

The doubly marginalized female diasporic subaltern: dimple and Jyothi in Bharati Mukherjee's wife and jasmine

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Abstract

The North American land for more than a decade has been a land of luxury, a safe haven of existence and a utopia for opportunities to a lot of immigrants across the globe. Such conceptions act in a reverse way, imparting feelings of loneliness, dislocation and fragmented subjectivity when the immigrant learns to look at the flip side of the American dream. Bharati Mukherjee in "Imagining Homelands" rightly speaks for most immigrants who come to realize this dilemma. This paper aims to argue that such experiences are further compounded for a third world immigrant female since she has to work through two levels of daunting uncertainty. She needs to break free from the protected and "truncated" life of the paternalistic society which she comes from as well as rewrite her present from the vestiges of the past in a foreign land. This paper examines how Bharati Mukherjee acts as a spokesperson for this complex issue through her third world female protagonists Dimple and Jyoti in *Wife and Jasmine*. Both these women have lived dependent lives in India but undergo the biggest "psychological metamorphosis" when they are exposed to alien borders of the United States.

KeyWords: Immigrant, Psychological Metamorphosis, social and cultural identity

Introduction

Mukherjee's *Wife*, is a more distant story that sees Dimple, a young, naïve Indian woman, trying to reconcile the Bengali ideal of the perfect, passive wife with the demands of her new American life. As a young woman who was raised to be passive, Dimple lacks the inner strength and resources it takes to cope in New York City as the young wife in an arranged marriage. Again in this novel, Mukherjee deals with the complications that come from being thrown between two worlds and the strength and courage it takes to survive and, ultimately, live. *Wife* was often dismissed because its heroine fails to make the transition from one world to another, and was often judged to be "weak." Although both of Mukherjee's first books weave complex tales, they lack the strength of storytelling that her later works are more successful at capturing.

The Central figure of Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Wife* is Dimple. As the name suggests, it is the story of a wife. The novel revolves around the character Dimple, Who grows, matures, rebels, kills and finally dies in this novel. Dimple Dasgupta is desirous to marry a neurosurgeon, but her father is looking for engineers in the matrimonial ads. Despite her conventional upbringing in Calcutta, she aims at becoming, "Sita, the ideal wife of Hindu legend". She initially believes that marriage "would bring her freedom, cocktail parties on carpet lawns, fund-raising dinners for noble charities. Marriage would bring her love". Indeed she oscillates between fear and fantasy. Her ideas of marriage are rather vague as they are from the exaggerated art of Indian films, movies and magazines. Arranged marriage by means of the matrimonial advertisements insistently signifies the subordinated, passive role of the matrimonial advertisements insistently signifies the subordinated, passive role of a daughter brought up to obey male authority. She believes, "Marriage would free her, fill

her with passion. Discreet land virgin, she waited of real life to begin". Her father chooses Amit Basu, an engineer who is waiting for immigration to Canada or US for her Marriage. The author has pin-pointed here the dilemma of the Indian woman whose social role, by tradition, is defined by a patriarch ally encoded culture. It is the stark reality that marriages are arranged by parents, especially the father; the husband assumes authority over the wife; the wife is expected to subsume her individual and private identity into the patriarch ally social and cultural identity. Women are considered as properties in the male dominated society. Moreover, the author shows the transitional situation of living in the familiar surroundings of Calcutta to moving to the so-perceived violent city of New York. Dimple is presented as a young naïve Indian woman, who tries to reconcile the Bengali ideal of the perfect, passive wife with the demands of her new American life. As an Indian woman, it is her feminine duty to subjugate her feelings and desires to the will of her husband. She wanted Amit to be infallible, interact able, godlike, but with boyish charm.

Dimple would like to adapt to the very different lifestyle of New York. She becomes addicted to daytime TV shows with inspiring names like "The Guiding Light" where everything "was about love". The gap between life's promises and day-to-day reality makes her helpless and miserable. The sense of identity frames all of her responses to her new environment which has generally of Indians, mostly Bengalis. When Jyoti and Amit discuss "guns and licenses "over dinner, Dimple "thought she had never really been friends with anyone before this, never stayed with someone for weeks and discussed important things like love and death. That's what American meant to her. Further she thinks, "In Calcutta she'd buy from Muslims, Biharies, Christians, Nepalis. She was used to many races; she'd never been a communalist..... she was

caught in the crossfire of an American communalism she couldn't understand. She felt she'd come very close to getting killed on her third morning in America".

Dimple is hardly able to find her space within the confines of an alien culture. Mukherjee highlights the loss of sanity of Dimple as an attribute to her sense of alienation from her won and American culture. Her sense of loss is remarked by her seduction by Amit's friend, a moral lapse that is as inimical to her status and self-identity as it is insidious to her role as a wife. The sense of her own subservience reiterates her marginality, which is further compounded by her continuing frustration in adjusting with her new environment and new experiences. Her descent into madness, in the final analysis is to be seen as both an affirmation and a denial of her identity as a victim of cultural displacement and patriarchal discourse. Mukherjee deals with the complications that come from being thrown between two worlds and the strength and courage, it takes to survive. Towards the end of the novel being suppressed by such men and attempts to be the ideal Bengali wife, Dimple becomes extremely frustrated and out of fear and personal instability she ultimately murders her husband and eventually commits suicide: "Thus, Bharati Mukherjee blends two themes – the upheavals of migration and the unresolved dilemmas of a modern woman in this carefully constructed novel that operates through a series of deft touches and well-observed details" (D'souza 428).

Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989) revolves around a 17 year old widow's strife to comprehend her husband's romanticized conception of America and her parallel quest for identity. The ignorant village girl, Jyoti is married off to Prakash at an early age. Fuelled by radical ideas, Prakash denounces the feudal system and draws his wife into his envisioned democratic world by giving her the pseudo American name, Jasmine. This transformation introduces her to her husband's dream of the American life. Although she shares his dream, it is not her vision. Had she followed Prakash into his American dream, she would have been his mere shadow.

Jasmine is a remarkable novel by Bharati Mukherjee in which she depicts very vividly the hypersensitive mind of a female. It is the story of a young Hindu woman who leaves India for the U.S. after her husband's murder. She narrates her painful story as a twenty-four-year old pregnant widow, living Iowa with her crippled lover, Bud Ripple Meyer. It takes two months in Iowa to relate the most recently developing events. But during that time, Jasmine also relates biographical events that span the distance between her Punjabi birth and her American adult life. The past biographical events inform the action set in Iowa. Her odyssey encompasses five distinct settings, two murders, at least one rape, a maiming, a suicide, and three love affairs. The title character's identity, along with her name changes and changes again from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jazzy to Jase to Jane. Her identity and role are frequently changed and they enable her to explore ever-new facets of herself as she adapts to the changes in her life. They are presented by the image of a hurting stone: "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" (138). The novel illustrates the permeability of the boundary between self and other, inside and outside: "The villagers say when a clay pitcher breaks; you see that the air inside it is the same as

outside" (15).

The premature terrible death of Jyoti's father shakes her. Further, her beloved school teacher Masterji is brutally shot with thirty bullets by fanatic youths of the separatist sikh movement, despite masterji having been a pious sikh himself; her husband, Prakashvijh, was killed by a bomb planted by sikhkhalsa Lions in the central bazaar of Jalandhar, her own escape on the occasion having been miraculous. Moreover, Jasmine was raped in the Flaming court motel in Florida by half Face Bubba. The table was turned; the rape victim transforms herself into an incarnation of the blood thirsty goddess kali, by slitting her own tongue. Jasmine is transformed to stab her aggressor half face to death.

In a nutshell, it is a story of dislocation and relocation as the protagonist continuously sheds lives to move into other roles, moving further westward. The author in some parts of this novel shows some agony to the third world as she shows the Jasmine needs to travel to America to make something significant in her life. In the third world she faces only despair and loss. In *Jasmine*, Bharati Mukherjee has created a heroine as exotic and in expected as the many worlds in which she lives.

Jasmine, Mukherjee's most popularly read novel, was generally received enthusiastically, but there was some criticism that it was too short and its plot too contrived to be a really successful work of fiction. It is a novel that stems from an earlier short story from *The Middleman and Other Stories* and was expanded to a story of a young widow who uproots herself from her life in India and re-roots herself in search of a new life and the image of America. It is a story of dislocation and relocation as the title character continually sheds lives to move into other roles, moving further westward while constantly fleeing pieces of her past. In it, Mukherjee rejoices in the idea of assimilation and makes it clear that Jasmine needs to travel to America to make something significant of her life, because in the third world she faced only despair and loss. What Mukherjee hoped that people would read in the story is not only Jasmine's story and change, but also the story of a changing America.

Jyoti, the vulnerable teenager is nudged on to become Jasmine. The free American society makes Jasmine the bold Jase. However, accosted by love, Jase flees to Iowa to become the cautious Jane Ripplemeyer.

Jyoti of Hasnapur was not Jasmine, Duff's day mummy and Taylor and Wylie's au pair in Manhattan; that Jasmine isn't this Jane Ripplemeyer having lunch with Mary Webb at the Univeristy Club today. (127)

Diasporic literature is strained with the imperative presence of melancholia. This stems from the concept of home. As much as Jase or Jane does not want to go back to being Jyoti, memories of Hasnapur flood her mind. The Trauma of the death of her husband is the principal trigger to her migration and sows the seeds of nostalgia for India in her. However, the melancholia does not evoke any wish to return to her homeland. Jasmine solely wishes to return home. The question is where lies home, and what is home? Is it the physical space one inhabits or the symbolic conceptualization of where one belongs? Jasmine flees to Iowa, and is pregnant with Bud Ripplemeyer's child.

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