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Reflections of Female Sufferings in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* and *Wife*

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Abstract:

The present paper analyses the female sufferings of the characters in Bharati Mukherjee's novels; *Jasmine* and *Wife*. Mukherjee's *Jasmine* is a story of an Indian woman, beginning with her birth and early life in a little town in India, over the emigration to the USA and finally to herself and what it means to become an American. The eponymous narrator in *Jasmine*, also known as Jyoti, Jase or Jane, passes through one situation and country to another and so is her inner self reborn several times towards a higher level, until she finally seems to have found a place to rest. Mukherjee's *Wife*, presents a feminist perspective, creating an image of the oppressed woman, Dimple who struggles with her identity but does not know it. She is subject to the desires and whims of others and has been socialized to be unaware of her own desire for an independent identity. She believes she wants to be a wife, but her longing is confused with her desire for freedom. She is also unaware that such a role will not grant her those desires.

Keywords: Sufferings, Oppressed, Identity.

Bharati Mukherjee, is a contemporary novelist, short-story writer and Critic. She grew up in India and Britain. She was educated in India and the US. Mukherjee emigrated from the US to Canada in 1966. She has taught at a number of Universities in Canada and the United States, including McGill University and the University of California, Berkeley. Mukherjee and her husband, Clark Blaise, returned to the US in 1980. She explains in her 1981 essay, "An Invisible Woman," that she found that Canadian attitudes toward South Asian immigrants - particularly women - had grown increasingly intolerant during her years here.

Bharati Mukherjee's fiction powerfully and sensitively evokes the cultural tensions and torn identities that her South Asian protagonists suffer. In both North America and India, her characters live amidst the disjunctions of two very separate worlds and world views. Mukherjee published her first 2 novels while living in Canada: *The Tiger's Daughter* (1972) and *Wife* (1975). Her difficult experiences as an immigrant in Canada are also reflected in the themes of her 1985 short-fiction collection, *Darkness*. Mukherjee acclaimed joint autobiographical account of her year in India - *Days and Nights in Calcutta*, co-written with Clark Blaise - appeared in 1977. The present paper analyses the female sufferings of the characters in Mukherjee's novels; *Jasmine* and *Wife*

Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* is a story of an Indian woman, beginning with her birth and early life in a little town in India, over the emigration to the USA and finally to herself and what it means to become an American. The eponymous narrator in *Jasmine*, also known as Jyoti, Jase or Jane, passes through one situation and country to another and so is her inner self reborn several times towards a higher level, until she finally seems to have found a place to rest. Throughout the novel, Jasmine experiences numerous situations that bring violence with them. She is not always the subject of these situations, but they are always connected with her. It is not only physical violence experienced, but also mental violence that influences Jasmine's further way of life and forces her to be reborn as a different person. The rough pictures that Mukherjee draws of violent moments reflect the psychological pain that comes with the changes of culture and life that Jasmine experiences. The paper will deal with these moments and analyze them according to their meaning for Jasmine.

Born as Jyoti in Hasnapur, a little town in India, Jasmine is told by an astrologer that she will be a widow at the age of 17. She doesn't believe it, but the man hits her and she falls on the ground, bits her tongue and gets a scar on the forehead. "It's my third eye [...] now I'm a sage" (JS 5) is what she tells her sisters. The pain she feels and the scar will always remind her of that moment in her life, when she tried to run away from her fate. When Jasmine runs to her sisters at the river, she swims a while in it and suddenly sees a rotten dog's body. The stench she smells and the pictures follow her for the rest of her life. Later in her life she still remembers the stench whenever she drinks a glass of water: "I know what I don't want to become" (JS 5).

Jasmine's father dies when she is a teenager. He gets killed by a bull after stepping out of a bus. Her mother shaves her head afterwards as a sign that she has given up her own life. Jasmine knows a story of a woman who burned herself on her husband's grave after his death, so what her mother has done is not the worst case. But having experienced this sort of mental violence, see the father dead and the mother resigned, Jasmine stays strong and takes over the role of the mother in the house. At that point in the novel, Jasmine already takes over a new role in her life and leaves the old behind. She is no longer only a daughter, but she has to take responsibility for the rest of the family. The child is gone and she is reborn as a young woman.

As that young woman, Jasmine is getting ready to find a husband for herself. She meets a friend of her two brothers and later on, they get married and move to a bigger city. Prakash is planning to move over to America, for his former professor lives there and could help him. Jasmine's past comes back to her mind when her husband is killed through a bomb attack in a shop shortly before his departure to America. She has been just seventeen at that moment. The bomb, the work of some radicals, was supposed to hit her and other women in that shop for being "whores" (JS 93), meaning "too modern". That cruel act of violence changes something in Jasmine. First of all, she goes back to her mother's home and they live isolated as two widows for a while. But Jasmine wants to do more with her life. She gets her brothers' help to get documents for a journey to America. She takes her husband's clothes with her and intends to burn herself with them at the university he wanted to study at. "Jasmine", given that name by her husband when she

still was named Jyoti, already has changed into the more modern woman her name represents. She already has turned from Jyoti, the girl from Hasnapur, to Jasmine, the woman who immigrates to America.

Jasmine's first encounter with a man in America, after her long journey through three continents, is that with a rapist, "Half-Face", who brings her into a motel the first night and rapes her. He treats her like cattle, like something he owns. Jasmine intends to kill herself afterwards, but instead she cuts her tongue and stabs her rapist to death. This violent act is both of physical and mental pain, but it again changes her into another person. Later in the novel, Jasmine says she had a man for every person she was, and Kali was for "Half-Face". So Jasmine leaves the old Jasmine behind and now begins the life of an illegal immigrant and murderess: "[...] for the second time in three months, I was in a room with *aslainman* [...] I was walking death. Death incarnate" (JS 119). It is like she peels one of her skins off and appears as a new person, trying to overcome her past and start again. After several steps and places to stay at, Jasmine gets a job as a caregiver in New York. The child's father, Taylor, is a man who embodies what it is like to be an American for her. Again, Jasmine is reborn, this time she feels like an American: "I became an American in an apartment on Claremont Avenue [New York]" (JS 165). That rebirth is again combined with a new name, for Taylor calls her Jase instead of Jasmine. Her new life breaks in two at a day in the park with Taylor and the child, when Jasmine thinks to recognize the man who has killed her husband in a "hot-dog man" (JS 188). Jase feels that her journey is not yet ended, because she still cannot come to rest and so she decides to move to Iowa.

A person's life and the choices they make are ultimately shaped by their continuously changing circumstances. In *Jasmine*, Mukherjee introduces us to the various changes that her novel's main protagonist – Jasmine – goes through, as she journeys from the world of rural Indian Punjab to that of America's Mid-West, discovering her American dream in the process. The author does not shy away from exposing the inadequacies of both these worlds and masterfully explores their inhabitants' individual search for peace and happiness, giving the main character of her novel the liberty to make a more humane choice towards the end. Mukherjee is equally unforgiving when looking at the hollowness of both the American Mid-West and the many social cruelties of rural India, but she carefully uses them to show the changes that take place in Jasmine's personality as she moves from one end of the world to another. The author also does not shy away from showing how each such transformation is accompanied by its own share of pain and, sometimes, violence.

Mukherjee's second novel, *Wife*, opens in Calcutta with Dimple Dasgupta's father seeking her a suitable mate of appropriate caste, an engineer, by scouring matrimonial advertisements. When we first meet Dimple she is fantasizing about marriage, not to an engineer, but to a neurosurgeon. She imagines it will bring her freedom, love, and a more desirable life. Life has so far been simply a rehearsal for real life, the kind of real life that comes with marriage; for marriage brings opportunities that single women are denied in Indian culture, and Dimple longs for those freedoms more than anything.

Dimple worries that she is not fair or bosomy enough for marriage. From the start Dimple seeks to manipulate her identity through whatever means in order to become more desirable. Dimple studied at Calcutta University but is unable to take her exams, over which she despairs because without a B.A. she will be considered less marketable. She is presented as unformed and malleable; she simply adapts and adjusts according to others. Mukherjee presents a feminist perspective, creating an image of the oppressed woman who struggles with her identity but does not know it. Dimple is subject to the desires and whims of others and has been socialized to be unaware of her own desire for an independent identity. She believes she wants to be a wife, but her longing is confused with her desire for freedom. She is also unaware that such a role will not grant her those desires.

Dimple's Calcutta neighbor Parameta Ray, is colorfully drawn and represents all that Dimple would like to be. Pixie is a gregarious go-getter who eventually achieves the status and fanfare for which Dimple longs. Dimple will measure herself against Pixie throughout as Pixie becomes at first a working woman and eventually the wife of a film star. But Pixie, too, is limited in her potential, as she is content being "Mrs. P Bagchi of Calcutta and Bombay" (W 65). Dimple seeks instruction and confirmation for her life through various media channels. She writes Miss Problem-Walla c/o Eve's Beauty-Basket in Bombay for guidance, not of the beauty kind, but as if she might be some sort of guru able to aid in emotional matters as well. Dimple is compelled by the authority of print, but her letters go either unanswered or dismissed, further highlighting her isolation in society.

Dimple's husband, Amit Kumar Basu, is eventually found in the papers; Dimple is not, however, the Basu family's first choice. While the wedding is perfect, it is clear that the marriage will not be. The first of Dimple's series of disappointments comes in learning that Basu is a short Prince Charming rather than a tall one. Her marriage does not turn out her hope and dream. Rather than blossoming by gaining a firmer identity as a married woman, she finds that with each day she becomes less enthused. First her mother-in-law takes away her name, preferring instead Nandini. Then the newlyweds move into Dimple's mother-in-law's, where they live a far-less-than-glamorous life. And Amit wants Dimple to act robotically, knowing simply what to do and say to please him.

Dimple finds herself further removed, now in an even more unfamiliar society when they immigrate to America. She sees in those Indians who surround her further reflections of what she should and should not be. Meena Sen represents the ideal Indian woman, perpetually satisfied with her position and her identity as a wife and mother. Ina Mullick represents the opposite extreme, an emboldened pants-wearing woman who is determined to live freely and to also free Dimple. Dimple sees in herself neither.

Dimple is cast into the world of the "other," exiled, unassimilated, but also unable to fully embrace her role as Bengali housewife. As such she is depicted as a character to whom things happen. Staying home, she is isolated and grows more and more depressed. She is detached and begins to confuse her reality with television. She reacts to others passively, never actively engaging in socializing or housework. She sleeps nearly all day, cooks when necessary, and increasingly watches television and reads magazines while her husband repeatedly inquires what she does all day. Amit begins to become something

of a caricature: at one time he is even imagined as a profile in a whiskey ad; he is in many ways cast as the one-dimensional character of the matrimonial ad. Dimple even has a brief affair with the American Milt Glasser, from which she is equally detached. It is as if the sexual act occurred in a surreal dream world like television. Dimple seems at all times absent, but there is violence beneath her passive exterior.

Before they left Calcutta for America, Dimple had found herself pregnant. Unable to face motherhood, she jumped rope until she aborted her fetus. Foreshadowing the climax of the novel, Dimple had then exclaimed that it wasn't murder, that she could never commit murder. There is little early evidence that Dimple will act violently toward others, since the violence she fantasizes about is largely self-imposed; she imagines her own suicide regularly, compiling a list of various ways to succeed and even using it as a way of "counting sheep" to sleep. Being found dead would grant her some form of identity. But once, when Amit sneaks up to embrace her, she lashes at him with a knife, reflecting how impulsive her nature can be when she responds instinctively to the uncontrollable fears she has of her environment.

Wife ends climactically, with Dimple committing murder after all. She kills Amit by stabbing at the mole on his face, her realities so confused that she is not fully aware of her own actions. Again it is depicted like a dream. She is symbolically freed from the power Amit and their marriage had over her through this violent act and seems to hope to embrace such freedom since she believes women on television get away with murder. It is ironic that with a name like Dimple, she chooses to kill Amit by stabbing at his mole. Her identity might simply be described as the slight indentation for which she is named, and in vengeance she has sought Amit's much more identifiable facial features as the target for her frustrations.

The novel is written in three sections, the first taking place in Calcutta, the second in America while Amit and Dimple are living with Sens, and the third when they are subletting an apartment in Manhattan. *Wife* develops many of the themes for which Mukherjee's work is celebrated in her depiction of the life of one woman exiled from her country and herself.

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