to the oppression of India as success is solely associated with the US, and one does not exist

[270] Koshy, "Sex Acts as Assimilation Acts," 147.
[271] Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 25th ed. (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2014), xxvii.

without the other. Thus, and bearing in mind the author's interpretation, depicting India as an orientalist country is the sine qua non of Jyoti's Americanization in the US.

Jyoti's story is an emancipatory narrative from the Third to the First world, which is why her liberation is from ethnic identity, as in the case of her feminist reconstruction narrative. In its introductory chapter, the text announces two ends of a binary opposition that continues for the rest of the story: East and west, synonymous with death and freedom respectively. It opens with Jyoti's encounter with a rather too-well-known cliché from Indian culture: the tradition of reading astrological charts. The astrologer's prediction of Jyoti's life, and her agency in transforming her scar, are discussed earlier in the chapter as folk-tale elements. It is revisited here in order to highlight the juxtaposition in the portrayal of India and the US. Just like Hester Brynne's scarlet letter,[272] Jyoti wears her scar—an emblem of the old world that is deconstructed by the power of female agency into a badge of defiance and potency. Thus, the scar is a 'star' and a 'third eye', a sign of redemption and transformation that foreshadows Jyoti's ability to access the world of the US. Jyoti's agency is achieved on account of highlighting Indian culture as permanently inertial and Indian women as complacent subjects with no ambitions. This juxtaposition between the two worlds of the US and India becomes clear in the final lines of the first chapter. Following her encounter with the astrologer, Jyoti goes for a swim in the river, after which she comes across a rotten carcass of a small dog with eaten eyes. The moment she touches it a 'stench leak[s] out of the broken body'. (5) In the identity of Jane Ripplemeyer, she recalls in retrospect:

> That stench stays with me. I'm twenty-four now, I live in Baden, Elsa County, Iowa, but every time I lift a glass of water to my lips, fleetingly I smell it. I know what I don't want to become.

[272] Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (Boston: Ticknor, Reed & Fields, 1850).

These few lines lay the ideological foundation of the text. The stench Jyoti is reminded of is reminiscent of India and what it represents, a static place and a dead culture – something that Mukherjee asserts as she celebrates the fact her heroine can "make it" in the US despite the fact that she comes from a place defined by that stench. The image of the dog carcass – symbolic of stasis and passivity – reiterates its presence in different forms throughout the novel and comes as a reminder of the fate the astrologer has predicted for Jyoti. The dog carcass in the river re-forms again, this time in the shape of a mad dog attacking the women of the village when they go to relieve themselves in the fields. The narrator describes this time of 'Ladies Houre' as 'companionable', where '[s]ober women crude, lusty, raucous', get together and exchange jokes, talk about sex and other things, expressing themselves freely. (55) This private space, used primarily for female bonding, is suddenly threatened by a 'mad dog':

> I heard a growl, a kind of growl-and-stalking combination. This dawn, as so many others, perverts from the village across the stream sat on their bank and ogled us. [. . .] The growl got louder, closer. The men in our village weren't saints. We had our incidences. Rape, shame, ruin. [. . .] First I saw the head. A pink-skinned, nearly hairless, twitching animal head. Behind me women screamed. [. . .] Fear stripped their naked haunches. 'A mad dog!' I heard the women's chorus. 'Help! Please help!' A dog, but not a dog. [. . .] It circled the pit, it sidled and snuck around like a jackal. [. . .] I hated all dogs, distrusted their motives. I hated this dog because it had made terrified naked women crab-crawl. [. . .] 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 its viscous drool. I knew it has come for me [. . .]. (56-7)

Just like in *Reading Lolita* when Nafisi metaphorically explains: 'Lolita's image is forever associated in the mind of her readers with that of her jailer. Lolita on her own has no meaning; she can only come to life through her prison bars',[273] Jyoti is locked in the mind of her reader as a "Third World" character coming from that Indian stench, one that never fails to remind her of what she does not want to descend to – a motif also prominent in *Brick Lane*, discussed in the next chapter.

Inevitably, the novel, as well as its protagonist, straddles the hard contradiction between Americanization and the consumption of the exotic "Other", given that the text is not short of exoticizing Indian women in general. 'Indian women are purists, they're cleansing their hairs with berries or yogurt, they're not ruining their hair with shampoos, gels, dyes, and permanents. American women have horrible hair [. . .] [symbolizing] [t]heir lack of virginity and innocence'.[274] This image of the Indian/traditional/western/pure woman vis-à-vis the modern American one is tied in the Western mind to a traditional culture and practices of antiquity. Jyoti, the "Third World" subject, cannot achieve self-realization in her native country; hence she travels to the US, a space which provides her with a liberal agency. Even if Mukherjee, as discussed earlier in her interviews, attempts to celebrate Jyoti independently from this notion, she replaces it with a far worse assumption that communicates: even in her attempt to create a different kind of agency the "Third World" immigrant is still unable to do so without relying on the 'Otherness' of her homeland as well as the exoticization of the self.

Trinh Minh-ha quotes Ellen Pence, who writes about the Western feminists' unintentional oppression of the 'Third World' feminist:

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[273] Nafisi, *Reading Lolita*, 514.
[274] Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 153.

> [G]radually I began to realize the tremendous gap between my rhetoric about solidarity with Third World women and my gut feelings. [. . .] Our idea of including women of colour was to send out notices. We never came to the business tables as equals. Women of color joined us on our terms. [. . .] I started seeing the similarities with how men have excluded the participation of women in their work through Roberts Rules of Order, encouraging us to set up subcommittees to discuss *our* problems but never seeing sexism as their problem. It became clear that in many ways I act the same toward women of color, supporting them in dealing with *their* issues. [. . .] I'm now beginning to realize in many cases men do not understand because they have never committed themselves to understanding and by understanding, choosing to share their power. The lessons we've learned so well as women must be the basis for our understanding of ourselves as oppressive to the third world women we work with.[275]

In this light, one might argue that Mukherjee herself, willingly or not, absorbs the logic of western feminism, given that Jyoti is an oppressed character in the manner Pence describes. Intentional or not, Mukherjee is caught in a position where she could be seen as a native informant whose novel is not only ideologically complicit in advocating US nationalism, imperial power, and hegemonic discourse of feminism; but also oppressive of South Asian women immigrants in the process.[276] In a similar way, Gurleen Grewal concurs: 'when a self-immolating Third World Woman is an immigrant to America, she has nothing to preserve of her identity [. . .] [and] is symbolic of and synonymous with oppression'.[277]

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[275] Minh-ha, *Women, Native, Other*, 85-6.
[276] For more on gender and feminism please see: Judith Butler, "Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire," *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge 1990).
[277] Grewal, "Born Again America," 187.

III.4 Conclusion

The end of the novel marks the zenith of Jyoti's Americanization and it is crystallised in two points. Not in her expressing 'humanitarianism that is part of the subjectivity of cosmopolitans in the west [. . .] [as] [s]he adopts a Vietnamese refugee boy, even while showing contempt for other Asians and South Asians',[278] but in her metamorphosis into a Lillian Gordon – becoming herself the American Saint of immigrants, rescuing other victimised Asians and setting them on the path of self-realization. When Du informs her of his decision to leave and join his sister in L.A., speaking to herself, she says, 'I am [. . .] trying to think like Lillian Gordon. She put me on the bus to Florida that morning, gave me money and a kiss [. . .] [I should] be proud of what he [Du] did'. Du in return kisses her and says: '[y]ou gave me a new life. I'll never forget you'. (223-4) She then becomes the living embodiment of the US liberal imperial project whose hegemony is expressed through the mode of rescue performed for other "Third World" subjects. The second point is in joining Taylor in the ultimate 'American' tradition – that of 'heading West to California' (239) – she announces: 'adventure, risk, transformation: the frontier is pushing indoors through uncaulked windows'. (240) Jyoti is now whole-heartedly the new American pioneer – *Jasmine* ending as Mukherjee's ultimate immigrant epic of transformation.

In his study of the cultural foregrounding of imperialism, *Culture and Imperialism*, Said investigates the imbrication of the literary and the political, the cultural and the imperial, in the Euro-American imagery. The purpose, as he points out, is not to reduce Western literature to the political epochal predilection/predisposition but simply to engage the political fact as the primary interlocutor of the literary event.[279] Espousing Said's approach with the readership's perception of *Jasmine* helps us to further understand the ideological impact of the novel. Therefore, it is useful to borrow Inderpal Grewal's survey of readers' reviews of

[278] Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 68.

the novel on the amazon.com website in order to demonstrate the ideological impact of *Jasmine*. Out of twenty-eight reviews only four were negative. Three read the text as part of academic coursework, and also enjoyed reading it. The majority of the responses confirm that the discourse of victimized Asian women and the tradition-modernity binary is what appeals to the readers in the US. The parts that were mostly worthy of comments are those regarding the miserable existence of Indian women and a 'sense of hope' they find in the US. Here are two comments that encapsulate the survey. While some understood the narrative in a realist register, others found in it a universal message of '"love and hope."' One reader said: '"it seemed real and plausible"', it wandered through the '"American experience,"' and was a '"good story on the transformation of people."' Another was fascinated by the account of Indian women in India: '"[h]er story of the plight of women in India seems to be real. Women are oppressed and must learn how to survive."' According to Grewal, none of the reviewers, except one, who identified themselves as from the US, referred to the immigrant experience in terms of '"struggle"' or '"difficult[y]."' [280] From these reviews, one can figure with little contention, if any, that the novel's most communicated ideas are the backwardness of India and agency of the US. These responses put in perspective and demonstrate the ideological impact the novel has on the reader.

If this novel is an example of successful "Americanization" – an amorphous concept – then what did the heroine do to achieve that, apart from annihilating the Indian self? Gurleen Grewal asserts that *Jasmine* is indeed about successful Americanization of the heroine but 'the central problem of the novel is that it is silent about the conditions that make such assimilation possible'. (182) This close reading of *Jasmine* compels us to ask the following questions. If the US accepts all kinds of immigrants, as the writer states, then why are the terms and conditions for this acceptance that one must embrace the dominant culture? If the

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[279] Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage Books, 1994).

US provides us with a liberal discourse of freedom, then why is the text advocating US nationalism? If accepting the dominant culture is what "it takes" to successfully assimilate, then why must one also renounce the immigrant's ethnic culture? If renouncing ethnicity is a 'must', then why valorise racial beauty? If Americanization lies in the protagonist's female agency of self-determination and choice, then why is the white man represented as the problem-solving medium? If the text is celebrated on the grounds of empowering the woman immigrant, then what is disempowerment? Where does this narrative leave the not-as-pretty-as-Jyoti illegal female immigrants? If we combine all of these factors and remove 'the US', the novel immediately unveils its ideology-loaded discourse. One can suggest that this book participates in the circulation of images of feudalism and in the cultivation of US opinion against the "Third World", having already done a great deal as a propaganda tool at the disposal of the US ideology of freedom and democracy. Both Nafisi and Mukherjee fail to represent with complexity social and political circumstances in both host country and country of origin. There seem to be a lot of love stories, and some concern regarding human rights issues; however, all such themes are infused with biases towards Eurocentric/Americanized frameworks. The authors thus become zealous advocates and active troops in the discourse of 'Americanism'. Both develop their narratives from an alienated position in relation to their native places, revealing an ideological position coming from their native or semi-native immigrant status. Both *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and *Jasmine* systematically fail to demonstrate a historical accountability for the incidents they incorporate in their narratives, and by so doing, they have, perhaps unwittingly, and undoubtedly unjustifiably, participated in and supported the US ideology of imperialism. The next chapter interrogates a similar discourse of advocating the dominant culture, but in favour of the United Kingdom, in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003).

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[280] Grewal, "Becoming American," 72-3.

IV Chapter Four: Interrogating Ideological Ambivalence in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

IV.1 Introduction

Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) is a migration narrative that presents an unsettling process of identity negotiation. While the novel focuses on the Bangladeshi population that already inhabits the area of Brick Lane in London, the port of departure for these characters – Dhaka, Bangladesh – and their journeys to the UK are revealed through memory flashbacks and letter-exchanges. The structure of this migration narrative further differs from that of Mukherjee's *Jasmine* and Nafisi's *Reading Lolita* as, rather than concentrating on the assimilation narrative of an individual character, Ali instead communicates the different assimilation narratives of many characters within the community of Brick Lane. This multiplicity of narratives seems to highlight the heterogeneous nature of the migrant subjectivity. For example, each narrative of a migrant character, such as Nazneen, Razia, Chanu, Karim, and Shahanna, reflects a different trajectory in the negotiation of identity within the host society; while Nazneen and Razia find a "home" in the cultural diaspora of the UK, Chanu and Karim reject the cultural diaspora and identify their "home" as being outside the UK. Although this representation appears to emphasise the inadequacy of homogenising communities according to race or ethnicity, the way the narrative delivers this idea is inconsistent and ambivalent because it simultaneously disseminates stereotypes and misconceptions. Ali's narrative, incongruent and discrepant, synthesises ambivalent/opposing notions to the extent that it is not clear whether the author is emancipating or disempowering the migrant subject. The ideological ambivalence manifests itself in the representational politics of the text. In this chapter, I interrogate this ambivalence arguing that while the text appears to offer an emancipatory narrative of the migrant figure, it simultaneously undermines it by adopting the dominant culture of the host society. This all results in a novel

that provides the basis for producing discrepant readings and creates an ambivalent attitude towards the migrant subject's plight within a host society.

The narrative revolves around the character of Nazneen, a simple Bangladeshi 'unspoilt girl [. . .]. From the village', who is shipped off to London following an arranged marriage with a Bangladeshi migrant, Chanu, who is already based in the UK.[281] Bound by her inability to speak English and her wifely duties/obligations, Nazneen is shut away from the rest of British society. In the first decade of her migrant life, her world is confined to the private space of her home and the surrounding Bangladeshi community. Nazneen, alienated from the world, unable to make decisions on her own or to freely access the world outside her flat, is consumed by repressed longings and sexual fantasies. Ali focuses on describing the intricate domestic details in Nazneen's life as they seem to reflect the protagonist's state of mind. Anguish and trauma at the death of her first son, followed by an incessantly dull routine of domesticity, renders Nazneen a shadow obsessed with seemingly ridiculous ice-skating fantasies, which she picks up from excessive television watching. Later in the novel, Nazneen meets Karim, an activist for the local Islamic group, whose seductive youth and vivid energy charm the frustrated housewife and leads her into an illicit affair. Karim is a second-generation migrant who has been born and brought up in London; nonetheless, he experiences feelings of displacement that lead him to develop religious affiliations. Through the character of Karim, the author attempts to demonstrate the appeal of the Islamic cause to characters who are desperately trying to reclaim a sense of selfhood. Nazneen's husband Chanu is an educated man, twice her age, whose character represents the postcolonial trauma in the migrant figure. On the one hand, he feels superior to his compatriots in the community; on the other hand, he is frustrated and unable to fulfill his aspirations in British society. Chanu is constantly chasing projects in his mind without achieving any of them in reality: the

[281] Monica Ali, *Brick Lane* (London: Black Swan, 2004), 22.

house he wants to build in Dhaka, the library, the chair-restoring business, the import export plans, and the interminable reading. His ultimate dream is to return "home" to Bangladesh, before the children 'get spoiled'. (32) Shahanna and Bibi are the deracinated young adult daughters whose conflict with paternal authority, mainly Chanu, represents the frustration and disorientation that second-generation migrants might encounter; they struggle to define their identity according to their own terms and choices. After disconsolate wanderings through the host world, the events of 9/11 trigger transformation in the characters. The resulting Islamophobia implied in the world of the novel, and the increasing tensions in the wider society, substantialises the emotional and psychological instability of Chanu and Karim, who then search for their "paradise" or, at the very least, a deliverance from their wretched and alienating present. The novel culminates in what we might call the reaction-formation to alienation. Nazneen breaks up with Karim because she realises that they fell in love with each other for the wrong reasons. Karim leaves the country in order to find "home" somewhere else, as the text reveals that he joins other Islamic organisations. Chanu returns "home" to Bangladesh, whereas the recalcitrant Nazneen and her daughters decide to stay in England. Nazneen joins her friend Razia in establishing a new clothing business, 'Fusion Fashion', the name of which reflects her determination to make the UK a "home" for herself and her daughters.

Ostensibly, *Brick Lane* offers a critique of the Bangladeshi community, as an ethnic enclave within a multicultural environment, by providing an insightful account of the alienation these migrant characters experience, and by exposing the violent discourses the community generates against women migrants. This being the case, the reviews of the novel have celebrated its unveiling of the Bangladeshi community as a daring social critique. Yet, *Brick Lane* is less interested in revealing the broader material relations of power and domination in the host society, and how they work to shape and constrain the migrant

community being depicted. As such, there are absent, or neglected, issues in the representational politics of the text. The reader is able to see, for instance, how the migrant characters, particularly females, are alienated, oppressed, and made to feel inadequate because of the pressure their community exercises on them, while simultaneously portraying the community as backward and oppressive. Yet these notions of agency are problematic as Ali fails to depict any kind of emotional, social, or economic support from the community, and further overlooks the fact that the immigrant community is compromised by, and subordinated to, the social and economic spheres of the wider society that hosts it. By approaching *Brick Lane* in this way we find that the author's narrative of unveiling of the Bangladeshi community is rather problematic as it is infested with absences that create confusion and ambivalence in the attitude towards the community depicted.

What makes *Brick Lane* different from *Jasmine* and *Reading Lolita* is the fact that it presents the reader with a democratic perspective on the world of the novel; highlighting the migrant subjectivity as the text does indeed offers a polyphony of voices, by which the reader is given the impression that each character chooses "home" freely and independently. The question however becomes how much of a choice is the migrant figure granted in *Brick Lane* when the author arguably presents *desire* as the key agency to "make it" in the host society – indirectly suggesting that the migrant character is solely responsible for their assimilation, or failure of assimilation, into the host society, given that the outcome is here dependent on how much they desire to assimilate, rather than any external factors that may hamper their ability to do so. In other words, the author provides a bricolage of migrant characters, Chanu, Nazneen, Karim and Shahana, whose identities diverge in configuring their "placement" or "home", but the only characters that are given successful narratives of assimilation are the ones that possess the particular agency of *desire*. This desire is framed according to the dominant ideology of the host culture and it dismisses other trajectories of negotiating

identity and "home". When the characters cannot negotiate their identity and "home" in terms and conditions other than desire, as suggested by Ali, there is not really much of a democratic choice given to the migrant subject. Such strict and confined treatment of the migrant subjectivity actually limits this subjectivity, thus generating ambivalence in the text. Thus, though the text appears to be democratic in its various representations of the migrant choice of "home", it eventually undermines its democratic aesthetic by suggesting that assimilation is contingent upon this problematic notion of agency – desire – ignoring the migrant subjectivity and again overlooking any institutional role the host society plays in the context of assimilating the migrant figure. Ali defines the failure of assimilation almost exclusively in terms of character flaw, and by doing so reinscribes the hegemony of the dominant ideology of the host society. Therefore, I argue that while the text appears to offer an emancipatory discourse of negotiating identity and "home" of the migrant subject in the host society, it reproduces as well as reinforces the issues it seemingly seeks to subvert.

I interrogate the way ambivalence manifests itself in the novel through examining three major elements. First, I explore the inconsistencies in the *Brick Lane*'s narrative style through a discussion of critical readings by Jane Hiddleston and Alistair Cormack in order to tease out the inconsistencies in their critical identification of distinctive modes of writing operating in the novel. Second, I address the ideological ambivalence characterising the narrative by mainly analysing the characters of Chanu, Nazneen and Shahana. I also draw on the characterisation of Razia and Karim in order to put certain issues into perspective. In the character study, I particularly broach the topic of the alienation of the migrant subject because it figures significantly in the ideological foundation of the text. The insightful, detailed, account of alienation in the novel does not only draw out the sympathy of the reader but also underlines the ideological complicity in the narrative: while the author seems to highlight the predicament and alienation of the migrant characters, she presents the

deliverance of their wretched state of alienation as related to their possession of the agency of desire. It is in this way that *Brick Lane* puts forward an emancipatory rhetoric whilst simultaneously undermining it.

IV.2 Contention over the "Authenticity" of the Text

While some readers and critics celebrate the text as an insightful account of the little-represented part of London (the Bangladeshi community of Brick Lane), others denounce it as offensive and misrepresentative, considering the text to be reinforcing stereotypes and cultural otherness.[282] There are two main points of contention regarding the question of in/authenticity and legitimacy in the novel that provide the basis for the ambivalence in the text's reception. The first one relates to the title "*Brick Lane*", as it is perhaps rather difficult to separate "real" from the "fictional" when the title of the novel conjures an image of a real place (Brick Lane), which, in turn, tends to summon authentic/real associations in the mind of the reader. The second concern relates to the author's own mixed ethnic parentage.

The author's mixed ethnicity, having a Bangladeshi father and a British mother, seems to influence the reception of the book. For although she is an outsider to the community of Brick Lane, it is rather difficult for some readers to ignore the position of Ali as a Bangladeshi female author. Her Bangladeshi origin – she was born in Dhaka, though raised in Northern England from the age of three – tends to confer a certain "authenticity" on the text, certainly more than her non-Bangladeshi peers. The author's mixed ethnic identity

[282] This is a short overview of Brick Lane's position in public consciousness. Brick Lane as an area has a historical pattern of hosting refugees and immigrants. Among plenty of others, the list of migrations includes French (Huguenots), Irish, Russian and Polish Jews, Bangladeshis and Somalians. It can be said that as an area it was rather obscured until the late nineties and early 2000s during the time multiculturalism was promoted in London. Brick Lane is now a very well-known hipster area of East London (along with the Bangladeshi restaurants and textiles shops, there are record stores, fashion stores, galleries and bars at the lower end of the street). At the time of Ali's writing the novel the area was already known. The novel's success drew more attention to the area of Brick Lane. Recently, the London Borough of Tower Hamlets wanted to brand Brick Lane 'Curry Capital' 2012 in time for the London Olympics, with its mayor Lutfur Rahman who was adamant on welcoming the world in the vibrant and exciting part of London – announcing Brick Lane as a "performance" in the discourse of multiculturalism.

fuels the tension surrounding the text's reception and contributes to the polarising of responses it provokes. Many of Brick Lane's local audience received both the book and its film adaptation with shock and hostility.[283] For example, Abdus Sadiqui, chairman of Brick Lane Traders and owner of several businesses on the street, expresses outright criticism after reading the text in both English and Bengali: '[s]he says it is fiction, and the film will be fiction, but to me that is not true. She has targeted our Sylheti community, for some reason, why I don't know, and she is saying things about us which are just not true.'[284]

However, Ali repudiates claims that consider the writing of *Brick Lane* to be derived from her positioning herself as a representative of the community; she states: 'I wrote out of character'.[285] This is to suggest that her Bangladeshi background or ethnicity do not actually interfere with the writing of the text. In a conversation with Hanif Kureishi, Ali comments on the question of representation in the following way:

> There is a sort of tyranny of representation. James Baldwin's phrase is still in force and the irony is that, you know, fiction succeeds to the extent that it is particular, not representative and nobody would dream of it working any other way if it weren't at [*sic*] a minority group. So, it's,

[283] Ali's publisher received a letter from the Greater Sylhet Development and Welfare council reprehending her portrayal of the Bangladeshi community as backward and uneducated. Later, when *Brick Lane* was shortlisted by the Booker Prize panel, a representative of the Sylhet Development wrote a letter to the head judge John Carey expressing objections to certain passages in the novel. Larry Finlay, managing director of Transworld Publishers, a Random House company, was reported by the BBC in December 2003 as having replied that 'Brick Lane is a work of fiction. Monica Ali's Brick Lane is a novel that we are enormously proud to have published - we find both the accusations against it and any demand for censorship ludicrous'. "Ali's *Brick Lane* Upsets Community." *BBC News*, Wednesday 3rd December, 2003, accessed November, 2014, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/3287413.stm.

[284] Maev Kennedy, "In a Sense, If You Come under Fire from Those Conservatives People, You Must Be Doing Something Right." *The Guardian*, Friday 28th July, 2006, accessed January, 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2006/jul/28/bookscomment.books.

[285] Ali, Monica. "A Converstation with Monica Ali and Hanif Kureishi at ICA (Institue of Contemporary Art)," London 9 November, dir. by Gavron, Sarah, (Studio Canal: Brick Lane. DVD, 2007).

> it's, it's, [*sic*] I don't know, it's kind of depressing and I think it's related to the growth of identity politics.[286]

The author's appeal against the problematics of representation is that a writer ought to be allowed to create a fiction concerning any given community, even if s/he is not a part of that community. This is to say that she accepts that she is not part of the Bangladeshi community of Brick Lane; however, the issues of representation arise because of the assumption on the part of the readers/critics that Ali's Bangladeshi heritage grants the author a particular access to the Bangladeshi culture that is depicted in her text. As such there appears to be an ambiguity as to how the novel ought to be approached/read.

In this regard, James Procter and Bethan Benwell provide an insightful, detailed, account of the production of various readings of this text, via a study conducted on reading groups across different countries. *Brick Lane* is one of the novels included in their study and we can conclude from the reader responses that they cite that readers approach the topic of Ali's position as an insider/outsider to the community with inconsistency. One reader says, for instance:

> [T]he author was trying to write from the perspective of the Bangladeshi about the community to gain acceptance to the wider community that she has found herself in. [. . .] I felt she was writing for the English or for the Westernised readership, even though she was writing from a Bangladeshi perspective.[287]

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[286] Ali, Monica. "A Converstation with Monica Ali and Hanif Kureishi at ICA (Institue of Contemporary Art)," London 9 November, dir. by Gavron, Sarah, (Studio Canal: Brick Lane. DVD, 2007).

Another reader explains: 'I think she was writing for the Bangladeshi that are living in UK [. . .]. I think she portrayed that very well and the fact that she is a Bangladeshi also will make her sympathetic to the conflicts that they have'. (129) The aim of Procter and Benwell's study is to evaluate the way that realism is read inside and outside of academia. They suggest that

> [T]he effects of realism are contingent upon how, where, when and by whom the text is decoded [. . .] [This suggests] not just that different readers and reading acts prompt a re-thinking of the category "realism", but that realism exposes reading formations as, if not incommensurable, than certainly irreducible to a singular notion of 'the reader'. (136)

Thus, they highlight 'the reader' in the act of reading. Acknowledging that while for some readers the author's position as an insider/outsider to the content works to legitimise certain meanings, for others it does not. To say that the act of reading *Brick Lane* is entirely oblivious to the position of the author would be an overstatement. In any case, this issue of how the author relates to the content of the text, in regards to authenticity or outsiderness, remains ambiguous and thus generates ambivalence in the production of meaning that occurs when reading *Brick Lane*.

Another issue that gives rise to ambiguity in the response of readers to the novel can be found in regards to the novel's editorial process. Doubleday Publishing house bought the rights to the book – Monica Ali's debut – after reading its first two chapters, and it is notable that a key editorial intervention concerned that of the novel's title, which the publishers changed from *Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers* to *Brick Lane*. Ali's initially proposed title is

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[287] James Procter and Bethan Benwell, *Reading Across Worlds: Transnational Book Groups and the Reception of Difference* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 128.

drawn from a line that appears in one of her character Hasina's letters, which are written in broken English:

> Sister I think of you everyday and send love. I send respect to husband. Now you have address you will write and tell me all thing about London. It make me tremble you so far away. You remember those story we hear as children begin like this. 'Once there was prince who lived in far off land seven seas and thirteen rivers away.' That's is how I think of you. But as princess.[288]

Hasina's line refers to a Bangli children's story collection known as *Thakurmar Jhuli* (meaning grandmother's tales) in which 'the village women's dreams of becoming queens, princesses or to be off on adventures "across seven seas and thirteen rivers" could literally come true; in the realm of fantasy.'[289] It is arguable that the classic Orientalist and nostalgic appeal of Ali's original title would advocate a different reading of the work compared to the more contemporary associations evoked by Doubleday's choice of *Brick Lane*. Marianne Velmans, publishing director of Doubleday, says: 'Brick Lane has a lot of relevant connotations, whereas *Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers* would be more appropriate for a book about the subcontinent. The story starts in Bangladesh but most of it is about the experience of immigrant communities in Britain'.[290]

While the original title proposed by the author recalls Oriental fantasies of the distant East, the published title draws attention to issues pertaining to multiculturalism in British society. The question is how much difference or redirection the title "*Seven Seas and*

[288] Ali, *Brick Lane*, 26.
[289] Lopamudra Maitra, "100 Years of Thakurmar Jhuli (Grandmother's Bag of Tales): From Oral Literature to Digital Media - Shaping Thoughts for the Young and Old," *Indian Folklore Research Journal* 4, no.7 (2007), 83.

Thirteen Rivers" would have created in interpreting the book, if it had remained as its title. It is possible that it could have promoted a more post-colonial approach to reading the novel, at least tentatively.[291] Furthermore, the change of title into *Brick Lane* announces the text as a "performance" within the discourse of multiculturalism and global market; the change of title indicates a shift in the marketing strategy of the novel as the new title commodifies and commercialises the content in order to accommodate an impulse found in literary consumerism.[292]

IV.3 Ambivalence in the Narrative Style of *Brick Lane*

Whereas, above, the focus was on non-academic reader responses to the text, in regards to realism, here I will demonstrate how, in academic circles, *Brick Lane* received a mixed critical response due to an ambivalent narrative style that is symptomatic of the ideologically ambivalent content of the book. The ambivalent nature of the literary representation of the novel is such that it has been read both as a straight representation and as a metanarrative – different, often contrary, critical readings of the text that will be examined herein.

'Whether their representations are accurate matters little if we move the burden of representation of migrant authors, allowing them the same imaginative freedom we give other contemporary novelists,' says Sara Upstone in reference to Monica Ali and Zadie Smith.[293] Upstone's interpretation in "Same Old, Same Old" highlights the conflicts of the postcolonial subject in the text. As with Ali's own attitude to the issue, as expressed above, Upstone's

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[290] David Smith, "It's Brick Lane by Any Other Name." *The Guardian*, Sunday 14th September, 2003, accessed January, 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2003/sep/14/bookerprize2003.usa.

[291] Additionally, the original title would perhaps lend the novel, which is set in contemporary times, a metanarrative quality by its being wrapped up in traditional fairy-tales; this point is further discussed in the analysis of the writing style of *Brick Lane*.

[292] Unfortunately due to the limited space in the thesis it is difficult to expand on this point. For more please see Procter and Benwell, "Reading in the Literary Marketplace," *Reading Across Worlds: Transnational Book Groups and the Reception of Difference* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 137-177; and Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001).

[293] Sara Upstone, "'Same Old, Same Old' Zadie Smith's White Teeth and Monica Ali's Brick Lane," *Postcolonial Writing* 43, no. 3 (2007), 346.

reading does not seem to concern itself with questions of misrepresentation or stereotypes; it rather prioritises the freedom of the artist. In "Shapes and Shadows: (Un)veiling the Immigrant Community in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*", meanwhile, Jane Hiddleston explicitly endorses both: admiring the author's freedom to present misrepresentations and stereotypes, arguing that they produce a 'multilayered' textual interpretation.[294] The existing readings that conceive the text as exotic and grossly misrepresentative, Hiddleston argues, can be 'counter-posed with the awareness of its implications as a literary experiment'. On the other hand, Alistair Cormack relates the huge success of the novel to the fact that it is a 'realist narrative with a postcolonial story'.[295] As such, in "Migration and the Political Narrative Form: Realism and Postcolonial Subject in *Brick Lane*", he focuses on the composition of the literary text in terms of form and content. While Hiddleston categorises Ali's writing as 'fictional experimentation', refuting readings that 'rely on some notion of literature as a realist documentation',[296] Cormack problematises the narrative through his examination of the relationship between the realist form and the novel's complex content – where 'complex' describes the process of negotiating an identity in a multicultural environment.[297]

Given their specific focus on the literary form of *Brick Lane*, my discussion addresses three points of comparison between the readings made by Hiddleston and Cormack: characterisation, narration, and the relationship between form and content. Given the underlying issues of ambiguity concerning the narrative form, as specified earlier, interrogating and contrasting these critical interpretations of *Brick Lane* might shed light on the conundrum of the novel's narrative form.

According to Hiddleston, the stereotyped and contrived images of *Brick Lane*, along with its stock signifiers of an exotic Eastern culture, are consciously 'intended' by Ali in

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[294] Jane Hiddleston, "Shapes and Shadows: (Un)veiling the Immigrant Community in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*," *The Journal of Common Wealth* 40, no. 57 (2005), 60.
[295] Cormack, "Migration and the Politics of Narrative Form," 695.
[296] Hiddleston, "Shapes and Shadows," 57.

order to 'provoke the reader'.[298] The flawed and sketchy characterisation is also deliberately implemented; its use as a 'Platonic metaphor precisely reminds us that these characters are mere forms or outlines, imperfect shadows that fail to reveal any underlying truth'. (59) The constant shifting of the narrative perspective from an external narrator to a free indirect discourse is the way in which the author seeks to 'raise the questions of who speaks for whom.' (65) Hiddleston believes that the author redeploys the aforementioned common rhetorical tropes as a literary technique so that 'the reader is forced to consider the[ir] implications and effects'. (61) In this case, the text depends on goading the readers' sense of complicity through exercising common stereotypes. Hiddleston, then, is making the argument that the text is meant to exorcise these stereotypes and misconceptions from the readers themselves, and that the text draws attention to itself in order 'to caricature the community of "foreign" characters evoked' for this purpose. (61) Hiddleston rethinks Ali's style as an innovative literary technique in which the author challenges the tendency to 'mistake discourse for truth', and disputes those 'literary critical assumptions that ally the author too closely with the community she seems to represent in her work.' (70) Though refraining from openly claiming so, Hiddleston's insightful analysis seems to draw heavily on the characteristics of metanarrative.

There are three vital points to explore in *Brick Lane* as a metanarrative fiction: the text as a self-conscious work of art, the role of the reader, and the paradox of the text, each of which is present in Hiddleston's reading of the text. In the first case, the text 'draws attention to its own artifice, rather than purporting to provide straight forward knowledge'. (58) In regards to the second component, the reader is placed in 'an active position'. (71) And thirdly, there is the dilemma of the content, which is described by Hiddleston thus:

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[297] Cormack, "Migration and the Politics," 695.

> The evocation of characters in these terms emphasizes the ways in which they are flawed, insubstantial imitations; they are not real essences but forms carved out in language. Ali's text is split, then, by its contradiction between hope for revelation on one hand, and the knowledge of the impossibility of any complete unveiling on the other hand. (59)

Thus, the narrative itself is a demonstration of its contradiction. Hiddleston's analysis aspires to prove that the text is multilayered and self-referential. One can think of the textual paradox as a case of transference; the paradox of the content quoted above, the 'split', is transferred onto the artifice of the novel, in the form of both its flawed plot and its 'insubstantial' characterisation. Given this, it is useful to examine Hiddleston's interpretation of *Brick Lane* under Linda Hutcheon's concept of metanarrative.

If a text is characterised as a metanarrative, it usually implies intense self-reflexivity and overtly parodic intertextuality. In *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, Linda Hutcheon chooses the terms 'narcissistic' and 'paradox' to describe metanarrative. 'Narcissistic' is used in the figurative sense of the word, in order to denote textual self-awareness, while the 'paradox' is that the text is 'narcissistically self-reflexive and yet outwardly focused, oriented towards the reader.'[299] Drawing on Hutcheon's definition, then, for a narrative to be considered as metanarrative, its ubiquitous narcissism alone should demand its self-consciousness – however, this is arguably a quality that is lacking in *Brick Lane*. What is most needed, or ought to have been present, in *Brick Lane* in order for it to be considered a metanarrative is the auto-representational quality of such a narrative – whereby the reader is not dictated by a critic, such as Hiddlestone, how to read or respond to the text.

It is essential to emphasize that Hiddlestone's reading of *Brick Lane* is academic focusing on the literary qualities of the text. If we recall however her point, mentioned earlier,

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[298] Hiddleston, "Shapes and Shadows," 61.

regarding the role of the reader in reading *Brick Lane* that 'the reader is forced to consider the implications and effects' of the stereotypes in the text, the word 'forced' remains rather vague. In this instance, in Procter's and Benwell's study of the different readings produced by different readers in different reading groups, there is not any account of a reader who expresses any opinion that is close to what Hiddleston assumes the narrative techniques in the novel forces the reader to do.[300] Procter and Benwell emphasize that 'book group account for realism often go beyond aspects purely literary evaluation'. (131) They highlight the other factors that contribute to the reading of a text explaining that '[t]he taste of realism among our readers is not necessarily a personal aesthetic choice then, but socially produced and acquired, part of a habitus [. . .], and broader regime of value'. This is not meant to completely disregard Hiddleston's proposed role of the reader, but it is an attempt to suggest that *Brick Lane* rather fails to engage with the 'auto-representational quality' a text needs in order to force the reader into exorcising stereotypes and misconceptions.

The 'auto-representational' quality is a defining feature of the metafictional narrative, through which the reader becomes primarily a collaborator rather than a mere consumer, as Hutcheon suggests. However, *Brick Lane* is not clearly self-referential, or self-referential enough, to draw the attention to itself as a self-conscious text; it needs a catalyst. And the catalyst is the critic; *Brick Lane* needs critics such as Hiddlestone in order to point out and propose a way of reading it as a metanarrative or as an 'experimental' text. The need for a critic to interfere/facilitate the interpretation of the text defies the purpose of metanarrative in the first place, because it means the text is lacking its fundamental hallmark as a narcissistic and self-conscious work that speaks for itself. Clearly, the three cited characteristics of metanarrative are interrelated and interdependent; thus, they have a domino effect in their

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[299] Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (New York: Methuen, 1984), 7.

relationship with each other. Therefore, if the text does not achieve self-referentiality, in its need for a critic to speak for it, such critical interference affects the role of the reader as an independent interpreter. Hutcheon, in examining metanarrative, problematises the reader-text affiliation in relation to 'art' and 'life':

> On the one hand, he [the reader] is forced to acknowledge the artifice, the 'art,' of what he is reading; on the other hand, explicit demands are made upon him, as a co-creator, for intellectual and affective responses comparable in scope and intensity to those of his life experience. (5)

Consequently, *Brick Lane*'s narrative style does not give the reader such a role where the reader is supposed to be 'a co-creator' (in the way proposed by Hiddleston) – another essential component of the narcissistic narrative, upon which the paradox of the text arises. If we cross-examine the role of the reader in both Hiddleston's experimental aesthetics of *Brick Lane* and Hutcheon's metanarrative, we can say that the narrative style in the novel is too ambivalent to determine the role of the reader.

It is clear, after examining previous metanarrative characteristics, that *Brick Lane*'s relationship to parody is also rather problematic, since it is already established that the text is not auto-representational in the metanarrative sense. Hiddleston draws attention to Ali's attempt to 'caricature' certain aspects in the text; nonetheless, it remains far from being self-parodic. On the contrary, there are moments in the text that are more suited to satire than parody. In these moments, the narrative voice intervenes and can be considered rather satirical. For example, in the telling of a story concerning jinn possession and exorcism, the

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[300] James Proctor and Bethan Benwell examine and demonstrate in *Reading Across Worlds* the difference in the production of readings within the academy and outside it. James Procter and Bethan Benwell, "Reading and Realism," *Reading Across Worlds: Transnational Book Groups and the Reception of Difference* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 101-136.

narrative voice does not recount the incident in a self-parodic manner, but is instead implicitly judgemental and comic. As Alistair Cormack puts it, the narrator's tone is biased and deceptive: '[b]y the tone we can be entirely sure of the narrator's view of the exorcism. The world of spirits, religion, and village folklife is primitive and comic'.[301] Furthermore, given that one of the ways Cormack reads the text, as realist one, it is notable that the narrator's description of the exorcism process is deemed to fail in this respect also. Although the narrator describes the exorcism process as a 'strategy', Cormack adds that in 'the attempt by the narrational voice to synthesize this event into its realist register, the material does not quite work'. (717) In this example, the narrative is not successful as a self-parody nor as a realist telling; instead, it is ambivalent.

This equivocal character of the narrative is further clear in Hiddleston's interpretation. As although Hiddleston attests to Ali's style as a 'fictional experimentation' rather than a 'realist documentation', in her reading she attests to the point that the text can be read on two levels: one is realist and the other is experimental.[302] She adds that both approaches are determined by 'a history of reading conventions'. Hiddleston approaches the text as a realist narrative at times. (64) In specific passages, she resorts to approaching the text as a realist narrative in order to understand certain nuances in *Brick Lane.* Therefore, it seems necessary to investigate what Hiddleston identifies as the dual nature of the narrative in Ali's text, as well as the broader relationship between realist narrative and metanarrative.

In Hiddleston's analysis, the dual approach of realism and experimental narrative (or metanarrative) indeed has precedent in literary work; however, the relationship between the two approaches is arguably different from that suggested in Hiddleston's interpretation. In essence, metanarrative employs realism in order to question it. For example, Miguel de Cervantes' parodic *Don Quijote* (1605) is a case of a realistic novel that is also highly self-

[301] Cormack, "Migration and the Politics," 716.

referential/conscious.[303] Cervantes neatly establishes, in Hutcheon's words, that 'in the novel form the narrative act itself is, for the reader, part of the action.'(5) Hutcheon suggests two types of metanarrative texts; the first type represents itself as *narrative* that is diegetically self-conscious while the second type represents itself as language that demonstrates awareness of its linguistic constitution. The narrative style of *Don Quijote* places it in the first type, which, clearly, *Brick Lane* does not belong to, given that the auto-representational quality found in Cervantes' text is lacking in Ali's, and neither does *Brick Lane* belong to the second type, given that its language is not especially fantastical. While Hiddleston alternates between 'experimental' and 'realist' interpretations in her approach to Ali's text, *Don Quijote* demonstrates how, in a metanarrative, these two modes both interact and are critical of each other. Hiddleston asserts that realism is used in the text as a necessary means to understand the characters through their surroundings.[304] However, the purpose of juxtaposing the 'experimental' approach that is intended to be caricaturist in purpose, with realist intervals that are intended to provide one with insight into the characters' consciousness seems rather debatable. A realist narrative is not traditionally based on 'flawed' characterization and 'hazy' depictions, which is how Hiddleston describes Ali's writing. (58-59) Realist narrative is inherently different in form, content, and purpose from a metanarrative and experimental interpretation. Thus, in the interest of precision, although Hiddleston's reading is insightful in many ways, shifting the approach to the narrative from experimental to realist rather highlights the issue of ambivalence in the writing mode.

On the other hand, Alistair Cormack suggests that the huge success of the novel is down to its straightforwardly 'realist narrative', and its employment of 'a postcolonial

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[302] Hiddleston, "Shapes and Shadows," 60.
[303] Quijote is written with "j" and not with "x", Quixote, as written by Hutcheon in her book.
[304] For instance, Hiddleston relies on the narrator's intricate descriptions of the furniture around the protagonist in order to understand her state of mind validating in a way the realism in the text. Hiddleston, "Shapes and Shadows," 64.

story'.[305] However, Cormack criticises the use of realism as a mode of writing in *Brick Lane*, arguing that such a traditional literary form does not work well in the context of the complex ontology of hybrid identity. Cormack argues that

> realism ceases to be traditional, because it is called upon to depict this new social juncture; the form's limits become visible, as do the presumptions by which it works [. . .] the 'doubleness' of hybrid cultural and psychological structures is flattened when it is represented in a form that stresses linear development towards self-awareness.

This is perhaps why the realist narrative of Ali's prose is not successful. Cormack points out that the use of realism in a text dealing with the complicated content of the migrant's identity negotiation leads to both inconsistencies within the narrative and fragmentation in the characterisation.

The above discussion of Hiddleston and Cormack's readings indicate, then, that *Brick Lane*'s narrative style is inconsistent and incoherent in the way it synthesises opposing writing modes. In cumulative terms, the text contends with issues pertaining to the migrant's alienation, identity transformation, postcolonialism, multiculturalism, and cultural hybridity; nevertheless, it remains a literary conundrum to precisely define the mode of representation given in the text. It is perhaps safe to say by now that the text struggles with narrative inconsistencies, be it those related to realism, or to experimental or metanarrative. Thus, the novel is ambivalent as to its literary mode, that it is partly realist, but also partly experimental.

This is significant as the problems in the form reflect on characterisation and the ideological foregrounding of the text. Although the ambivalence in the novel's narrative

[305] Cormack, "Migration and the Politics," 696.

mode could compromise the discussion of identity negotiation in the migrant figure – since the operating modes of writing is ambivalent oscillating between realism and experimental – the novel nevertheless still sheds light on important aspects pertaining to the alienation of the migrant figure and its struggle to define "home" within a plethora of meanings and understandings. In fact, it seems that the novel's form metamorphoses to adopt the shape of its content that is negotiating an identity: as the migrant characters attempt to negotiate an identity in the host society, the text, symptomatic of its theme, negotiates the identity of the literary form.

IV.4 Ideological Ambivalence in the Migration Narratives of Chanu and Nazneen

Starting with Chanu, the divided consciousness of his character significantly addresses the question of whether "home" is location or the "abstract home" of dislocation – pursuing "home" outside the UK. At the beginning of the novel, he is portrayed as a forty-year old educated Bengali man who is immensely absorbed and tormented by fantasies of his own making. From the perspective of an omniscient third-person narrator, the text recounts Chanu's life-changing experiences of displacement and alienation that gradually nourish the growing gap between two states of mind. The first is a state of ambition, evident in Chanu when he arrives in the UK as a young man with a 'degree certificate and big dreams'.[306] The second state of mind is saliently contrasted with both his current job (as a taxi driver), and his social and financial predicament. During the former phase, he immerses himself in an illusory reverie: '"I thought there would be a red carpet laid out for me. I was going to join the Civil Service and become the Private Secretary to the prime minister"'. He is seen as a hard-working man eager to climb up the social ladder with the hope of excelling in his endeavours. However, in the narrative of *Brick Lane*, after 'thirty years or so' in London, (289) we find

that Chanu's ideological framework has been shaken after a series of disappointing professional failures that have doomed his attempts to fulfil his dreams:

> Sometimes I look back and I am shocked. Everyday of my life I have prepared for success, worked for it, waited for it, and you don't notice how the days pass until nearly a lifetime is finished. Then it hits you—the thing you have been waiting for has already gone by. And it was going in the other direction. It's like I've been waiting on the wrong side of the road for a bus that was already full. (320)

The disempowerment and pain in this passage presents Chanu's second state of mind: his outright alienation not only from his own self but also from British society. To his "shock", the bus that is not only on the other side but also "already full" reveals how Chanu's sense of existence has been rendered worthless and meaningless by a society that neither needs nor acknowledges his presence. His sense of self disintegrates and he is eventually provoked to leave England, if not, exactly, to go back to Bangladesh. For as Chanu expresses it: 'I can't stay'. (478)

The 'going home syndrome', as mentioned in the novel, clearly manifests itself in the character of Chanu who becomes the fictional framework for narrating the complexity of cultural dislocation and loss of identity in the migrant figure. (32)[307] During the thirty years of his stay, Chanu develops an identity conflict and gradually begins to psychologically deteriorate. The symptoms of identity-conflict are most clear in his schismatic and moody cultural responses and oscillations. For example:

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[306] Ali, *Brick Lane*, 28.

> [T]oday Chanu had ordered skirt and no trousers. Yesterday, both the girls [Shahanna and Bibi] had to put trousers beneath their uniforms. It depended where Chanu directed his outrage.
>
> If he had a Lion Heart leaflet in his hand, he wanted his daughters covered. He would not be cowed by these Muslim-hating peasants.
>
> If he saw some girls go by in hijab he became agitated at this display of peasant ignorance. Then the girls went out in their skirts.
>
> Sometimes he saw both sides of it. 'The poor whites, you see are the ones that feel most threatened. And our young ones are rebelling [. . .]' On these days it was left to Nazneen or the girls to decide what they should wear. (264)

'Lion Heart' is the 'white' local political group in the neighbourhood that passes around anti-Islam leaflets, and it is opposed by the local Islamic 'Bengal Tigers' that passes around counter leaflets. Chanu is caught in the middle of this ideological battle; on the days he encounters a leaflet from 'Lion Hearts' he supports the other group and vice versa. His reaction to the leaflets impacts on the dress code of his family members. He seems to know what he does not relate to, yet is unable to locate a position of his own. In this passage, the character of Chanu displays a divided consciousness that is unable to ideologically affiliate with a stable source of reference, thus Chanu's identity follows a pendulum movement between the groups until he, at times, is left with no identity at all – such as when Nazneen or the girls can exercise free choice over their dress code.

The relationship of Chanu's character with the host society here seems to resemble to a large extent the African American dualism, but as it would be placed within the context of

[307] The character of Dr. Azad describes Chanu's feelings in the context of what he calls 'the going home syndrome'; it is a syndrome that is commonly felt among the Bangladeshi diaspora when the hopes and dreams of the migrant figure fails to materialise in the host society.

the postcolonial immigrant identity. Chanu's state of doubleness recalls what W. E. B. Du Bois, in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), terms as "double-consciousness". Du Bois suggests that the black person in America is afflicted with 'a double-consciousness [. . .] two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body'.[308] Du Bois describes this particular sensation as: 'this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others'. The African American 'ever feels his two-ness', which is a potentially disabling ambivalence: for it is 'the contradiction of double aims' as an "a Negro" and as an American. (3) The African American longs 'to merge his double self into a better and truer self', a merging in which 'he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost'. (2) Similarly, Chanu's host society yields him no true self-consciousness, but lets him see himself through the revelation of the other host world. His dual personality is forced, and it forces him to take his stance on things not from the perspective of a citizen but from that of a coloured immigrant. His double-consciousness is a source of confusion and ambivalence and his character is always in doubt about his identity and aims.

The conflict in Chanu's identity, particularly his love-hate relationship towards his Bangladeshi self, deepens in the text as it becomes a source of ambivalence and confusion. Amongst his double-consciousness Chanu seems to privilege what Bhabha calls the supremacy of a 'norm given by the host society or dominant culture'.[309] Chanu seems to adopt the host, or "white", discourse in his relationship with his Bangladeshi self/peers. He considers himself an 'intellectual' who is above the rest of his expatriates, the inferior race.[310] In Chanu's words:

[308] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black People* (Chicago: Dover, 1994), 2.
[309] Homi Bhabha, *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 208.
[310] Ali, *Brick Lane*, 35.

> [M]ost of *our people here* are Sylhetis [my italics]. They all stick together [. . .] they think they are back in the village. Most of them have jumped ship. [. . .] They have menial jobs on the ship, doing donkey work, or they stow away like rats in the hold [. . .] And you see, to a white person, *we* are all the same: dirty little monkeys all in the same monkey clan [my italics]. But these people are peasants. Uneducated. Illiterate. Close-minded. Without ambition. (28)

Chanu's outlook here is best explained by way of a passage in *White Skin, Black Masks,* where Frantz Fanon recalls an incident in which a frightened young white boy points at him, proclaiming repeatedly: 'Look, a Negro!' Fanon recounts the impact the incident has upon him: '[m]y body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning [. . .] the Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly.'[311] Fanon stresses the conflict between the inner "self" and the external socially-constructed "self" that is bestowed by the "white" world of social normativity. The "white" gaze is as inescapable as the "black" skin, such that "the other" is recognised, recognisable and incapable of recreating different circumstances. In *Brick Lane*, Chanu is the terrified little boy who points out at himself as "the other". His otherness frightens him as he adopts the "white" gaze against his Bangladeshi self, by which he believes his Bangladeshi self to be a peasant self, illiterate, close-minded and without ambition.

In his conversations with Dr. Azad, with whom Chanu identifies himself ('we intellectuals must stick together'), (35) he protests: '[t]hese *people here* didn't know the difference between me, who stepped off an aeroplane with a degree certificate, and the peasants who jumped off the boat possessing only the lice on their heads [my italics]'. (34) The last two passages express potent emotions of self-loathing that are usually inherent in a postcolonial trauma. Chanu seems to represent the perfect mimicry of the Englishman, with

his display of signs that symbolise colonial power; for example, he is seen throughout the novel studying and quoting literary references such as Shakespeare, symbols that are intended to associate himself with the British educated elite.[312] (92, 112, 257) He believes that his education must grant him access to English culture because he is different from the rest of the "peasant" Bangladeshi community. This part of Chanu's divided consciousness resembles, to a certain extent bearing in mind a crucial difference, V. S. Naipaul's Ralph Singh in his relationship with the coloniser's culture in *The Mimic Men* (1969). Ralph is a former politician of Isabella, a tropical Island, who is exiled in London, who, having the advantage of narrating his story in retrospect, is aware, *unlike Chanu*, of the irony and alienation they both experience: '[w]e pretended to be real, to be learning, to be preparing ourselves for life, we mimic men of the New World, one unknown corner of it with all its reminders of the corruption that comes to the new'.[313] As Bhabha argues, the challenge of identity in the migrant figure becomes further complicated by means of this mimetic practice, in whose course reality is replaced with the misleading alteration of self-representation that results from identifying with the coloniser "other".[314]

Nonetheless, the last two extracts quoted from the novel reveal an ideological ambivalence in the way Chanu's dilemma is represented. On the one hand, the text's effort to reveal the predicament of the postcolonial migrant figure, Chanu in this case, is successful and laudable. On the other hand, these passages, and many similar ones in the novel, provide an account of the Bangladeshi community given by the character of Chanu who is a trusted insider. In order to affiliate with the character of Chanu, the reader presumably believes what he says. It is in this indirect way that the narrative disseminates stereotypes and misconceptions, and shapes the perception of the Bangladeshi community, which is primarily

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[311] Fanon Frantz, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. by Charles Lam Makmann (London: Pluto, 1967), 112-3.
[312] It is this kind of characterisation that Hiddleston refers to as 'caricature', 'weak' or 'hazy'. By having Chanu identify with the British elite through quoting Shakespeare, Ali is using a cliché after all.
[313] V. S. Naipaul, *The Mimic Men* (London: Penguin, 1969), 118.

characterised as peasant, illiterate, close-minded, and without ambition. Chanu's alienation from the Bangladeshi "self" subscribes to a discourse that homogenises ideas and sweeping generalisations in a multicultural environment. On first look, the text seems to draw attention to issues pertaining to the dynamics of social perception in a multicultural environment: the disempowerment and alienation caused by the dominant part of society ('people here') that negates the individual identity located in a foreign culture in favour of a communal identity. However, for Chanu's failure to integrate is ultimately blamed on his character and not on the host society, particularly if contrasted with his wife's successful integration story.[315] In this case, Chanu's self-loathing remarks are not portrayed as a result of notions that homogenise communities based on race, ethnicity and religion; instead his predicament ultimately passes in the narrative as a character flaw.

To Chanu's mind, his attempts as an individual to stand out and become a success are predestined to fail not by social misconceptions and prejudices but by the fact that his Bangladeshi compatriots are a stigma. In other words, the blame for the homogenisation and generalisation of the migrant as just "the same" as his compatriots is presented as not being the work of the host, "white", community, but rather the migrant himself. In *Brick Lane*, Chanu's lack of success translates itself into a self-hatred – "self" here referring to the Bangladeshi "self", and, it is Chanu who extends this hatred to the apparent selfhood of the Bangladeshi community. In a darkly comic sense, instead of fighting social prejudice and clichés, he directs his anger towards his own community, blaming their "tainted" existence for his failure.

From one perspective, Chanu's alienation from the Bangladeshi "self" could be viewed as the result of homogenising ideas and sweeping generalisations in a multicultural environment – that, under the influence of ideologies that categorise "alien" bodies and

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[314] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 85-88.

promote standardised images of cultural/ethnic communities, Chanu tricks himself into believing that he is a victim of his own people, the "peasants". Chanu is thus disempowered as a migrant figure; unaware of his divided consciousness and self-loathing, his alienation in the text does not really highlight the predicament of the migrant figure in a constructive image, it rather presents Chanu as a comically deluded immigrant with self-esteem issues,[316] whose failure to "make it" is entirely a product of his own making.

Chanu's economic issue, his failure to attain a job based on his education credentials, is an example of a common problem that immigrants face in the host culture: when the skills learned in the home country are devalued in the host market. Chanu is alienated from his intellect since he cannot use it. He is instead forced to take up jobs that are very much beneath his skill level, such as that of driving a taxi. The narrative seems to touch upon this matter yet, again, it simultaneously shifts the blame from the host society to the immigrant character.

The successful assimilation story of Nazneen highlights by contrast the failure of Chanu's. The novel, as established earlier, is not short on highlighting Chanu's migrant predicament of not being able to secure a job in the host society that is suitable to his level of education. Similarly, the uneducated character of Nazneen encapsulates the alienation of the violent discourses imposed on migrant women from within the community.[317] So, we reach the conclusion that the text demonstrates, in a variety of ways, the alienation of these characters. However, while Chanu fails to assimilate and returns to Bangladesh, Nazneen succeeds in "making it" in the UK. Although this might appear to be benignly democratic, the

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[315] The comparison between Chanu's and Nazneen's assimilation narratives will follow shortly.

[316] For example, he writes a short story that he titles 'A Prince Among Peasants', presumably inspired by his own experience. He sends this story to a journal, which the editors decline: '[w]e are most interested in your story [. . .]. But unfortunately it is not suitable for our publication'. Ali, *Brick Lane*, 42. Ironically, or not, Chanu cherishes the reply letter as if it is a testimony to his literary prowess, or one of his finer accomplishments, as he proudly asserts, '"[i]t was a nice letter, I kept it somewhere"'.

[317] The violent discourses are discussed later in the chapter and they are patriarchal and community pressure related.

novel ends with this line that actually functions more as a statement that encapsulates the underlying ideological outlook of the novel, if we strip the ambivalence characterising the representational politics of the narrative. In the last line the protagonist is portrayed approaching the skating ring wearing a sari. She states: '"[b]ut you can't skate in a sari'" and her friend replies '"[t]his is England"' to which the protagonist emphasises '"[y]ou can do whatever you like"'. (492) This suggests that the environment of England is one of freedom and opportunity, and that failure in this society is down to a person's inability to engage with such freedom and to grasp such opportunities. In this instance, the crisis of the migrant figure is reduced to the crisis of the individual – the migrant subjectivity becomes the determining factor for assimilation – and the nature of the crisis lies less in the economic, political, and social conditions of society itself than in the character's *desire* to "make it" in the adopted country. To sum up the ideological ambivalence in this example: *Brick Lane* has indeed something to say about the job insecurity faced by educated migrants like Chanu, which the reader learns is a tough and difficult situation; nevertheless, his character is the sole reason for his failure to assimilate – had he the *desire* to "make it", it would have been possible.

Desire constitutes the individual agency that defines the migrant subjectivity in the text. This kind of agency is central to understanding the binary of Nazneen's and Chanu's characters as emblematic of the ideological ambivalence in the text. According to *Brick Lane*, successful assimilation is simply a matter of desire; individual initiative and the sheer force of will magically cancel out the institutional constraints, and the dominant relations of oppression are substituted with the notion of unacceptable character flaws. In fact, all of the texts examined in this thesis define agency through this limited notion of choice, and, as such, these texts reinscribe assimilation as an individual desire rather than treating it as an inseparable part of a complex social, economic, and political network.

The lack of structural support systems for Chanu in his long periods of unemployment seem to be insignificant next to the factor of desire – though it is the host society's undervaluing of his intellectual ability that alienates Chanu from his aspirations, his character is implicitly blamed for not having the adequate *desire* required to attain them. This idea becomes crystal clear when his uneducated wife "makes it" at the end of the novel; and her success is emphasised by its juxtaposition with his failure. While appearing to address important social issues – such as Chanu's alienation from the job market – the author, by ignoring the wider relations of power in the host society, ends up indirectly reinforcing the white privileging ideologies that cause such issues in the first place. *Brick Lane* produces a plentitude of sites where similar ideological ambivalence define the identity performance of the characters, and this will be analysed throughout the chapter.

IV.5 Nazneen and Razia in the "Reproductive Sphere"

Home, the flat in Brick Lane of Tower Hamlets, is the world of the character Nazneen. Imported by Chanu as the 'unspoilt girl [. . .]. From the village', Nazneen's purpose, by implication, is to import along with her the 'unspoilt' domestic-life of Bangladesh.[318] The community of *Brick Lane*, as an ethnic enclave, is defined within the lines of moral panic between the immigrants of the community (predominantly Bangladeshis) and the host society (the British) – this is demonstrated in the text through the conflict between the aforementioned groups of 'Lion Hearts' and 'Bengal Tigers'. The Bangladeshi community is itself organised along national, ethnic, and racialised lines. These lines establish exclusionary definitions of belonging, of devout and absolute demarcation of "self" and "other". Many feminists address with concern the ways in which women are positioned within these definitions as a resource for the politics of cultural reproduction. For instance, in her article,

"Birth, Belonging and Migrant Mothers: Narratives of Reproduction in Feminist Migration Studies", Irene Gedalof uses the term 'reproductive sphere' in order to refer to 'both the embodied work of mothering, such as childbirth and childcare, and the work of reproducing cultures and structures of belonging, such as the passing on of culturally specific histories and traditions regarding food, dress, family and other inter-personal relationships'.[319] Nazneen's character is grounded in the 'reproductive sphere' of the Bangladeshi identity in her community. Re-grounded in *Brick Lane*, the text exposes the ways in which migrant women undergo an oppressive patriarchal discourse of duty and obligation in order to re-create patterns of cultural connection, to re-make "home" through performing the familiar discourse of domesticity. Similar to all the other female characters in the text,[320] the protagonist Nazneen is depicted as an alienated woman who is confined within the walls of her apartment and immersed in knitting the emotional and material work of "homing": the acts of cooking, cleaning and taking care of the family.

Theoretical work by postcolonial and diasporic feminists such as Sara Ahmed, Irene Gedalof, Avtar Brah, and Aleksandra Alund expose the 'violent' discourse in which the 'female body', as a symbolic representation of women's activities, is repeatedly appropriated as a marker of national, racial, religious, and ethnic communities in dominant discourses of identity. The 'female body' in the context of *Brick Lane* is employed within a particular discourse that Sara Ahmed calls 'stasis and fixity' and that Avtar Brah terms as 'staying put'.[321] While 'staying put' refers to the narrative of re-enacting the memory of the nation in the new home through the 'reproductive sphere', Ahmed's concept of 'stasis and fixity'

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[318] Ali, *Brick Lane*, 22.
[319] Irene Gedalof, "Birth, Belonging and Migrant Mothers: Narratives of Reproduction in Feminist Migration Studies," *Feminist Review*, no. 93 (2009), 81.
[320] All the females characters are depicted as confined to the home, only Razia and Nazneen towards the end of the novel manage to get out of this categorization.
[321] Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 2006), 178.

associates this 'reproductive sphere' with 'the stasis of being'[322] – which negatively impacts on the process of a woman's becoming in the new culture and stands in her way of negotiating an identity across cultures. Therefore, in the role assigned to and imposed upon them, women in the diasporic community are positioned as the 'sacred' body of the nation, and, as such, this body must never be altered. Consequently,

> by associating the female body with community origins, many identity narratives position 'Woman' as 'place', as the pure space of 'home' in which tradition is preserved from outside contamination […]. Hence, we have the heightened salience of the forcible displacement of women in the context of ethnic conflict.[323]

In *Brick Lane* Nazneen and the female migrant characters represent the safety and stability of "home". In light of the last quotation, it becomes clear why their attempts to change the discourse of 'staying put' are vehemently opposed not only by the male characters but also by the community as a whole. We learn that the Bangladeshi community of *Brick Lane* does not only condemn women who try to liberate themselves from the discourse of 'stasis and fixity', but also bears them responsible for male infidelity and any subsequent destruction of the family. Ali's text features the story of Jorina, who, after prolonged suffering caused by community pressure, is pushed into committing suicide by throwing herself from the sixteenth floor. Jorina who was trying to keep her work in the garment factory a secret was unsuccessful as the news leaked out to the community, in which '[gossip]

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[322] Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 89.
[323] Irene Gedalof, "Taking (a) Place: Female Embofiment and the Re-Grounding of Community," *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration*, ed. by Claudia Castñeda, Sara Ahmed, Anne-Marie Fortier and Mimi Sheller (Oxrofd; New York: Berg Publishers, 2003), 95.

is the Bangla sport' and 'spreading rumours is [the] national pastime'.[324] Jorina, under scrutiny and harsh criticism, in the gossip circles of the Bangladeshi community, is intensely alienated to a suicidal degree. Mrs. Islam convicts Jorina for working; Mrs. Islam sanctimoniously illustrates: '[s]he started work, and everyone said, "he cannot feed her." [. . .] he was ashamed [. . .] he became reckless and started going out with other women. So Jorina has brought shame on them all'. (97) Even after her death, which is a testimony to the 'the heightened salience of the forcible displacement of women', Jorina's funeral is turned into a moral lesson for those who might dare to follow in her steps. Mrs. Islam unsympathetically preaches to Nazneen and Razia: '[m]ixing with all sorts: Turkish, English, Jewish. All sorts. I am not old-fashioned [. . .]. But if you mix with all these people, even if you are good people, you have to give up your culture to accept theirs. That's how it is'. (29) According to Mrs. Islam, if the female migrant "accepts" other cultures, she is not only giving up hers but she is also contaminated and thereby contaminating.

Taking into consideration Gedalof's idea and Mrs. Islam's comments, we develop an understanding of the dominant discourse of identity in the community of *Brick Lane.* Mrs. Islam's character stands as a representative of the static and monolithic cultural and Islamic fatalism in the community that pushes Jorina to kill herself. Therefore, it seems that assimilation or cultural diversity is generally doomed by the morality of the community. The story of Jorina also constitutes another example of ideological ambivalence: although the text reveals the predicament of the female migrant in an ethnic enclave – the community pressure and the patriarchal discourse of oppression – the narrative disseminates stereotypical images and sweeping generalisations about the Bangladeshi community of *Brick Lane*. In the world of the novel the Bangladeshi community oppresses women, isolates its diaspora from other cultural influences and does not accept the "other". The use of the feminist discourse here

[324] Ali, *Brick Lane*, 126-6.

explains the depiction of the community in such a way justifying Ali's representation of the community. However, there is an absence or a lack of variation on the treatment of women in the community depicted in *Brick Lane*. The narrative homogenises this treatment of women as if it is necessarily the case in the migrant Bangladeshi community.

Brick Lane's plot is a familiar story in mainstream migration literature, one that is often criticised for perpetuating the gendered misperception of the predominance of the male-breadwinner model. Evangelia Tastsoglou and Alexandra Dobrowolsky criticise this kind of story line:

> The story typically unfolds as follows: you have an active male pioneer who sets out to a new land and he is then followed by the passive and dependent family that consists of the wife who comes to look after the children and be the caregiver so that the husband can continue to be the breadwinner. These are often racist assumptions.[325]

Although *Brick Lane* initially starts with such a story line, the narrative appears to challenge this cliché. The narrative appears to deconstruct such familiar racist assumptions, and further works to scandalise the gender-based hierarchy of the breadwinner. Throughout the text, the husbands reject their wives' requests to learn English or to work outside the house. Thereby, men do not only restrict the women migrants' activities to the "reproductive sphere", but also they minimise their contact with the host society to nearly nothing. Nonetheless, through the characters of Razia and Nazneen the text reveals that the female migrant is capable of destabilising the discourse of the male-dominant identity of the migrant community.

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[325] Evangelia Tastsoglou and Alexandra Dobrowolsky, *Women Migration and Citizenship: Making Local National and Transnational Connections* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), 19.

Razia is driven mad by her husband '"[t]hat son-of-a-bitch!"' who works all day and night and keeps her locked up inside.[326] She says: '"[i[f I get a job, he will kill me. He will kill me kindly, just one slit across here. That's the sort of man he is"'. By merely requesting aspects of self-determination, the text's female characters destabilise the male bread-winner / pioneer model. They go further by actually challenging male orders and enacting such aspirations in any case. Razia defies his orders, often sneaking outside the house in order to take English classes at college and to search for job opportunities. For most of the novel, she is depicted as a working woman, not in a sari but always, '[s]ince gaining her British passport', wearing 'a sweatshirt with a large Union Jack printed on the front [. . .] paired [. . .] with brown elastic waisted trousers'. (188) Such clothing symbolically reflects both a progressive assimilation into the British society (her Union flag sweatshirt) and a potent rebellion against the gender-based prejudice that was inflicted by the community and the husband (the trousers). The community looks down at Razia and condemns her transformation. Razia challenges what the text portrays as the bigotry of her community: '"Oh yes. I don't need anyone. I live like the English"'. (358)

However, it should be noted that Razia's liberation/assimilation presents the reader with an uncritical view of the host society as the text suggests that assimilation is contingent upon desire and nothing more. Once the male oppressor is dead Razia symbolically wears the Union Jack hoody and becomes 'like the English'. This is an over simplified view of negotiating the female migrant identity in the host society. And Ali's challenging of the male bread-winner cliché is also somewhat weakened by the way her character's liberation comes about. Although Razia is a female migrant character who has the desire to liberate and reinvent herself, her emancipation is enabled by the death of her husband. Razia's alienation is not resolved via her own narrative of rebellion or integration, but instead at the hands of the

[326] Ali, *Brick Lane*, 123.

author, who interjects into the plot the death of the oppressive male authority. Her husband's death takes the form of the symbolically redemptive and horrifying image of seventeen frozen cows falling on him during work; upon learning of this, Razia's mouth 'twitched', probably to conceal a hidden smile, as she groans: '"I can get that job now. No slaughter man to slaughter me now"'. (139) As such, although the text attempts to empower the female migrant figure, the delivery of this aim is not developed in the narrative; it is by way of an external incident, an almost random occurrence, that the female self is liberated here, rather than an engagement with a discourse of integration or negotiation of identity within the narrative development of a character like Razia.

The character of Nazneen, on the other hand, represents the female-migrant foray into self-determination within the constraints of a male-dominant immigrant community that is rooted in traditional morality. The characterisation of Nazneen is 'one woman's attempt to negotiate the tensions, dissonances and ambiguities in the relationships among culture, religion and gender'.[327] It is essential to the analysis of this character to understand the ideological framework in which Nazneen was raised. From the moment of this character's birth in Bangladesh, the reader is given the sense that there is a miserable helplessness that haunts Nazneen's life. Her mother, Rupban, mistook labour for 'indigestion' as she was giving birth to her. (11) Moments after Nazneen is born, very weak and feeble, Beansa, the midwife, is preparing to 'wash and dress her up for burial'. (13) As she is trying to breathe, Nazneen's 'yowl' is interpreted as 'a death rattle' (13) – a significant allegory of Nazneen negotiating an identity in a new world, and it recalls the time in which she collapses from nervous exhaustion. After 'God has called her [Nazneen] back to earth,' (13) Rupban refuses to take Nazneen to the hospital, because 'we must not stand in the way of fate. Whatever happens, I accept it. And my child must not waste energy fighting against Fate'. (14) The

[327] Mackenzie, "Relational Autonomy," 103.

third-person narrator reveals that young Nazneen not even once questions this logic that left her survival to "fate"; she grows up believing that fate decides what happens and one should not question that. '[N]othing could be changed, everything had to be born' is the 'mantra' that rules Nazneen's being. (16) Thus, as with everything else in her life, Nazneen accepts her father's arrangement to marry her off to a man twenty years her senior, whom she glimpses just once in a photograph and deems to have a 'face like a frog'; an acceptance that consequently finds her displaced to another continent. Nazneen's experience of traditional arranged marriage (common practice in South Asia) might be approached in the context of marriage and migration of women.

Thérèse Blanchet in "Bangladeshi Girls Sold as Wives in North India" says that 'whether [such women] consented to marriage or not made little difference to the outcome. Most of them sooner or later realized that they had been cheated and were trapped'.[328] Similarly, Nazneen is depicted as a victim of the ideological constructs that sustain the marriage system in the Bangladeshi community. It is usually the norm that women and the families involved in the arranged marriage scenario share a culture in which the right to appropriate a girl/wife is recognized – a culture that 'guarantees a husband and his family the right to wedlock a wife and exert monopoly rights over her.' The fact that Nazneen belongs to this ideological set-up (also implied in her blind belief in fate, which suggests a lack of self-determination or belief in her own ability to exert free choice) is essential to understanding her estrangement. Having no choice in the decisions that control her life, along with an ideology that dictates a slave-like system of marriage, complicates Nazneen's identity struggle as a migrant. To begin with – and unlike the protagonists in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and *Jasmine* who leave "home" according to their own free will in order to pursue their aspirations in a different country – *Brick Lane*'s protagonist is made to migrate. This

being the case, Nazneen is alienated from the motivation that supports the migrant throughout the process of negotiating an identity in a new society. Nazneen's inherent cultural ideology impacts her identity-transformation – it remains inwardly suppressed and suffocated in her inability to enact it. Although Nazneen rebels against oppressive forces in her life, she remains incapable of articulating her thoughts. It is only towards the end of the novel that Nazneen is finally empowered to speak for her self and thereby creates her own "fate/mantra". Her desire to transform herself is in conflict with the cultural-ideology of her upbringing, and this conflict crystallises Nazneen's schismatic conundrum and intensifies her alienation from her self, her family, and her surroundings. Uprooted from the village in Bangladesh at the age of eighteen, Nazneen flounders to forge an identity within the Bangladeshi community of *Brick Lane*—one that is characterised as being suffused with patriarchal ideology. As a self-effacing and submissive wife, most of her life in the novel is predominantly foregrounded within alienating circumstances. One can discern three stages in Nazneen's life through which identity-transformation takes place. The first is a time of cultural-shock and trauma, when Nazneen is freshly relocated to East London. The second starts when Nazneen's cultural schism begins to create a conflict within the way she thinks. The third stage is her final resolution to that conflict in her decision to stay in England, refusing to go back to Bangladesh with her husband.

Since she cannot speak English, Nazneen spends most of her migrant life isolated in her flat and completely reliant on her husband, who negotiates her limited contact with the English-speaking world. During her first year in East London, Nazneen is housebound and entirely withdrawn from the place around her. Her only independent contact with the outside world is from within the space of her flat, and particularly through the window. This contact is restricted to the visual observation and silent conversations she has with the overweight

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[328] Thérèse Blanchet, "Bangladeshi Girls Sold as Wives in North India," *Marriage, Migration and Gender*, ed.

"tattoo lady" who lives across the block and spends all her time sitting on a chair eating and drinking. The window is both a transparent pane and a barrier reflecting the protagonist's location on the border of society and her inability to cross this symbolic plane. Nazneen repeatedly daydreams about going over to the tattooed lady's flat and offering her samosas or bhajis, but can never summon the courage to do so. In any case, she finds no point in doing so since the only words she can say in English are 'sorry and thank you'.[329] The relationship with the tattooed lady further reveals Nazneen's alienation from the outside world given that, although trying to access this world through silent observation, she is still shocked and unable to make sense of what she beholds. This mysterious lady is poor and fat, an unfathomable contradiction to Nazneen: '[i]n Bangladesh it was no more possible to be both poor and fat.'(53) Nazneen watches her tattooed neighbour's routine – sitting unwashed and wearing a man's vest, eating, drinking, and watching television – perplexed by this kind of daily activity: '[h]ow can she just sit and sit? What is she waiting for? What is there to be seen?' The reader can understand Nazneen's confusion, as well as her alienation from the place and its people, when she reminisces:

> You can spread your soul over a paddy field, you can whisper to a mango tree, you can feel the earth beneath your toes and know that this is the place, the place where it begins and ends. But what will you tell a pile of bricks? The bricks will not be moved. (87)

One can understand Nazneen's alienation in her confined flat by means of contrast to the world she comes from.

Nazneen's alienation grows inconsolable; it does not only rule her relationship with the outside world but it also inhabits the very private space of her home and it feeds on her

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Ranji Palriwala and Patricia Uberoi (London: SAGE, 2008), 170.

relationship with her husband. Months into the new marriage, Nazneen's relationship with Chanu is fraught with incompatibilities and incongruities. Nazneen starts to suppress aggressive desires against her husband, as the narrator reveals:

> Every morning before she opened her eyes she thought, *if I were the wishing type, I know what I would wish.* And then she opened her eyes and saw Chanu's puffy face on the pillow next to her, his lips parted indignantly [. . .] Was it cheating? To think, *I know what I would wish?* Was it not the same thing as making the wish? If she knew what the wish would be, then somewhere in her heart she had already made it. (18)

Nazneen's 'wish' is an indicator of marital discomfort with Chanu. This wish if it were to come true, it would probably make Chanu disappear from her life at once. Through this passage one can identify the influence and interference of Nazneen's cultural ideology, or 'mantra', in her thoughts. She equivocates about making a wish and reassures herself that she is not the wishing type; she deflects her desire to think about making a change in her life, because the desire itself is understood to be an act of defiance against her fate. Nazneen is, thus, alienated from her own thoughts to the extent that she considers being honest with her self to be 'cheating'. The accumulated and repressed thoughts and desires force themselves into Nazneen's consciousness through dreams and wild imaginings. For instance, sometimes she 'dreamed the wardrobe had fallen on her, crushing her on the mattress. Sometimes she dreamed she was locked inside it and hammered and hammered but nobody heard'.[330] The dream image suggests potent feelings of estrangement and entrapment in which Nazneen is frightened and positioned as being beyond rescue. She sits and recites verses from the Qur'an

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[329] Ali, *Brick Lane*, 19.
[330] Ali, *Brick Lane*, 24.

hoping that it will pacify her; instead, she finds herself wondering about the meaning of the alien Arabic words that she repeats blindly. (21) Even religion, which is supposed to soothe her anxiety, does not offer the protagonist any solace or refuge from the alienating environment.

Secluded and trapped day after day in this 'large box with furniture to dust', 'in all her eighteen years, she could scarcely remember a moment she had spent alone. Until she married.' (24) In her enclosed space, Nazneen suffers from a volatile mood; she is often anxiously engulfed in random thoughts and feelings about many people and memories simultaneously. For example, in one short paragraph she vacillates between two points of time and place: she is portrayed thinking about what her sister Hasina is doing in Bangladesh (at the present moment) and then she interrupts her flow to ask Chanu about a sari, again she is thinking of the reasons that her father did not accompany her to the airport (a past moment), then she remembers that more furniture polish is needed – trying eventually to flee from her ideas by immersing herself in household work. This reflects how Nazneen's state of mind is fragmented as she floats between the two worlds/times of "here" (Brick Lane/UK) and "there", (Dhaka/Bangladesh) unable to configure her self in the current "place" or to connect to a tangible reality.

Even the writing style of the novel serves as a conduit for the expression of the protagonist's fragmented thoughts. The narrative is filtered through Nazneen's view of the world; as such, the recounting of the events in the text is often disrupted with random ideas, mirroring Nazneen's incoherence. For example, the story of Jorina extends over almost four pages with intervals about how Razia looks, how Mrs. Islam is, and what Chanu thinks about the Bangladeshi community, before finally telling of how Jorina dies. (26-29) Similarly, the letters of Hasina intrude on the events; within the narrative they dis/appear as an incursion, demonstrating Nazneen's constant pendulum mind-movement between "here" and "there".

Nazneen repeatedly wanders off in her mind about the contents of the letters, revisiting a familiar face (that of Hasina) time and again, in order to escape the alienating present. She is trying to imagine herself "home" in Bangladesh away from the alienating flat in Brick Lane, in an attempt to escape to another place.

Nazneen starts to identify herself with Hasina's life in the letters to the degree of re-enacting them at times. In fact Hasina and Nazneen are living similar kind of lives across two different continents – perhaps this is where the original title comes in, that Hasina's letters are like the orientalised vision of a world which is made mundane and bitter in the world we see through the eyes of Nazneen. In one of the letters from Hasina, she escapes from her abusive husband and becomes 'a woman on her own in the city, without a husband, without a family, without friends, without protection'. (58) Hasina's deprivations in Dhaka also voice those of Nazneen's in London but with different degrees and types of oppression and alienation Hasina encounters in Bangladesh than Nazneen in London. Later, when Nazneen takes her first walk in the street of Brick Lane, the narrator reveals: '[s]he had got herself lost because Hasina was lost'. Hasina's letters register Bangladesh as a jarring reality infested with prejudice, injustice, and inequality. The reader is informed of her devastating journey across an abusive and hostile world: she elopes with a lover who throws her away onto the street, afterwards she is raped, pushed into prostitution, and finally taken in by a wealthy family as a servant. The text also presents the reader with an Orientalised view of Bangladesh, one that subscribes to the image of what the East looks like in an Orientalist view. At the end of the novel, the reader learns that Nazneen's decision to stay in the UK is mainly motivated by the fear, if not horror, to have a similar life to that of Hasina depicted in the letters. The backward and oppressive "Third World" image of the home country is shared by Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, Nafisi's *Reading Lolita* and Ali's *Brick Lane*. The three authors who tackle cross-cultural narratives of migration and identity transformation seem to advocate the host culture always

on account of the culture of origin. This binary presentation of the "First World" and the "Third World" is a problematic treatment in the realm of migration. In the three texts discussed in the thesis, there is an absence of negotiation between the two Worlds. None of the protagonists, be it Nazneen, Jyoti or Nafisi, attempt to create a common ground and negotiate a hybrid identity; instead, they all fetishise the host culture and demonize in the process the culture of origin. This critical treatment is symptomatic of a dangerous issue: such presentations suggest that "First World" and "Third World" or East and West have very little chance of reconciliation.

It is through Chanu's character that *Brick Lane* criticises the concept of arranged marriage, and it reveals the ways in which it can obliterate the individual identity of women and reduce them to the inferior status of "servants" whose value is restricted to performing house tasks and obeying the man of the house. Chanu's understanding of marriage is simply demonstrated in the following attitude towards Nazneen: '[w]hat's more, she is a good worker. Cleaning and cooking and all that [. . .]. Any wife is better than no wife'. (23) It reflects how Chanu is married to the concept, or idea, of the wife rather than to the person that Nazneen is, and, as such, always rejects Nazneen's individual needs and wishes. Any time Nazneen asks Chanu for something, she finds herself thwarted in his contradictory rejections. For example, he denies her desire to learn English, deeming it unnecessary. (37) Another time, when Nazneen requests Chanu's permission to leave the house, he considers it a nuisance:

> 'Why would you go out?' [. . .] 'If you go out, ten people will say, 'I saw her walking down the street.' And I will look like a fool. Personally, I don't mind if you go out but these people are so ignorant. What can you do?

> She never said anything to this.
>
> 'Besides, I get everything for you that you need from the shops. Anything you want, you only have to ask.
>
> She never said anything to this.
>
> 'I don't stop you from doing anything. I am westernized now. It is lucky for you that you married an educated man. That was a stroke of luck. (45)

When she asks him to allow her to work, he reiterates: '"[s]ome of these uneducated ones [Bengali expatriates in the community], they say that if the wife is working it is only because the husband cannot feed them. Lucky for you I am an educated man"' – implying, again, that he personally does not mind but that it is out of the question because of the regressive mentality of the community. (184) Furthermore, this passage emphasises the voicelessness of the protagonist and the way she is suffocated in her marriage; as the narrator repeatedly reports, '[s]he never said anything'. It is after one of Hasina's letters and Chanu's frustrating and indifferent attitude that Nazneen takes a first step on her own. One morning after Chanu leaves for work, Nazneen embarks upon her first adventure, a walk alone in Brick Lane.

This walk is portrayed in the narrative as a terrifying experience of a woman's journey across an alien world. Nazneen walked and 'walked faster and looked only at what she had to see to walk without falling or colliding [. . .] tears came into her eyes and she banged into a man with a suitcase'. (57) She helplessly recalls verses from the Qur'an to calm herself down but 'the pain in her knees and her hands and her ankle destroyed the verses. *Proclaim the goodness of your lord. Proclaim the goodness of your lord*', she whispers frantically to herself. This walk, symbolic of Nazneen's initiation into the next phase of identity-transformation, that of identity-crisis, seems to foreshadow the struggles that Nazneen is about to go through. The painful experience of walking through an unfamiliar

world, getting bombarded by unimaginable stresses, and feeling alienated by people's faces, the intimidating buildings, and fast automobiles, represents the challenges as well as the difficulties that Nazneen, the "simple" migrant from the village, is faced with.

The second phase is marked by Nazneen's split personality. The narrative reveals changes in her character; her gradual departure from the entrapping cultural ideology of her past, along with her escalating dualism. Nazneen is no longer afraid of having opinions of her own. She is often surprised by herself: '[w]hat is wrong with my mind that it goes around [. . .]. It does not seem to belong to me sometimes'. (69) Her rebellious thoughts are enacted while performing simple household tasks.

> Nazneen dropped [Chanu's] promotion from her prayers [. . .]. She chopped two fiery red chillies and placed them, like hand grenades, in Chanu's sand-witch [sic]. Unwashed socks were paired and put back in his drawer. The razor slipped when she cut his corns. His files got mixed up when she tidied. All her chores, peasants in his princely kingdom, rebelled in turn. Small insurrections, designed to destroy the state from within. (63)

This extract shows the ways in which the text deconstructs the familiar discourse of domesticity as an affirmation of wifely submissions, and transforms it into a resourceful repertoire of resistance. Domestic work turns into a site of mutiny where praying, cooking, cleaning, and attending to the patriarch's needs are the duties Nazneen no longer considers to be her 'fate'. In other words, fulfilling her 'mantra' to be 'a good wife. Like Amma' is no longer the principle that rules Nazneen's life. (18) In this quotation, Nazneen's repressed thoughts and desires transform her from being passive to being passive-aggressive.

Nevertheless, Nazneen's passive-aggressive resistance does not restore balance to her relationship with Chanu, nor does it empower her in any way that might help her negotiate an identity in the new world. We infer that Nazneen's resistance is far from achieving a fulfilling result. Indeed, if anything, this unacknowledged self-expression, as comforting as it may be, intensifies her split personality and her alienation. The text is riddled with other examples that highlight Nazneen's inability to vocalise her thoughts, her suppression of irritation with Chanu:

> Nazneen did not know what he [Chanu] was talking about. 'If you say so, husband.' She began to answer him like this. She meant to say something else by it: some-times that she disagreed, sometimes that she didn't understand or that he was talking rubbish, sometimes that he was mad. But he heard it only as, 'If you say so.' (99)

The gap between what she thinks and what she says is a measure of the schism in her identity. Simultaneously, it stands for the reciprocated alienation between the two parts of the split self: who she really is and who she sounds as if she is.

From another perspective, that of literal and metaphorical translation, given that Nazneen knows little to no English for most of the story, the narrator is translating Nazneen's thoughts from Bengali to English. This act of translation can be read as a symbolic representation of Nazneen's inability to either articulate her thoughts or understand what she feels. The third person narrator reviews the story from a vantage point after the events have occurred, given that the text is written in the past tense, and, as such, has an advanced understanding of Nazneen's character and access to her thoughts. The narrator does not only translate the language to the reader but also translates Nazneen's inability to use language; through relying on descriptions, of furniture for example, that reveal Nazneen's inner

thoughts. Jane Hiddleston's comment on the author's writing style regarding the detailed descriptions of Nazneen's flat interior complements the point of discussion. Hiddleston argues that the intricate examinations of the furniture as well as Nazneen's reactions to her environment are the author's attempt to draw the reader into Nazneen's consciousness.[331] Therefore, it is implied that Nazneen is incapable of vocalising her thoughts, and we also infer by extension that her character is not easily accessible to the reader. The omniscient narrator does not give the reader access to Nazneen's stream of consciousness; instead, it relies on the descriptions in the text in order to enter the private sphere of her thoughts, as in the following: '[a] cracked mug bear-ing a picture of the thatched-roofed cottage and a mouse in trousers leaning on the gatepost. It was a picture of England. Roses around the door. Nazneen had never seen this England but now, idly, the idea formed that she would visit it'.[332] Nazneen does not express her private feelings explicitly – that she is estranged from the new world she lives in – because she is unable to vocalise them, yet, the reader can deduce from this moment not only this sense of estrangement, but also that she has a desire to engage with it. Her relationship with the outside world or reality is through either flat surfaces (window-pane or television) or objects that enter the private space of her flat, such as the broken mug.

The quoted passage also introduces us to the alienation of spectatorship. In Guy Debord's words:

> The images detached from every aspect of life merge into a common stream in which unity of that life can no longer be recovered. *Fragmented* views of reality regroup themselves into a new unity as a *separate pseudo-world* that can be looked at. The specialization of images of the

[331] Jane Hiddleston, "Shapes and Shadows," 64.
[332] Ali, *Brick Lane*, 438.

> world has culminated in a world of autonomized images where even the deceivers are deceived. The spectacle is a concrete inversion of life, an autonomous movement of nonliving.[333]

Although Debord criticises capitalism in the context of modern society in which authentic social life is replaced with representation, his approach can also address the migrant figure, particularly the character of Nazneen, whose life is reduced to a collection of images. Debord explains how the spectacle estranges humans and divides the world into two. For Nazneen, the public life outside her flat is completely detached from her daily private life inside, as her access to the host society is merely through windows, television, and objects. This division created by the images on the TV and of a capitalist society leads Nazneen to a fragmented sense of self. The irony in Nazneen's spectacle lies in its dilemmatic nature: she believes there is a dichotomy between docility and liberality due to culture, which is born of the spectacle that she views through her various windows. The point is that while she believes she is liberating herself, she is actually succumbing to the spectacle. This is particularly clear in her obsession with ice skating fantasies that she whole-heartedly follows on TV. At the end of the novel the apotheosis of the protagonist's sense of liberation is manifested in actually realizing/living this image of ice-skating. This dream-comes-true image is intertwined with the underlying ideology of the text, advocating the dominant culture, as the protagonist announces "this is England you can do whatever you like".

[333] Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (London: Rebel Press, 2006), 7.

IV.6 "But you can't skate in a sari": Cultural Identity as a Site of Ideological Ambivalence

As a migrant woman who is trying to claim her individual voice in a male-dominated Bangladeshi community, that is further located within the larger lines of British society, Nazneen privately staggers in the overlapping space between two cultures. She inhabits two worlds within herself, a self that thus struggles between two ideological mind-sets: the Bangladeshi one in which she is the docile housewife and the liberal one in which she can be part of the new culture, at least in Ali's conception of British society as proposed in this book. Therefore, while her unconscious repressions and conscious suppressions increase, her anxieties find their way out in her proportionately growing tendency towards resorting to a fantasy world. In the following extract, while Nazneen is staring at her image in the mirror, she compares her self in the traditional sari with an array of images of English women, which she briefly encounters on the street or watches on television. She symbolically fulminates against her traditional sari and deems it responsible for her unfulfilled aspirations. The third person narrator reveals:

> Suddenly, she was gripped by the idea that if she changed her clothes her entire life would change as well. If she wore a skirt and a jacket and a pair of high heels then what else she would do but walk around the glass palaces on Bishopsgate, and talk to a slim phone and eat lunch out of a paper bag? If she wore trousers and underwear, like the girl with the big camera on Brick Lane, then she would roam the streets fearless and proud. And if she had a tiny tiny skirt with knickers to match and tight bright top, then she would – how could she not? – skate through life with a sparkling smile and a handsome man who took her hand and made her spin, spin, spin. For a glorious moment it was clear that clothes, not fate made her life. And if the moment had lasted she would have ripped the

> sari off and torn it to shreds [. . .] she picked up her brush [. . .] and she brushed it [her hair] so hard that it hurt.[334]

This extract is rich with frustrated longings of a woman suffocating with desires and consumed by fantasies. In this lucid reverie, one concludes that Nazneen recognises the ideology in her 'mantra'; she is now aware of the fact that it is choice, here in the context of clothes, not 'fate' that determines life. Feelings of guilt and 'cheating', which once tormented her, are replaced by clear-conscious yet strenuous-to-achieve wishes. The agony and pressure caused by Nazneen's inability to negotiate an identity between two cultures is depicted in the self-inflicted pain (the hurt inflicting hair-brushing).

However, the dress code representation in the quoted paragraph draws another issue of the ideological ambivalence. On the one hand, the passage highlights Nazneen's identity split delivering to the reader the character's alienation and identity conflict. Yet, on the other hand, the protagonist is portrayed as both imprisoned and potentially liberated by culturally specific garments. Here the sari, the cultural dress that signifies Bangladeshi culture, becomes a sign of oppression, while the cultural dress that signifies British culture, that of short skirts, becomes a sign of freedom. Given that Western clothes represent freedom and individuality whereas the sari becomes an emblem of confiscated freedom and individuality, Ali gives us a polarised view between the East and the West that fails to register the migrant attempt to negotiate an identity between the culture of origin and the host culture. Although the full picture articulates Nazneen's split self as torn between the two cultures, this passage seems to suggest, and to validate, the solution of replacing one culture with another, demoting the Bangladeshi culture on account of promoting the Western culture of the host society.

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[334] Ali, *Brick Lane*, 277-8.

Although the use of cultural visibility through clothing is symbolically employed in order to highlight by contrast the alienation of the female migrant, it subscribes to and feeds into a fixed paradigm of cultural perception. The ideological display of cultural visibility through the binary opposition of (Western, Eastern) clothing is problematic in the realm of cultural analysis. In *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (1993), Renato Rosaldo problematises the ideological conflicts that inform the play of cultural in/visibility in defining citizenship, and he explores the ways in which cultural politics sometimes erase the "self" only to highlight the "other". He explains: 'full citizenship and cultural visibility appear to be inversely related. When one increases the other decreases'.[335] Cultural in/visibility becomes censorious when it conflates the notion of culture with the idea of 'difference'. Rosaldo argues that this 'difference', although having the advantage of making cultural peculiarity visible to outside observers, poses a problem because 'such differences are not absolute'. (202) Ali's treatment of cultural in/visibility through the dress code in *Brick Lane* is symptomatic of the underlying ideology of the text as it polarises the Eastern and Western dress codes in favour of the Western one. The emancipation of the migrant protagonist is promised with the change of cultural habits such as in the clothing. While Rosaldo argues that such cultural difference exists but is not absolute, Ali rather emphasises this cultural difference through presenting liberation in the shape of Western clothing. At the end of the novel the protagonist protests that "'you can't skate in a sari'" but she immediately realises that she can do whatever she likes. Although this could be interpreted that Nazneen will go on skating in a sari at that moment, a reading of the dress code in the novel suggests that Nazneen statement refers to the fact that she can take off the sari now and skate in a mini skirt as she likes and always dreams about rather than actually skating in a sari.

[335] Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Cultural Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 198.

Nazneen's understanding of cultural admission or integration into British society seems to be made through the concept of replacing the Bangladeshi dress code with the Western one, or in Rosaldo's words by becoming 'culturally invisible'. The novel recounts many similar incidents in which the feeling of belonging to a particular "home" is associated with cultural in/visibility. For example, on the one hand, Shahana who finds London her "home" 'hated her Kameez and spoilt her entire wardrobe by pouring paint on them.'[336] Razia, too, the aforementioned example of the liberal female immigrant, is always wearing a Union Jack hoody, emphasising that she has an English passport and lives like the English. Razia's characterisation, through the dress-code image, also equates integration with transformation into the host culture. On the other hand, Karim's gradual dissociation from British society is synchronised with the change of his dress code from the 'gold necklace [. . .] the jeans, shirts, trainers' into a beard, 'Punjabi-pyjama and a skullcap [. . .] sleeveless fleece and big boots'. (376) The characters – Nazneen, Karim, Shahana, and Mrs. Islam – thus demonstrate a belief in conflicting and competing cultural essences, such as clothing, food, or patterns of behaviour, to which one may remain loyal or, alternatively, to which one may assimilate. Bhabha also opposes this concept of cultural 'difference' in which signs of affiliations are constructed through opposition with others, with no underlying truth that can put an end to their process of significance. 'Cultural diversity', for Bhabha, is 'an epistemological object—culture as an object of empirical knowledge—whereas cultural difference is the process of the *enunciation* of culture as "knowledge*able*", authoritative, adequate to the construction systems of cultural identification'.[337] Thus, the treatment of cultural in/visibility in *Brick Lane* emphasises a static and monolithic view of migrant communities within a multicultural environment.

[336] Ali, *Brick Lane*, 180.
[337] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 34.

Dress code constitutes a site of ideological ambivalence. While the dress code in the examples above does not seem to encourage cultural hybridity, there is another example in the novel where cultural hybridity is encouraged through a hybrid cultural venture: 'Fusion Fashion'. The dress code in the aforementioned scenes equates cultural citizenship with cultural invisibility, but, towards its end, the novel relies on the Bangladeshi dress sense in order to suggest the possibility of cultural negotiation. The narrative synthesises opposing notions when it attempts, through the joined hybrid business venture of Nazneen and Razia 'Fashion Fusion', to present the reader with the Bangladeshi sense of style as a possibility to negotiate a "third space" between the two cultures, as will be discussed later. Thus, one can say that the author's ultimate purpose is to draw attention to the liberating agencies found in negotiating an identity for the female migrant, yet her narrative remains ambivalent as it is an incoherent and inconsistent effort to deliver a point. The treatment of dress codes demonstrates this ambivalence within the text: on the one hand, it equates cultural citizenship with cultural invisibility. On the other hand, it suggests 'Fashion Fusion' as a hybrid symbolic effort in negotiating the identity of the female migrant.

Thirteen years of Nazneen's life in *Brick Lane* are absent from the narrative. Between the years 1988 and 2001, the only access the reader has to her life is through the letter-exchange between Nazneen and her sister Hasina. The letters mainly report two events: the first is an elaboration on Hasina's ill-treatment and miserable, degrading, life in *Brick Lane*'s Bangladesh, and the second is a brief summary of Nazneen's life during this time. We learn that she has two daughters, Bibi and Shahana, and that the family suffers from financial difficulty because of Chanu's constant job changing. Post-2001, the narrative informs the reader of the impact of the 9/11 tragedy on the community of Brick Lane.[338] The attack on New York triggers transformation in the migrant characters and, by extension, the whole

[338] Ali, *Brick Lane*, 366.

community. We learn that the ethnic conflict within wider society that arises from the event escalates negatively and influences the lives of the characters in the community of *Brick Lane*.

> A pinch of New York dust blew across the ocean and settled on the Dogwood Estate. Sorupa's daughter was the first but not the only one. Walking in the street on her way to college, she had her hijab pulled off. Razia wore her Union Jack sweatshirt and it was spat on. 'Now see what will happen,' said Chanu. 'Backlash.' (368)

> Karim became excited. 'Man, they are going to live to regret it. They don't even know what they are saying. Islam lays clear rules of engagement for war. (406)

The text gives examples of the intolerance and ethnic tensions circulating among the characters: between English and Bangladeshis, and Bangladeshis amongst themselves as well.[339] In the second extract, Karim, in reaction to the leaflets distributed by Lion Hearts about Islam being a vile religion that leads to mass murder, threatens the "whites" for persecuting Islam – he becomes incessantly obsessed with defending Islam and this eventually leads him to join jihadi groups elsewhere. Chanu finds the post-9/11 Brick Lane to be a place infected with "backlash", and decides to collect enough money in order to go back "home".[340] The major two events characterising the third phase of Nazneen's life concern her job and an illicit affair. Nazneen manages, with the help of Razia, to bring a sewing machine

[339] It is worth noting that it is not clear from the passage who attacks Sorupa's daughter or who spat on Razia.

to the house – to which Chanu agrees with uncomfortable hesitation and only because the financial return will speed up his "homecoming". Nazneen starts to work from home, sewing vests and handing them to the middleman Karim.

Nazneen's affair with Karim comes at a critical moment in her life, when she feels completely marginalised and in need of a solid sense of self. Karim is a British-born second-generation migrant who, from Nazneen's perspective, seems like an authentic young English man who appears to be the antithesis of Chanu's Fanonian character. Nazneen is enticed by his British accent, Western apparel, and commanding presence. She falls in love with him because she, mistakenly, as the narrative reveals later, believes that 'he had that [which] she and Hasina and Chanu sought but could not find. The thing that he had and inhabited so easily. A place in the world.' (264) This statement highlights by extension Nazneen's longing and desire for a "place" in British society. Through her relationship with Karim she negotiates a connection with British society. The body-connection with what she thinks is a "real" British man becomes both her invisible link and access to the world outside. After their first intimate encounter, Nazneen's sexual awakening introduces her to an array of feelings and possibilities that she was not in touch with before. She becomes 'aware of her body, as though just now she had come to inhabit it for the first time and it was both strange and wonderful to have this new physical expression.' (343) Mixed feelings of fear and defiance initially confuse Nazneen as she tries to come to terms with the new experience.

> She had submitted to her father [. . .] she had submitted to her husband. And now she gave herself up to a power greater than these two [. . .] when the thought crept into her mind that the power was inside her, that she was the creator, she dismissed it as conceited. How could a weak woman unleash a power so strong? (200-203)

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[340] In addition to all his frustrations and struggles, the intolerance expedites his decision.

Nazneen's sexual revelation destabilises the permanent fixtures in her life and disrupts her stagnant powerlessness. Many critics read Nazneen's affair as an enabling agency. For instance, Mackenzie argues that Nazneen's 'growing sense of agency is due in part to the late awakening of her sexuality in an affair with a younger man, an affair that runs counter to her religion and challenges her conception of herself'.[341]

Although the author is trying to empower the female protagonist through providing her with the agency of sexual awareness, the process of leading up to this act by Nazneen is rather problematic. As with the unexpected death of Razia's husband, the insertion of the affair here finds the author override the process of Nazneen's negotiating an identity and self becoming. It seems that the text's desire to liberate Nazneen and highlight the sexual awareness of the female migrant is forced on the protagonist, who is portrayed for the most part of the novel as someone who is unable to articulate her thoughts or do anything beyond the realm of being passive aggressive. With thirteen years of Nazneen's life absent from the text, Nazneen's jump into an illicit affair seems abrupt and unexpected. The protagonist's affair and the decision to stay in the UK is certainly a pleasurable turn of events; its lending a feel-good aspect to the story is what makes the novel and the movie adaptation quite appealing to audience and readers. However, the feel-good factor ought not to obscure that the text gives no indication of the protagonist's character development going in that direction. As Angelia Poon points out, the narrative does not indicate any increased politicisation, personal fulfilment, and sexual awareness in Nazneen's character, it rather jumps into this sexual affair without signposts in the narrative.[342] In a text dwelling on the identity of the migrant figure in the host society, *Brick Lane* does not present the reader with a process of negotiating an identity; it instead delivers its protagonist to a successful end without

[341] Mackenzie, "Relational Autonomy," 104.

informing the reader of the process through which the female protagonist achieves this. Another issue that can also dispute the role of the affair in the protagonist's life is her nervous exhaustion after the affair. The pressure and secrecy of the affair, along with Karim's vibrant-yet-tiresome enthusiasm, start to weigh heavily on Nazneen's consciousness. The psychological collapse indicates that the affair, apart from spicing up the plot, does not contribute much to the female migrant identity transformation.

Nazneen is still secluded from the world outside her inner thoughts, consumed by fantasies, overworked in her sewing job, and exhausted by a demanding young lover, all of which precipitates her implosion. One day Chanu finds her collapsed on the kitchen floor in critical need of hospital care. This mental breakdown is viewed by Chanu as 'a women's thing'. Responding to his daughters' concern about their mother, he ironically reassures them:

> 'Nervous exhaustion,' Chanu pronounced. 'She had a condition known as nervous exhaustion'.
>
> 'Why?' Said Shahana.
>
> Chanu, very briefly, looks unsure. Then he rallied. 'Nerves. Women's thing,' he said. 'You'll know about it when you get older.'[343]

Through this incident, *Brick Lane* re-addresses the notion of *hysteria* and women, established in the traditions of the Victorian era and tackled by works like Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Gustave Flaubert's *Madam Bovary* (1856) and Charlotte Gilman's *The Yellow Wall Paper* (1892). Theories of hysteria commonly concur that:

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[342] Angelia Poon, "To Know What's What: Forms of Migrant Knowing in Monica Ali's Brick Lane ," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 45, no.4 (2009), 434.

> First femininity is inseparable from hysteria because the construction of 'women' is inextricably tied to the act of repression. Second, masculinity is bound up in hysterical repression; it returns in the guise of symptoms that are said to act out perversions that the subject has repressed.[344]

Brick Lane re-enacts the *hysteria* paradigm in the context of migrant women undergoing oppressive male treatment while trying to negotiate an identity in a new society. Nazneen fits the profile of the *hysterical* woman; she is unstable, acting out her repressed desires (sexual and otherwise) through her affair with Karim.[345] She is also volatile and unbalanced, which according to Chanu is characteristically gender-related. Chanu is incapable of understanding the reasons for Nazneen's collapse and he describes it as 'nonsense' because, '"my wife is very very calm. No one is more calm than my wife. She has nothing to be excited about"'. (328) While Chanu believes with utmost confidence that his wife is 'calm', the narrative describes Nazneen during the collapse

> She pushed down into it like a diver, struggling against buoyancy, fighting her way into the depths. Where the water clouded with mud, where the light could not reach, where sound died and beyond the body there was nothing: that was where she wanted to be at times she found this dead space and rested within it. But then she would be caught up in a net of dreams and dragged up to the surface, and the sun hits the water and sliced her eyes and she saw every-thing in pieces as if in a smashed mirror, and she heard everything at once – the girls laughing, her [dead]

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[343] Ali, *Brick Lane*, 339.
[344] Evelyne Ender, *Sexing the Mind: Nineteenth-Century Fictions of Hysteria* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1995), 135.
[345] The text further recounts through Nazneen's memories the story about her crazy mother, who used to fake insanity under the pretext of being possessed with a 'bad Jinni'. It is presented as the mother's mechanism of coping with the pressures of her life. It enables her to escape from her family as she would for days wander alone in the forest and would only return when the Jinni leaves her. Ali, *Brick Lane*, 379-403.

> son crying, Chanu humming, Dr. Azad talking, Karim groaning, Amma wailing [. . .]. (324)

Here, Nazneen rejects reality and finds comfort and peace in the dark nothingness of her delirium. We infer the ways in which the alienation of daily life Nazneen faces as a migrant in her endeavour to negotiate an identity is reiterated in her failure to find her own "space". Hence, Nazneen finds solace in the 'dead space'. Her feelings of belonging are still blurred, and "home", at this point, is the indefinable empty space in her head. At the time of her heightened estrangement, when she most needs solidarity, tolerance, and a sense of being grounded/rooted, Chanu's interpretation and reaction can rather be interpreted as abusive in their negligence and ignorance. His diagnosis and prescription for the problem are different from that of the doctor's, and possibly detrimental, given that he says: '[k]eep your hospital beds and fancy medicines. It is rice that will do her good'. (326)

Elaine Showalter terms the Victorian approach to madness in England as a 'female malady' and highlights the ways in which femininity and insanity were equated in the perceptions of that time.[346] She illustrates how the male-dominated medical establishment perpetuated the Victorian era's belief that females were more susceptible to insanity than men. The idea of 'moral insanity' extended the definition of insanity to include any deviation from accepted social behaviour. For women, this includes what was considered "inappropriate" manners such as being loud, opinionated, or explicit about their sexual desires. Accordingly, in the eyes of her community, Razia, too, is naturally a hysterical woman. She is strong, outgoing, and independent, someone who looks and behaves "differently". She deviates from and violates the mainstream mode of docility according to which women are supposed to behave in the Bangladeshi community of *Brick Lane.* She goes

to college, smokes, has short hair, wears a Union Jack sweatshirt and trousers, and has a career. Thus, Razia is "inappropriate", and infected with femininity and insanity: '"Razia is a little touched. Crazy, crazy"'.[347] Her integration in English society is faced with sarcasm from fellow migrants: 'Razia is so English. She is getting like the queen herself'. Although through Nazneen's 'nervous exhaustion' and Razia's presumed craziness one can conclude that *Brick Lane* exposes the notion of *hysteria* as part of the violent discourse migrant women face in the new society, the novel also present a negative stereotype of the Bangladeshi community in the world of the novel. The idea of hysteria, then, constitutes another site of ideological ambivalence, where the reader is presented with a community that practices a discourse of violence against women. What makes *hysteria* ideologically ambivalent in the text is not the notion as it stands on its own, but it is the absence of any positive contribution or support from the Bangladeshi community in respect to the issue.

While *Brick Lane* registers a critique against the violent discourses and alienation of women immigrants in an ethnic enclave, it ultimately has little to say about those diverse and related aspects of community support and solidarity. *Brick Lane* largely ignores issues surrounding the advantages of living in a community with other people who share the same ethnicity, religion, and language in a host/foreign society. The emotional, economic, and social kinships that usually circulate in the migrant community all get factored out of the text's analysis of the Bangladeshi migrant community of *Brick Lane*. Economically, for example, immigrant communities 'provided the basis for the rapid growth of fledgling immigrant enterprises'.[348] The Chinese community, for instance, and their descendants, 'have one of the highest rates of self-employment among all ethnic groups, and their enterprises are, on the average, the largest among both native and foreign-born minorities'. On the social and

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[346] Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980* (New York: Penguin Group USA, 1987).
[347] Ali, *Brick Lane*, 229.

emotional character of immigrant communities, it has been found that religious organisations 'play an important role in the creation of a community and as a major source of social and economic assistance for those in need. [. . .] The idea of community – of shared values and enduring association – is often sufficient to motivate persons [immigrants] to trust one another'.[349] Even the role of religion, as a source of relief and stability for immigrants, is also rendered obsolete in the world of the novel; as is mentioned earlier, Nazneen's prayers never bring comfort. The characters of the community in *Brick Lane* are presented primarily in negative terms, as part of the uneducated and oppressing force in the novel. Take, for example, the character of Mrs. Islam, who is the religious symbol of the Bangladeshi community in *Brick Lane*, and who is depicted as a hypocrite who takes advantage of her compatriots in times of need, and even makes profit from them.[350]

The community of *Brick Lane* is revealed to be infected with a hostile mood that is devoid of any constructive relationships, solidarity, trust, or bonding; it is rather abusive and diseased with conflict and oppression. We learn that the Bangladeshi community in this novel does not offer support to its members. On the contrary, it stands in the way of female migrants who are trying to "make it" in the host society, as represented by characters such as Jorina and Razia. The Bangladeshi community of *Brick Lane* is portrayed as a backwards force that hinders the female migrant from negotiating an identity. Even if the text is trying to promote the individual agency of desire as the recipe to "making it", the logic of this agency ought not undermine the depiction of the most basic social solidarities of the migrant community. There is no excuse for the erosion or tearing up of social solidarity in the way presented in *Brick Lane*, weakening a valid value system that is critical to the migrant figure in the host society. Within the prevailing discourse of corruption and abuse characterising the

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[348] Alejandro Portes and Julia Sensenbrenner, "Embeddedness and Immigration: Notes on the Social Determinants of Economic Action," *American Journal of Sociology* 98, no. 6 (May, 1993), 1328.
[349] Charles Hirschman, "The Role of Religion in the Origins and Adaptation of Immigrant groups in the United States," *International Migration Review* 38, no. 3 (Fall, 2004), 207.

Bangladeshi community of *Brick Lane* there is no vocabulary for political or social transformation; there is no collective vision for this community; the author does not offer any solutions or suggest any agency to challenge the ruthless job insecurity to resist cultural tensions. The novel ends up giving a pessimistic vision regarding social, political, or economic reform for the community. As such, revisiting the notion of hysteria, the narrative exposes the violent discourse that faces the female migrant figure in an ethnic community, yet it also leaves the image of the Bangladeshi community in the novel at the hands of another problem; it disseminates negative stereotypes and sweeping generalisations about the immigrant community of *Brick Lane.*

This bleak and unsympathetic image of the Bangladeshi community of *Brick Lane* certainly recalls Jyoti's experience of the Indian Ghetto in Flushing, where the Indian community is also portrayed as backward and unable to offer the type of help fit for Jyoti's aspirations of becoming "American". It also brings to mind Azar Nafisi's intentional effort to distance herself from Iranian expatriates in the US because they also represent a backward and oppressive force, particularly men who wanted to take advantage of a young divorcee. In the three texts discussed in this thesis, there is this familiar thread connecting all the protagonists: they all refrain from the company of their own communities, referring to them in negative terms and ignoring all the advantages these communities can and do offer. However, it is worth pointing out that where Jyoti and Nafisi pursue their own individual agency, the migrant communities they dismiss are nevertheless present in the text as unified and supportive of one another, whereas in *Brick Lane* the community solidarity is absent from the narrative. Eventually, what reaches the reader from these narratives is a disturbing image of immigrant communities.

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[350] Ali, *Brick Lane*, 198-199.

In its attempt to expose the violent practices against the migrant figure, the narrative glosses over any indicator of community solidarity among the dwellers. It privileges characters that seem to have individualistic agency, such as Razia and Nazneen, who also happen to be presented, in this respect, as outsiders to the rest of their community. The narrative seems to divide the characters in the community into good and evil, doing very little to question the circumstances that trouble an ethnic community in a host society. As such, the narrative also reinforces the representational image of the Orient and its commodified view as a culture filled with conflict and struggle. The novel makes the "Third World" inhabitants, the Bangladeshi community of *Brick Lane*, objects of spectacle for the voyeuristic gaze of the "First World", affirming to a Western audience an Orientalist image of what a "Third World" in miniature is like. The novel, through the letters of Hasina, also creates an extensive repertoire of Orientalist images that reveals how backwards the Bangladesh of the novel is. This fact alone becomes the protagonist's main reason to refuse to return to her home country. She fears that she will meet the same destiny as her sister. Contemplating the idea of returning to Bangladesh, the narrator describes Nazneen's state of mind as so: '[a] thousand thoughts crushed Nazneen's skull. Dhaka would be a disaster. [. . .] Hasina was in Dhaka but the city of her letters was an ugly place, full of dangers'. (426) Through Hasina's letters the novel propagates the harsh realities of life in Bangladesh. Although it is not the intention of this chapter to contest the distressing Bangladesh portrayed in the novel, the fact that the image of the country is reduced to this representation is problematic. The reader is presented with brutal scenes of rape, abuse, violence, depravation, displacement, and the other psychological horrors that Hasina undergoes. Hasina's world becomes the image of the Orient that is reduced to a homogeneous space, defined by markers that only convey a sense of a completely abusive and dysfunctional place. This controversial, ghastly, image of Bangladesh transfers to the Bangladeshi community of *Brick Lane* where husbands beat up

their wives, as in the case of Razia, and female characters commit suicide under the community pressure, as with Jorina. My main quarrel with the novel is not the simplistic and impressionistic portrayal of the home country inasmuch as it is the use to which this portrayal is put, that is the troubling narrative it is deployed to create. Again, in this novel, as well as in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and *Jasmine*, the narrative polarises the country of origin with the host nation. This is made explicit when we find Razia explain to Nazneen: '[i]f everything back home is so damn wonderful, what are all these crazy people doing queuing up for a visa?' And she would get out her new British passport [. . .]'. (427) It becomes difficult to imagine the negotiation of the migrant identity in the host world if the narrative in the novel itself does not negotiate a cultural position but instead promotes the host culture over the culture of origin. What is presented is not cultural negotiation, but instead the exchanging of one cultural identity for another. Here, the England of *Brick Lane* subscribes to the image of the promised land, as ascribed to the US in *Jasmine* and *Reading Lolita*.

IV.7 "Fashion Fusion": A Sign of Hybridity?

Finally, Nazneen decides to make London her new "home". After Chanu's departure, she starts a business enterprise with Razia. They embark on their creative initiative, 'Fusion Fashion', in which they use their Bangladeshi cultural styling to re-make used items and transform them into something new. Nazneen does the designing, and Razia deals with securing orders and sales. Their business both literally and metaphorically transgresses the social boundaries of their community: '[Razia] got on the bus and went to distant lands: Tooting, Ealing, Southall, Wembley. She came back with orders, swatches, samples, patterns, beads, laces, feather trims, fake fur, rubber and crystals'. (481) This journey into the city, along with hybrid product (fashion fusion), demonstrates by example Michel de Certeau's notion of an 'in-between zone'. In 'Chapter VII Walking in the City', de Certeau examines

how travelling in the city introduces an in-between zone, a mobile transcultural space, that produces a feeling of ephemerality and transience rather than a secluded identification with a fixed positioning within social borders.[351] Although the text does not develop the characterisation of Razia and Nazneen in a way that demonstrates the agency of negotiating an identity in the host society, it is desperate to show that it is possible for routes (pathways) to be privileged over roots. Nevertheless, even if fashion fusion and the walk into the city are gestures towards cultural hybridity, it is worth noting that the places the author refer to in the text 'Tooting, Ealing, Southall, Wembley' are all areas with big South Asian communities. So the characters of Nazneen and Razia negotiate their identity by engaging with other Asian communities in London. The novel is thus still lacking in terms of negotiating a hybrid movement of these characters with the wider British society – an absence in a text dwelling on issues related to the migrant figure in a multicultural environment.

Therefore, the narrative of the novel seems to focus on the agencies that support the female migrant in her new "home": how the preservation of domestic and home-making practices becomes synonymous with not only defying gender narratives of patriarchy, but also with preserving an "authentic" cultural essence. This clothing venture – a feminine enterprise which is part of the 'reproductive sphere' – becomes the symbol of women negotiating limited possibilities in a multicultural capital, illustrating how the quotidian work of the domestic can be empowering, complex, and productive in the public space of identity. This possibility is best summoned, although it remains underdeveloped, through negotiating two cultures and creating a hybrid identity that is epitomised by the phrase 'Fusion Fashion'. However, in the realm of literary analysis, the characters of Nazneen and Razia refrain from re-imagining "home" in the absolutist terms of either "out of culture" or "into culture". Instead, they are in the process of innovatively negotiating an identity in the "third space"

[351] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. trans. by Steven Rendall (London: University of

between two cultures, suggesting how *'*[*b*]*eing grounded is not necessarily about being fixed; being mobile is not necessarily about being detached*'.[352]

Tastsoglou and Dobrowolsky criticise notions in the dominant culture that promote a view of sameness regarding the migrant figure in the community: '[s]ocial divisions and power relations – particularly those based on gender – exist within ethnically defined communities making assumptions of sameness and shared spaces problematic, if for no other reason than the internal differentiation is rendered invisible'.[353] Through "Fusion Fashion", Ali's text deconstructs assumptions that are based on the idea that gender relations in the migrant community obstruct the female from negotiating constitutive elements in her identity with the host society, and, secondly, it acknowledges the invalidity of the classical household model of the male breadwinner and female homemaker. Razia and Nazneen emphasise the idea that in a migrant community the classical gender-hierarchy of the household is susceptible to change not only through rebellious reactions to internal conditions in the community, but also via adaptive interaction with the host society in a 'Fusion Fashion'.

Nevertheless, 'Fashion Fusion' constitutes another site of ideological ambivalence. On the one hand, this clothing venture is Nazneen's and Razia's feminine project, their 'body of work', that can be interpreted as an expression of a creative diasporic gender identity that is neither an imitation of the western liberal feminist subject nor a radical reaction against their cultural identity. Their identity-transformation seems to become an emblem representing new possibilities for the female migrant, ones that are best summed by the name of their new hybrid clothing business, 'Fusion Fashion', forging by implication a new hybrid space in the multicultural environment of London. On the other hand, it is necessary to draw the attention of the reader to the fact that the characters do not actually demonstrate a process of

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California Press, 1988), 91-110.

[352] Sara Ahmed, Claudia Castañeda, Anne-Marie Fortier and Mimi Sheller, eds., "Introduction," *Uprooting/Regroundings: Questions og Home and Migration*, 3.

[353] Tastsoglou and Dobrowolsky, *Women Migration and Citizenship*, 68.

negotiating the 'third space' but are rather delivered to that end by authorial effort. Their characterisation serves as a suggestion of the possibilities through which the female migrant is able to bridge the cultural gap. However, the narrative remains oblivious to the struggles female immigrants face in the job market – for instance, the lack of insight given on how these characters would have actually managed to start their business from scratch. It feels that the text is trying desperately to liberate the protagonist, giving her a successful feminine venture, yet in spite of the new job, all the changes that Nazneen goes through are merely exterior, there is no corresponding growth in depth or maturity. The reader is informed that Razia and Nazneen "make it" but the narrative is really oblivious about and the process of "making it". So, while the novel appears to write the two characters into successful assimilation, another reading of the text shows that we have an end product but not a process. This problem in *Brick Lane* is similar to that in *Jasmine* and *Reading Lolita.* In the former, we also see that, in spite of all the changes in Jyoti's character, she fails to respond in growth and maturity. Jyoti relies on her exoticised beauty and male attention as she traverses her upward mobility in the host society. *Reading Lolita* also manufactures/produces the characters of 'my girls', as the narrator describes them, from the perspective of their own narrator who does not allow them a process of self development. Furthermore, 'Fashion Fusion' is not really a triumph for the female migrant subject but rather one for the multicultural market. The multicultural market place is the liberating agency for the female migrant and her domestic work is the means to reach that market. Nazneen and Razia are able to "make it" because the economy accommodates multicultural enterprises. This being the case, these characters are not liberated from the domestic role of the female.

The reader is informed towards the end of the novel of Nazneen's resolutions. She breaks up with Karim because she realises that they love each other for the wrong reasons, and she manages to stand up against Chanu, refusing to accompany him to Bangladesh. After

Chanu has enough money to buy the tickets for the family, on the morning of the flight Nazneen informs Chanu and the reader of her decision: 'I can't go with you', she says.[354] Why does Nazneen refuse to go back to Bangladesh? There are two reasons suggested in the narrative. First, she is frightened of the ghastly-image of the Bangladesh painted in Hasina's letters and, second, she is presumably pushed by her teenage daughters whose idea of "home" is "here" in London. The text informs us of the protagonist's reflection on going home:

> The worst thing was she did not know what would happen. What was the point in fearing this and that, if only *this* and not *that* would happen? If Chanu filled more suitcases and bought the tickets and bid her leave, then would that determine the end? Would Karim, set on his course, prevent her from going home? What if going home turned out to be just another one of Chanu's projects? A short while ago it seemed uncertain, but how could she be sure? She reminded herself: she had only to wait for everything to be revealed. (404)

Ironically, being vague, this reflection raises more questions than it gives answers. Here, Nazneen's ideas about where is "home" are not contemplated. Beyond waiting for the events to unfold, there are no signs of cultural conflict or increased awareness of what "home" is. In fact, Nazneen 'waiting for everything to be revealed' shows that she is depending on "fate" again, rather than demonstrating self-determination. Therefore, the stark decision of her character to stay in England does not comply with her state of mind as revealed in the passage. Nazneen's character is somehow enabled to bridge the gap between the host culture and the Bangladeshi one. *Brick Lane* recounts in abundance the alienations of the migrant woman in Nazneen's character; however, unlike Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, it does not explore the

[354] Ali, *Brick Lane*, 478.

socio-cultural experiences that provide the context for the construction of the integrated migrant identity. In other words, Nazneen's emancipation process is compromised by the character's inability to define her self, communicate her ideas, or connect with the world outside of her private space.

The novel culminates in the following scene:

> 'Here are your boots, Amma'.
>
> Nazneen turned around to get on the ice physically – it hardly seemed to matter. In her mind she was already there.
>
> She said, 'But you can't skate in a sari.'
>
> Razia was already lacing her boots. 'This is England,' she said. 'You can do whatever you like.' (492)

This scene represents something more ideological than physical; it resolves the protagonist's schism as it fulfils the sexual freedom and mobility represented by her recurring ice-skating fantasy: 'if she had a tiny tiny skirt with knickers to match and tight bright top, then she would – how could she not? – skate through life with a sparkling smile and a handsome man who took her hand and made her spin, spin, spin.' (277) However, the novel reveals that "home", more than being a space of belonging, can be approached from an alternative perspective, as Sara Ahmed suggests: 'the question of home and being-at-home can only be addressed by considering the question of affect: being-at-home is a matter of *how one feels or how one might fail to feel*'.[355] Nazneen in her mind is "already there" skating. This scene

[355] Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, 89.

again demonstrates how the process of identity formation is skipped over in exchange for a swift resolution, and clearly demonstrates the novel's underlying ideology of desire by way of the assertion that Nazneen's desire is the sole factor needed to "make it". The text is oblivious to the support structure and social and economic factors that indeed play determining roles in the lives of immigrants. Cheerleading for the adopted society is rather an uncritical gesture in the larger discourse of migrant assimilation. Whether it is Ali, Nafisi or Mukherjee, in their narratives they all seem to be cheerleading for the New World of their protagonists who blatantly forsake their heritage in order to be accepted by the dominant culture of the new society. Ali's uncritical embrace of UK's dominant culture in *Brick Lane* recalls the idealisation of the US in Mukhrjee's *Jasmine* and Nafisi's *Readling Lolita*; the host society in these narratives subscribes to the image of the promised land. Of course the authors are entitled to present the stories they like; these narratives nevertheless become all about fetishizing the dominant culture of the host society when the protagonist's assimilation is contingent upon problematic notions of desire and is requiring the devaluation of their former cultures.

Thus, though one might conclude that the novel appears to be democratic in the way it gives every migrant character its own voice and thereby its own narrative of assimilation, I would suggest otherwise. By suggesting that assimilation is simply contingent upon desire, as in the case of Nazneen, the text proposes that it is up to the character to decide what "home" is, which is also evident in the examples of Chanu and Karim – especially given that the narrative focuses more on "desire" and less on the factors that lead these characters to their decide to leave UK. The novel also sheds light on the possibilities through which the female migrant can "make it" but it does not present the reader with insight into the psychological or cultural negotiation process involved in the transforming and developing of a hybrid identity – exchanging such complexity for the sole factor of desire. It seems that the novel, reinforced

by the literary form it adopts, is rich with inconsistencies and incoherence. The sites of ideological ambivalence draw attention to the alienating predicament the migrant characters go through; however, their underlying assumptions also emphasise negative stereotypes and discriminating notions pertaining to the Bangladeshi community of *Brick Lane*.

I.1. Alienation and Ideological Ambivalence in the Second Generation Characters

This section addresses the ideological ambivalence found in the treatment of the second generation characters, through an examination of the alienation unique to their position. The previous discussion explored such ideological ambivalence through the examination of how the challenges faced by the first generation migrants, the characters of Nazneen, Razia, and Chanu, affect their inner world and thereby influence both their sense of self and identity. These challenges include alienating economic, social, and cultural forces that they encounter after they arrive in the host country. The alienating factors these characters face are mainly related to the fact that their current place of residence is different from the country of their origin, where they were born and nurtured until they reached adulthood. However, the context is different when it comes to the characters of Shahana and Karim, whose country of birth, and the only place they have lived, is Britain. As children of migrants their cultural position is different from that of their first generation migrant parents. Therefore, it is not imprudent to argue that the constituent forces at play in their alienation are also divergent. Undoubtedly, inter-generational difference between parents and their children, as well as adolescent rebellion, are always present factors that result in this second generation's alienation. However, this should not to be conflated with the cultural clash/conflict within the migrant family – which is the concern of this section. The children's identification with their culture of origin as well as with their culture of residence is a dynamic process that goes through the conundrum of "here" or "there". Their understanding of, feelings towards, and approaches to, the concepts embedded within these terms are in essence disparate from that

of their parents. On the one hand, "here" for Chanu is the new, temporary, location which he is primarily concerned with making the best of financially, so he can then go 'back home a big man',[356] whilst retaining and sustaining the traditions of "there" (Bangladesh). On the other hand, for Shahana and Karim, "here" (Britain) is the only location in which they live, go to school, and interact with different influences, whereas "there" is a speculative way of life, a social construct conceptualised by and communicated through parents, members of the community, and media.

It is from their position as migrant subjects that the parents approach the upbringing of their children. It is through their daily decisions about how to parent – who looks after the children and how, what to feed them, how to dress them, which language to use at home, what and how cultural values are taught to them – that a complicated sense of belonging in diasporic spaces emerges, for the children. The characters of Shahana and Karim are socialised into Brick Lane – a familial and ethnic community, including language, values, and customs from the Bangladeshi culture. Simultaneously, they are taught in the British educational system, which advocates different values, traditions, and language proficiency. Consequently, their identities develop along the lines of dual cultural structures and influences, in which they manoeuvre conflicting social contexts while they seek to integrate both their "here" and "there" into a meaningful sense of self.

> [T]he process of ethnic self-identification of second generation children is more complex [than that of their parents], and often entails the juggling of competing allegiances and attachments. Situated within two cultural worlds, they must define themselves in relation to multiple reference

[356] Ali, *Brick Lane*, 447.

> groups (sometimes in two countries and in two languages) and to classifications in which they are placed by their native peers.[357]

The question in point here is to what degree Shahana and Karim maintain a Bangladeshi self while developing a direct relationship with the British society in which they live. Both characters, models of British-Asian identity, define "home" drastically differently from each other. While Shahana feels a sense of belonging in England, Karim, on the contrary, chases "home" in the abstract sense of dislocation – "home" for him is an idea to pursue outside the UK since he feels he does not belong in the UK. The following section examines Ali's treatment of the second-generation migrants in *Brick Lane* through the exploration of the various alienating elements that both affect and contribute to the way Shahana and Karim define "home". In this respect, it is fundamental to examine the relationship between the second-generation children and their first generation migrant parents, the latter of whom want to produce a sense of belonging for themselves and their families.

In the migrant family, the normal parent-child relationship is disrupted by the various alienating effects and influences of migration. *Brick Lane* demonstrates this in a number of ways. Firstly, to take the example of Chanu's family, the parents and the children experience emotional alienation resulting from the differences in cultural/national affiliations and allegiances felt amongst the parents and the daughters. Secondly, the alienation of parents as "migrant" figures in the host society is translated into the domestic sphere in various forms, which affects their daughters. Thirdly, while the parents lack both proficiency in English and cultural experience, Shahana possesses superior cultural knowledge and understanding of the host society. She usually acts as an interpreter for her mother and frequently corrects her father, leading to a problematic reversal of the parent-child roles in the family.

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[357] Alejandro Portes and Rubén G. Rumbaut, *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation* (London:

Chanu and Nazneen have a direct relationship to both their daughters and to Bangladesh. However, Shahana does not share a similar link to Bangladesh due to her complete physical and emotional separation from the country, perhaps exacerbated by the lack of family ties to that country, ties that appear to be completely severed in the text. In other words, Bangladesh is not the source of personal identification for Shahana that it is for her parents. Since they do not share the same cultural bonds, the text reveals a communication gap between parents and children, one that alienates both parents from Shahana, and vice versa, turning them into strangers at "home". The kadam flower scene puts this issue into perspective. When Nazneen requests Chanu to show her a "kadam" (a flower indigenous to Bangladeshi, here symbolising a nostalgic sign for "there") on the computer, Shahana expresses disinterest. Shahana blows at her fringe and repeatedly refuses to look at the flower, disengaging from her parents' moment of connection to Bangladesh.[358] So when all of them gather in the living room in front of the computer:

> Nazneen put her hand around Shahana's arm. 'Go on, girl,' she whispered. Shahana did not budge. 'Take a little look.'
>
> '*No.* It's Bor-*ing.*'
>
> [. . .]
>
> 'What is the wrong with you?' shouted Chanu, speaking in English.
>
> 'Do you mean,' said Shahana, 'what is wrong with you?' She blew at her fringe [again]. 'Not 'the wrong'.'
>
> [. . .]

University of California Press, 2001), 174.
[358] Ali, *Brick Lane*, 200.

> He [Chanu] gasped hard as if she punched him in the stomach. For a few seconds his jaw worked frantically. 'Tell your sister,' he screamed, reverting to Bengali, 'that I am going to tie her up and cut her tongue. Tell memsahib that when I have skinned her alive she will not be looking so pleased with herself.' (201)

The conflict over this simple act of looking at the image of a cultural symbol, the kadam flower, reveals the clash of perceptions regarding the significance of "here" and "there" between first generation migrant parents and their children. Chanu and Nazneen invite Shahana to share in a sentiment embedded in an object representative of their attachment to Bangladesh, only to be met with rejection because Shahana does not deliver the anticipated nostalgic reaction. Unlike her parents, for Shahana the flower (and maybe the whole process of connecting to the Bangladeshi culture in any aspect), is 'Bor-*ing*' because it is devoid of any meaningful associations. Hence, as an individual, and an adolescent, she is incapable of relating to her parents' emotional, cultural, and national link. To Chanu's surprise, Shahana's response is unexpected and disrespectful, as well as confusing. He disconcertedly addresses her as 'memsahib',[359] inquiring '"what's the wrong with you?"' Describing Shahana ironically as 'memsahib' is a statement that immediately registers a schism in cultural belongings and demarcates Shahana as a *stranger,* distancing her from himself in terms of race, class, and language. Furthermore, Shahana's attitude and emotion of indifference generates fear in her parents who dread that Shahana is going to depart from Bangladeshi culture and become British, forgetting her roots. Thus, Nazneen and Chanu are emotionally estranged from Shahana because they feel she is drifting away and into a culture that they feel they have no connection to. Simultaneously, Shahana reciprocates this estrangement for she

[359] Memsahib is 'A married white or upper-class woman (often used as a respectful form of address by non-whites)'. Oxford Dictionary of English, Rev. 2nd ed. Edited by Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1096. Also available at http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/.

also knows that her parents belong to a culture to which she feels no tangible affiliation. Both the parents and their daughters experience emotional alienation as a result of the different cultural attachments they bear to “here” and “there”.

This estrangement deepens when Chanu makes a mistake while speaking in English. His use of the incorrect expression ‘what’s the wrong with you?’ renders the status of his parental attitude from a reproaching one into a comical one, whereas Shahana’s dexterity in the language of “here” establishes her superiority over Chanu, undermining his seriousness and alienating him from her, in particular, and from the realm of “here”, in general. In the passage, Chanu subsequently resorts to Bengali, the language of “there”, launching exaggerated threats in order to compensate for, as well as to restore, his overthrown control: ‘“I am going to tie her up and cut her tongue’”. This parent-child reversal of roles is an exercise of disconnection and leads to the loss of parental authority in the family, ergo it increases alienation between all the family members. Therefore, Chanu’s subsequent prohibition of English language speaking at home can be considered to be a response to the reversal of roles. It might also be interpreted as a pre-emptive measure against Shahana losing her cultural heritage and assimilating too much. The no-English-at-home rule, however, generates further complications:

> ‘*We* are not allowed to speak English in this house,’ said Shahana, transgressing at top volume. There was always this tension between them. They could never get over their disappointments [. . .].
>
> ‘And *we* are always keeping to the rule?’ said Nazneen.
>
> ‘But it’s his stupid rule in the first place!’
>
> ‘I know,’ said Nazneen.

> When Chanu went out the girls frequently switched languages. Nazneen let it pass. Perhaps encouraged it.
>
> [. . .]
>
> 'So what? What are you talking about? What do I care? I hate him. I *hate* him.' (139-40)

There is a strong sense of alienation expressed in Shahana's complaints against her father, who, in her eyes, is an incompetent despot who is trying to dominate her by isolating her from British society at home. She indirectly challenges Chanu by 'transgressing at top volume', as if hoping he would overhear the conversation with her mother. Hence, language seems to be another site of conflicted cultural belongings.

Language is an essential element of linkage; however, in the text, the treatment of language seems to be simplified in its polarised function. Bengali links Chanu with the country of origin and English identifies Shahana with British society. In the context of conceptualising the process of identity-formation in children of migrants, and its complexity in enabling or disabling a hybrid identity, language is 'recognized as an important factor in ethnic self-identification [. . .]. [It] affects all other social structures and thus is a central factor through which identity formation transpires'.[360] By tackling language from the one angle, that is language as an estranging agency between the migrant parents and their children, the text tends to neglect the role language plays in Shahana's ethnic/hybrid identity. In fact, if anything, language manifests itself as a symptom of parental pressure and thus offers a diagnosis of Shahana's departure from her ethnic culture. The text suggests that it is an "either or" scenario; the more Shahana denounces Bengali language, the closer she gets to

the British society. Shahana as a second-generation migrant adolescent tries to proclaim a social identity by consciously seeking to make sense of her self, her unique sense of personal being, in relation to everyday life. To what degree Brick Lane as an ethnic enclave, in which Shahana is a living member, influences her character is a question that remains unexplored in the text – although as readers we know that Bangladeshi culture is present in her life as much as British society is.

It is no surprise that Shahana's relationship with her father is fraught with tensions and it often manifests itself in the form of power struggle, which prevails in their (lack of) communication. Through her advanced knowledge at school, Shahana deconstructs her father's parental position. In the following scene, she renders his enthusiasm and pride about using computers redundant and outdated.

> On his computer, Chanu could access the entire world. 'Anything,' he said. 'Anything you want to see. Just tell me and I'll find it. This little wire that goes into the telephone socket – it all down the wire.'
>
> 'We go on the internet at school,' said Shahana, in English.
>
> Chanu pretended not to hear.[361]

The following conversation displays how the conflict between Shahana and her father is not only restricted to differences in education but also deeply imbedded in the dynamics of their relationship.

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[360] Hani Zubida, Liron Lavi, Robin A. Harper, and Ora Nakash and Anat Shoshani, "Home and Away: Hybrid Perspective on Identity Formation in 1.5 and Second Generation Adolescent Immigrants in Israel," *Glocalism: Journal of Culture, Politics and Innovation*, no. 1 (2013), 22.

> ‘Mr. Iqbal just sold his flat,’ said Shahana.
>
> ‘It’s these things that make me sad,’ continued Chanu, captivated by his own oration.
>
> ‘For one hundred and sixty thousand pounds.’
>
> ‘Living in little rat hole.’ Chanu waggled his head, and his cheeks were filled with sorrow.
>
> ‘He did *Right to Buy,’* said Shahana. ‘Fifteen years ago. Paid five thousand pounds in cash.’
>
> ‘So that’s why your mother and I have decided [. . .]’
>
> ‘You should have bought this flat.’
>
> ‘[. . .] to go back home.’ Chanu explored his stomach, checking the texture, the density. He appeared satisfied. ‘Good.’ He said and he beamed at Shahana. ‘I’m glad we talked this, father–daughter. Now you understand. That’s the main thing – understanding. Good. Go brush your teeth and go to bed.’ (321)

This dysfunctional tête-à-tête is diagnostic of the father-daughter relationship in the text. Chanu and Shahana resemble centripetal and centrifugal forces that are simultaneously at work, resulting in nothing but estrangement from one another. Although both characters demand to be heard by the other, neither of them listens to, nor acknowledges the validity of, the other. Chanu is explaining why he is leaving UK, whereas Shahana is making an argument for staying. On the one hand, Chanu’s being ‘captivated by his own oration’ reflects a state of self-absorption that indicates he is dictating to Shahana his decision, rather than having a father-daughter talk like he claims. His justification to leave the UK is based on

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[361] Ali, *Brick Lane*, 253.

their poor living conditions, their 'living in little rat hole'. On the other hand, Shahana challenges his logic by referring to what Mr. Iqbal did, implicitly blaming Chanu's ignorance for their poor living standards, rather than the country. Perhaps part of Chanu's anger towards, and alienation from, Shahana comes from the revelation that she has the ability to recognise his failures. While both characters demand to be heard by the other, their educational, cultural, and communication gaps all feed into an enlarging estrangement, where finding a common ground amidst these gaps becomes rather a far-fetched goal.

While Chanu tends to adjust to British society by re-creating Bangladesh at home, Shahana is preoccupied with incremental adjustments that incorporate the external characteristics that she encounters outside the house and acquires from her British peers at school, as well as from television and other forms of mass media. This occurs from before Shahana is even an adolescent, as the following scene demonstrates. During one of his evening 'lessons' on Bangladesh, Chanu says:

> 'In the sixteenth century, Bengal was called the Paradise of Nations. These are our roots. Do they teach these things in the school here? Does Shahana know about the Paradise of Nations? All she knows about is flood and famine. The whole bloody country is just a bloody basket case to her.' [. . .] 'If you have a history, you see, you have a pride. The whole world was going to Bengal to do trade [. . .] Dhaka was the home of textiles. Who invented all the muslin and damask and every damn thing? It was us.' [. . .] Bibi would sit on his lap and attempt through her stillness to reassure him that the lesson was being learned. Shahana would alternatively hop around and lounge sullenly across an armchair. As soon as he stopped speaking she would rush to the television and switch on. (185)

Here, the dichotomy of Chanu and television marks opposing cultural powers. Shahana 'would rush' to the television, to which Chanu loses out—an action that indicates Shahana's state of mind: impatient, unresponsive, and emotionally dissociated from her father's lessons.

Moreover, Chanu, as a migrant character with a divided consciousness, significantly complicates, as well as feeds, the conflict with Shahana. Shahana, who is already struggling amidst competing cultural structures, is also subjected to her father's, ironic as it sounds, perplexed cultural stands. The following, revisited, passage, highlights the way that Chanu's Fanonian contradiction affects the lives of Shahana and her sister Bibi.

> [T]oday Chanu had ordered skirt and no trousers. Yesterday, both the girls [Shahana and Bibi] had to put trousers beneath their uniforms. It depended where Chanu directed his outrage.
>
> If he had a Lion Heart leaflet in his hand, he wanted his daughters covered. He would not be cowed by these Muslim-hating peasants.
>
> If he saw some girls go by in hijab he became agitated at this display of peasant ignorance. Then the girls went out in their skirts.
>
> Sometimes he saw both sides of it. 'The poor whites, you see are the ones that feel most threatened. And our young ones are rebelling [. . .]' On these days it was left to Nazneen or the girls to decide what they should wear. (264)

Here we see that his approach to the issue of his daughter's clothing is a symptomatic instance of Chanu's identity conflict. Both his Fanonian contradiction regarding the Bangladeshi-English cultural conflict, and his divided consciousness between "here" and "there" have ramifications for his daughters. In his constantly-changing state of mind, he is always prepared to shift his code of conduct momentarily, depending on the situation.

Consequently, his behavioural pattern in the domestic space is erratic. Further, his shifting stance demonstrates an entanglement of embodied practices with collective/community identity: how Shahana and Bibi dress reflects not only on the daughters' place within the community, but also on their father's social and political stand, revealing how children of migrants in an ethnic enclave are caught up in a complex network of belongings. Furthermore, the quotation illustrates the manner in which Chanu's oscillation directly influences the daily practices of his children. His reactions to the leaflets translate themselves into what the children have to wear day-to-day. This example identifies an underlying pattern of discontinuity that involves subjecting the children to both random and unstable cultural references.

Shahana's dress code alternates between two styles, English and Bangladeshi, in a fashion that is connected to Chanu's inconsistency, depending on what he feels about being Bangladeshi/English in particular circumstances. Shahana, on the other hand, as an adolescent and a child of migrant parents, rebels against this confusion by choosing her own cultural frame: she hates her Kameez and wants to wear jeans, so she spoils her entire wardrobe by pouring paint on them: '[i]f she could choose between baked beans and dal it was no contest'. (180) For dinner, she requests 'Birds Eye burgers' whereas Chanu asks for 'fish head curry'. (159) Shahana frequently screams 'I didn't ask to be born here'. (181) Always talking of piercing and tattooing her body, she sees the physical marking of her body as a way to express her individuality and to differentiate herself from her parents. Shahana wants to have her lips pierced, '"It's my body"' she says. (240) She wants to get a tattoo. She presented these demands to her mother as a proof that she couldn't be '"taken home"' – suggesting that Shahana wants to get a piercing and a tattoo so that Chanu will be too ashamed to take her to Bangladesh and thus ensuring her stay in England. Therefore, as a migrant father with a divided consciousness, Chanu's identity conflict is inextricably

intertwined with the life of Shahana. When his authority in the domestic space asserts itself temperamentally, it, by extension, communicates, as well as transfers, its volatility to the rest of the family, in a manner that emphasises their cultural difference.

In the representational frame of second-generation migrant children, the treatment of the characters here tends to be bipolar – they can either be culturally British or Bangladeshi. Rather than offering a hybrid perspective of a fluid and flexible identity, neither of Ali's second generation characters can hold a "different" identity, one that would incorporate loose boundaries between the two cultures. Both characters follow in the paradigm of De La Rosa's 'acculturation continuum' of immigrant adolescence, in which he suggests four modes of identity-formation: 'neither here nor there', 'here and not there', 'there and not here' and 'both here and there'.[362] In comparison to other definitions of "hybridity", this conceptual framework of identity is dichotomist in nature. '[I]n the process of translating themselves [between "here" and "there"], some gain in translation while others may be lost in it'.[363] De La Rosa's representation of cultural translation instigates determinacy and forces a border, an either/or mood of functionality, a loss or gain, whereas Bhabha emphasises on 'an in-between space', that is, 'an interrogatory, interstitial space between the act of representation […] and the presence of community itself',[364] a 'space of translation: a place of hybridity', where 'humans are simultaneously "this and that" and "neither this or that"'. (37) Bhabha stresses the negotiatory aspect of the 'untranslatable', one that produces 'stubborn chunks'. (325, 313) They are elements that emerge

> from the constant state of contestation and flux caused by the differential systems of social and cultural significations. The process of

[362] M. De La Rosa, "Acculturation and Latino Adolescents' Substance Use: a Research Agenda for the Future," *Substance Use & Misuse* 37, no. 4 (2002), 439.
[363] Portes and Rumbaut, *Legacies*, 190.
[364] Homei Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 5.

> complementarity as the agnostic supplement is the seed of the 'untranslatable' – the foreign element in the midst of the performance of cultural translation. (325)

Therefore, the 'untranslatable' produces 'border culture' if hybridity, as opposed to the concept of 'dominant culture'. Hybridity, as defined by Bhabha, is 'a constant state of contestation and flux caused by the differential systems of social and cultural significances [...] [it is] the unstable element of linkage'. (324)

Both Shahana and Karim translate "home" through a polarised cultural filter, moving from one culture into another. While Shahana rejects Bangladeshi culture, instead identifying "home" to be the UK, Karim rejects the latter and moves abroad to find "home". Who has gained or lost in this translation is no longer a question that haunts the text: between Shahana who stays in England and Karim who joins Jihadi groups elsewhere, the winner is certainly not Karim. The author does not present the reader with a "border culture" – which refers in this context to the flow of spatial and social practices in and out of Brick Lane, as an ethnic enclave. Instead, the characters seem to be facing an "either or" scenario in their choices. Thus, the text produces polarised and biased images between those who choose the host culture and those who move away from it. Karim is Shahana's opposite; he does not integrate into British society and so he joins Jihadi groups. The narrative seems to imply that the best choice is the host culture, as it attributes negative associations to those who do not, such as Karim and Chanu. In the narrative of *Brick Lane*, we find the following to be absent: 'identity formation among the children of immigrants is a continuous process in which the host country and origin country, both or neither of them, create dynamic hybrid patterns of identifications.'[365] The treatment of the second generation in the text is limited as it focuses

[365] Hani Zubida, et al, "Home and Away," 1.

on only one aspect of identity-formation, that which is related to cultural conflict. It also neglects hybridity in the identity-formation of the second generation characters.

IV.8 Conclusion

This chapter has shown the ideological ambivalence in *Brick Lane* that produces conflicting considerations on how immigrants live, engage with others, and define themselves. If we are to read a novel such as *Brick Lane* as a social and political allegory, it becomes very difficult to pin point what the text is trying to communicate, and this is due to the ideological ambivalence with which it is written. The text insightfully portrays the alienation of the migrant characters; however, it is also complicit in perpetuating stereotypes and misconceptions, even if it bears concerned "messages", exposing the violent discourses against the female migrant figure, for instance. These concerns mask the underlying ideology of advocating the dominant culture while demoting the culture of origin in the process. Needless to say, the text can be read differently by different readers, and this fact suggests the necessity of interpreting *Brick Lane* on the basis of the core context it suggests: that of Bangladeshi immigrants negotiating an identity in the host society of the UK. However, due to the ambivalence of identity performance presented, the text invites a democratic approach to the migrant subject, yet ultimately constrains it to one particular outlook. The analysis of this narrative of ideological ambivalence thus reveals how certain meanings become more legitimate than others, particularly in respect to the notion that desire is the agency required to "make it" in the adopted country. Such ambivalence means that the narrative appears to provide agency for the migrant character, yet fails to challenge the structure of the dominant culture, a challenge required to properly situate the aforementioned agency. To sum up my argument, *Brick Lane* does indeed engage with the dominant discourses that circulate in a migrant community, yet it is symptomatic of ideological ambivalence and political absences. Though empowering the migrant figure, such as Nazneen and Razia, is laudable, Ali's

narrative nevertheless grants the migrant the power of assimilation within the standards of the Western dominant culture, without communicating the process of negotiating an identity between native and host cultures. Let us not forget the implications of the dress code in the novel, and the demotion of the native culture/society in such sites of binary conflict. This being the case, *Brick Lane* eventually marginalises the migrant figure by making them function only within the dominant culture of the host world.

V Chapter Five: Conclusion

Reading Lolita in Tehran, *Jasmine*, and *Brick Lane* are texts that are trapped within a failed literary logic in their attempts to represent the cultural politics of the female migrant subject. While they begin as emancipatory narratives, they ultimately work to intensify the exclusion of the migrant subject within the host society. These texts do represent a shift from, in Paul Gilory's words, "ethnic absolutism" in the context of migration narratives, since they write their protagonists outside exclusionary, fixed and unchanging essentialist notion of ethnicity and identity.[366] Nevertheless, each of these novels depict assimilation and cultural hybridity in fairly utopian scenarios based upon ideological notions of self-fulfilment, freedom, and the opportunities posited to be offered in the host society, while simultaneously eschewing the more radical understanding of culture associated with hybridity. Through critical analysis that uncovers the above points, I have demonstrated in this study that such narratives are thus questionable, especially where a particular form of individual agency is presented as a condition for the contemporary female migrant subject to "make it" in her adopted home. Ultimately, what I suggest is lacking from these texts is a body of valid arguments that deal with the complexity of the female migrant subject – specifically, the negotiation of a hybrid identity in their adopted homes.

In chapter two, "Alienating "Home": Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*", I demonstrated the narrative's underlying ideological contradiction: if the freedom called for in the text is intended to interrogate and challenge hegemonic ideology, such as that of Iran's theocratic regime, then the text contradicts itself, for its suggestion that freedom lies in the Western life style merely replaces one hegemonic ideology with another. In analysing the semi-fictionalised memoir, I explicated how the writing style is emblematic of the contradictions in the content. Addressing the narrative mode of the text, I pointed how the

merging of the genres of fiction and memoir renders the position of the author in the text ambiguous. For the voice that narrates the story is not a wholly fabricated voice, as with the narrator in the tradition of fiction, nor an authentic voice that is recounting real situations, as with the writer in the tradition of memoir. This of course impacts the way we ought to approach the ideological content of the text. The privileging of the US over Iran is made on the basis of accounts of human rights abuses in the latter nation, and the acceptance given to migrants in the former; yet this privileging depends on the "truth" claims regarding these supposedly characteristic aspects of each nation, which Nafisi's meshing of genres undermines. The position of Nafisi as a female migrant author further influences the ideological character of the text. My close analysis of the experience of alienation depicted in the text highlighted the rigid split in the narrator's approach to "home". This split finds the narrator's initial privileging of home as a concrete and material structure, a physical one, shifting to a privileging of the notion of home as an idea, an emotional state of belonging. This revealed how Nafisi adopts the US discourse of freedom and democracy. This thus proves that Nafisi's personal trajectory of transmigration, and the privileged status unique to this author, makes it problematic to generalise her experience, even though she claims it as one which is representative of that of Iranians, particularly Iranian women. In analysing the themes of alienation in the text, I also illustrated how the narrative deploys human rights violations, particularly those regarding women's rights, in the Islamic republic, in order to draw sympathy from the reader. Yet the narrative contradicts itself, and weakens its human rights message, by itself exercising an oppression of women, via the sexualising of the female characters in both rape and Orientalist fantasies. In analysing the contradictions in the text, I thus highlighted the connections between the experience of alienation. And, by demonstrating how ideology is embedded in the narrative structure of *Reading Lolita*, I also brought to the

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[366] Paul Gilory, "Nationalism, History and Ethnic Absolutism," *History Workshop Journal*, no. 30, (2002).

fore the dichotomisation of East and West that is present in the text, showing how the American dream and culture are constantly contrasted to their Eastern/Iranian counterpart.

In chapter three, "Exploiting the Fluidity of the Immigrant Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*", I demonstrated the ways in which the author employs the dynamic nature of the migrant identity in the service of advocating the US as a unique place of liberty; one which provides agency for the migrant character who has the will and desire to assimilate. As I pointed out, the position of Mukherjee as a female migrant author informs the ideology present in the narrative of *Jasmine.* The author's romanticised conception and celebration of the US's melting pot policy of assimilation is largely motivated by her bitter expatriation experience in Canada, and the implied racism she found in the Canadian multiculturalism policy of the mosaic. In regards to genre, I highlighted how the forms of literary representation adopted in *Jasmine*, whether in its *Bildungsroman* or folklore elements, underpin its ideological content. This is because they both anticipate the protagonist's uniqueness in her ability to perform the thematic cross-world movements and identity transformations that drive the novel towards its conclusion. Further, I explicated the importance of Mukherjee's failure to contextualise the historical and political events of India regarding the Hindu-Sikh conflict and the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, both of which feed into important plot points of the novel. Mukherjee reduces such complex historical forces to simple binary oppositions, and instead poses the "Americanisation" of the migrant figure as a simple process that is based on desire, independent of the social and political circumstances that largely interfere in the life of the migrant figure. I also illustrated how the narrative of its protagonist's Americanisation underplays the tensions and conflicts of the fraught racial stratification of American society. Instead, Mukherjee denies such stratification and instead presents a celebratory account of cross-racial coalitions between a beautiful South Asian woman and a series of white American men. My comprehensive

analysis of this idea demonstrated how the protagonist's assimilation relies more on her racialised beauty as a young Indian woman, rather than her female subjectivity and agency. In this respect, even in Mukherjee's attempt to create a different kind of agency, the "Third World" immigrant is still unable to do so without relying on the "Otherness" of her homeland, as well as the exoticisation of the self. And, after presenting Jyoti as the migrant in the Orientalist eyes of the host community, eventually Mukherjee's protagonist gives herself over, completely, to that which is most pleasing to those seers – Jyoti becomes Jasmine, she assimilates because she metamorphoses her identity into the shape and colour of the US dominant culture.

In chapter four, "Interrogating Ideological Ambivalence in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*", I demonstrated the ways in which Ali's narrative, incongruent and discrepant, synthesises ambivalent/opposing ideologies to the extent that it is not clear whether the author is emancipating or disempowering the migrant subject. This results in a novel that provides the basis for producing discrepant readings, and that creates an ambivalent attitude towards the migrant subject's plight within British society. I highlighted the way in which the author's mixed ethnicity influences the interpretation of the text. This relates to the notion of authenticity and insiderness, the notion that the author as migrant is able to give accurate insight into the migrant community depicted. With Ali, however, her personal circumstances of migration, mixed heritage, and location of upbringing, was seen to lead to a denial of insiderness on the author's own part, but expected authenticity in the part of the readers. Next, by analysing the ambivalence within the narrative style of *Brick Lane*, I showed how the form of the text is symptomatic of its ambivalent ideological content. My detailed analysis of the ambivalence regarding identity performance in the text demonstrated that, while the text seems to provide agency for the migrant character, it simultaneously disseminates negative notions and stereotypes of the Bangladeshi community depicted.

Finally, I illustrated that Ali grants the power of assimilation to the migrant characters that endorse the dominant culture of British society, and who assimilate by means of the agency of desire, thus failing to contextualise and challenge the wider relations of power and dominance that constrain the migrant figure in the host society.

In this study I diagnosed the sites of contradiction and ambivalence in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, *Jasmine*, and *Brick Lane*, thus exposing the ideological fetishism of the dominant culture that each of the texts articulate. Nafisi's ultimate purpose of depicting alienation in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is to protest against oppression and, by implication, to call for freedom and democracy, yet her call for freedom and democracy is compromised because of the binary opposition she posits between the oppression of the Islamic republic of Iran and its apparent, sole, alternative of Western values and life style. If the freedom called for in the text is intended to interrogate and challenge hegemonic ideology, such as that of Iran's theocratic regime, then the text contradicts itself, for its suggestion that freedom lies in the Western life style merely replaces one totalising ideology with another. The immigrant aesthetics of Mukherjee's *Jasmine* also pose a legitimate concern about the plight of immigrants in the US, yet the novel only works to serve the US ideology of "nationalism", ignoring problems of racism and social mobility in America and instead suggesting that a migrant's failure to assimilate is due to their lacking an American state of mind. *Jasmine* further feeds into the notion of the US as a unique and liberal place, a country which offers freedom and agency through migration, by way of belittling and mischaracterising the nations the migrants depart from. Similarly, the significant insight into the violent discourses that take place within the Bangladeshi community of Ali's *Brick Lane* do not conceal the text's ideological complicity with the dominant ideology of the UK. These narratives are, therefore, each suffused with pro-"Western" rhetoric, enthusiastically embracing an ideological standpoint that particularly advocates the US/UK cultural, social, and political discourse of

"freedom". Borrowing the authors' words, Nafisi is "very American", Jyoti is "born American", and Nazneen begins to fit in when she recognises that England is a place where she can do "whatever she wants" – it is clear that, rather than assimilation being a process of negotiating a cultural-hybrid identity between the culture of origin and host culture, assimilation flows rather organically from these protagonists. In this respect, we see that, besides fetishising the dominant culture of the host society, these narratives offer very little to empower their protagonists. All the protagonists are delivered to a successful end by authorial effort rather than personal negotiations on part of their characters.

Despite this, it is worth acknowledging that some of the ways in which the authors situate their surface concerns are useful: the various aspects of alienation and human rights abuse in Iran; the triumph of the fluidity of the female migrant identity as encapsulated by Jyoti; the oppression and violent discourses the female migrant figure encounters in the immigrant community of *Brick Lane*. Considered in this way, the texts do intimate, when taken together, the intention of emancipating the protagonists. However, I have shown that these important issues are redeployed and resituated in a manner that ultimately services the ideological content of the texts. This is to say that the authors end up exploiting the representation of these concerns for their own ideological ends. Hence what binds these texts is a mode of operation characterised by the problematical drawing out of sympathy from the audience by way of mis/using these issues, while simultaneously celebrating the West, and, in the process, denigrating the culture of origin in a manner that reinforces an East/West dichotomy.

As we have seen time and again throughout this study, the "form" of each work is inextricably bound up with its "content". Nafisi, Mukherjee, and Ali are first and foremost literary writers: their chosen modes of expression therefore sublimate the ideological content of their narratives into non-didactic prose. In *Reading Lolita*, Nafisi writes a life narrative in a

semi-fictionalised memoir – a style that automatically moves the text's generic status outside of the basic categories of memoir and fiction, such that the text appears to belong wholly to neither. Nafisi's text reads as fiction, but is suggested to be a true story. In *Jasmine*, Mukherjee writes an assimilation tale of the illegal immigrant Jyoti in the form of a fairy-tale based bildungsroman, yet in such a way that Jyoti's journey of "becoming American" as fairy-tale contradicts from the outset the novel's placement within the bildungsroman genre. For the personal growth of the character through conflict and reflection is undermined by the magical (in context merely lucky) interventions in Jyoti's life. Ali also writes her characters' narrative of migration with ambivalence, given that she employs a narrative that shifts registers between realism and experimentalism, making it very difficult to come to a conclusion as to what the text is trying to communicate. These generic hybridities and ambivalences become markers for ambiguity and contradiction in the text. It is unfortunate that the hybridity of the textual form is not bestowed upon the characters themselves, whose journeys, as has been argued, are ideologically stringent.

In order to bring this study to a close, we shall now briefly consider some of the further issues and possibilities for research that have been brought to light by my critical analysis of these three texts. I highlighted in this thesis the relationship between form and content in these texts, and what remains to be asked is whether there are wider conclusions that can be drawn regarding the reasons for the authors' choosing to communicate the migrant experience in such a manner. Further, in regards to authenticity and ideology, we also notice that readings of these texts are not detachable from the positions of the female migrant authors in relation to the migrant figures they write about, and to insist on a clean separation between the two would be both artificial and misleading. Nafisi, now resident in the US, is writing about her own experience in order to address the alienation the oppression of women in Iran; Mukherjee is a Bengali migrant in the US whose literary writing is closely

inspired by her own experience of migration; and Ali is a mixed race British author (of Bangladeshi and British parentage) who writes about the Bangladeshi Community in the real, British, locality of Brick Lane. How does the reader react to such texts written by authors who seem to be closely linked to the migrant figures they write about. The extent to which the demands of the literary market place determine the success, as well as the actual writing, of these texts, particularly in respect to the authors' position as representatives of the subject matter they are dealing with, is thus also an issue for further consideration. Would the publication of these texts under anglicised names affect reader response and commercial success; would the texts, and/or authors, then be more or less open to criticisms from the communities depicted; would the underlying narrative logic I have uncovered be more easily, or obviously, identifiable in such a case? Finally, we might ask what implications are posed by the role of "the exotic", as Graham Huggan puts it, within these texts, and to what degree it is participates in their perception, reception, and marketing.[367]

In conclusion, in this thesis I have interrogated the ways in which *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, *Jasmine*, and *Brick Lane*, as public pedagogies, play powerful roles in mobilising meaning and audience response. They produce important considerations on how immigrants live, engage with others, and define themselves, and, being bestsellers, these considerations are disseminated to a wide audience. This is why it becomes critical when they neglect to address in their narratives how the host society should take up questions fundamental to the well being of the female migrant characters. If we are to read novels such as *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, *Jasmine*, or *Brick Lane* as social and political allegories, it becomes very clear that they are not interested in a narrative of cultural hybridity or resistance, thus revealing the ideologies invested in their narratives. Needless to say, the texts can be read differently by different readers, and this fact suggests the necessity of interpreting them on the basis of the

[367] Graham Huggan, *The Post-Colonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001).

core context that they suggest: that of the "Third World" female immigrant negotiating an identity in the "First World" host society. By interrogating the contradictions of identity performance presented, I have brought to light the way these texts invite particular issues and desires, only to exclude others.

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