



# The War of Woman with Fate and Fantasy: A Study of Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine and Wife*

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## Abstract:

Bharati Mukherjee is an American writer of Indian origin. Her works are conceived with new vistas about immigrant lives of Indian women in particular. The women protagonists are bold and courageous having enough dare to break free the enforced taboos imposed on them and rise a distinctive voice of their own. Mukherjee has a great passion for portraying Indian woman in an alien country. This paper intends to discuss about few women characters, selected from Mukherjee's debated works, who are born and brought up in traditional Indian families, got married as per traditions, but later they proved their power and potentiality as a woman when situation demands. Here, two novels like *Jasmine*, *Wife* has been taken for discussion.

**Index words-**Marriage, Wife, identity, culture shock, Fact, Fantasy Born as Indian, but blossomed as an American writer; Bharati

Mukherjee is well known name in Diaspora literature. She writes in a period of colonisation and decolonisation when Indian history is going to be written with the largest number of Indians diaspora population in America. The postcolonial literature is crowded with the diaspora characters and discussion on expatriation, immigration, nostalgia, alienation, assimilation and identity search. Mukherjee loves to be an Indian but has a great passion for celebrating America as she has the strong power of assimilation and ambition. She maintains a beautiful balance between American self and Indian system and through her literature, she becomes a trendsetter. She embraces America for giving her "romanticism and hope..." as she admits; simultaneously, she's fascinated towards the melting pot culture of United States of America where she can be a new-person and can "discard that part of my history that I want, and invent a whole new history for

myself". In an interview with Amanda Meer in 1984; Mukherjee states:

"I totally consider myself an American writer and that has been my only big battle: to get to realise that my roots as a writer are no longer, if they ever when among Indian writers, but that I am writing about the territory about the feelings, of a new kind of fire near here in America".

*Jasmine* (1989) is the story of an Indian village girl who sets out her epic journey against her own fate. The novel begins with *Jasmine's* memory of her childhood in a retro visit to a period of Indian history that is eighteen years after the partition riots of India and Pakistan. She is the fifth daughter but the seventh child out of nine children of her parents. It is a hostile patriarchal family in which girls are taken as burdens and curse upon the family. She recalls the hut in Hasnapur where she was born and the bountiful harvest of that year. Her mother wanted to kill the newborn baby girl to save her from the torture after marriage. She thinks if she were a boy, that year "would have been marked (her) as lucky, a child with a special destiny to fulfil" (p.39). But she is a daughter and doomed to be distressed. She's born with a birthmark of dark bruises around her throat and tail bone, and as said by people is a mark of her foremothers opposing her from coming into the world. This unwelcomed girl child named as *Jyoti*, grows up with a strong instinct of struggle from childhood. Being the most beautiful and intelligent girl among her siblings, she develops a rebellious and reformative attitude towards the blind beliefs of feudal society. The novel moves in a to and fro movement of past and present, between memory and experiences. At the age of seventeen, *Jyoti* is predicted with widowhood and exile:

"Lifetime ago under a banyan tree in the village Hasanpur, an astrologer cupped his ears -his statelite dish to the stars and foretold my widowhood and



exile. I was only seven then, fast and venture some, scabrous- armed from baves and thorns”(J 1)

Jyoti's family is a conservative Hindu family, living in a village. Like other girls in the village, her future and fate is to be determined by her marriage. From the birth of a girl the parents starts thinking about her marriage; a girl has no individual identity before marriage, she is known by her father or brother's name and after marriage in the name of her husband and in old age in the name of her sons. Jyoti's father, Pitaji, an orthodox Hindu thinks, "The thing is that bright ladies are wearing bright sons, that is nature's design"(J 51). Jyoti is blessed with intelligence, what can be called beauty with brains, so she is different from her friends and her sisters in the family. The Fakir or astrologers prediction about Jyoti's future, was strongly opposed by Jyoti, even at the tender age of seven. She trips and bashes her head on a bundle of sticks and the bleeding wound takes the shape of a star. The astrologer reacts: "Bad times were on their way. I was helpless, doomed. The star bled"(J 4). That bleeding star symbolises and signals her challenging future ahead, but the little girl Jyoti takes it positively and calls the wound scar as her "Third eye" and herself as a sage. It is possible, because Jyoti is different from any weak and docile village girl, so the masterji in the school could notice the promising girl and suggested her father, Pitaji, to let her stay in school for more three years than her sisters.

Her grandmother, Dida suggests a rich but older and widower bride for Jyoti because the family's financial condition is weak to meet the dowry of all the daughters. Here the meaning of marriage is different, there is no emotion attached with the position of wife rather it will be a caretaker job for Jyoti, because that bride has three children. This was a common practice in Indian society in old times, the daughters of poor families had to marry father-like bridegrooms unwillingly to escape from dowry burden. But Jyoti chooses to be different and wishes to be a doctor and open her own clinic. However, Jyoti dares to dream a bright future by active favour of Pitaji in family and Masterji in school. To nurture her ambitions she concentrates on learning English.

Then Prakash enters into her life. Prakash, is a young dynamic and ambitious engineer, who wants to pursue his higher studies in America. Jyoti falls in love with Prakash and marries him. This is the turning point in Jyoti's life. Prakash gives her a new name 'Jasmine', which intends to illuminate everything with fragrance: "You are small and sweet

and handy, my Jasmine. You will kick in the whole world with your perfume".

Gladly Jyoti accepts the new name as it is her husband's gift of love as well as the name will fit in the foreign land. She's over excited for getting a loving and caring life partner and she had dreamt and also for defeating the Fakir's future forecast. Prakash is exactly the same as she thinks, "I couldn't marry a man who didn't speak English, or at least who didn't want to speak English. To want English was to more than you had been given at birth, It was to want the world"(p 68). After two weeks of their courting, both married in registrar office in a very casual dowry less manner. Despite different obstacles, both are bold and determined in their aim and start living in their own apartment. Both are sinners in their own societies as iconoclast by violating traditional customs of marriage. Prakash is a liberal feminist, he doesn't like cattle like treatment of women in the society where women call their husbands only referring to the children. He urges Jyoti to call him by name to make her equal with him. Prakash encourages Jasmine in every walk of life even on their arguments or disagreements. He is happy with Jasmine, but unhappy with his profession, so he has applied in USA for higher studies which is accepted in Florida international Institute of technology. The night he receives his admission letter, both go to town to buy a sari, but there, Prakash is killed by bombing by a Khalsa terrorist. With Prakash's death, Jasmine's whole existence is scattered, she returns to village with her widowed mother. Mukherjee is very authentic in giving pictures of the hell like life of Indian widow, particularly in villages. Jasmine denies to accept the stereotype widow life as her mother, Dida or any other village women. She is broken after Prakash's demise but she is not born to break. She has the burden of her husband's unfulfilled ambitions. If a woman is to be sati after husband's death, then why not at the dream place of dead husband?

She sets out on her epic journey to USA with forged documents. Jasmine has come to commit sati in the university campus where her husband was dreaming to read. The captain of the trawler, named Half Face, in which she smuggled herself illegally to Florida coast, brutally raped her.

She encounters being the incarceration of goddess Kali to kill the devil. After the violent experiences of rape and murder, Jasmine becomes bold and self-confident. She doesn't repent, rather discovers a new self to face any situation. As victory over her old self, Jasmine burns down her dishonoured clothes and tries to avoid everything



that is associated with her old life. During her self search journey she encounters characters like Half-face, professor Devinder, Taylor, Bud Ripplemeyer, Duff, Du and Women characters like Lillian Gordon, Mrs Vadhera and Mrs Ripplemeyer. Initially Jasmine thinks she has come USA to fulfil her husband's American dream, but later she realises that the journey is a quest for self-discovery; as she thinks while staying in Professor Vadhera's family:

“In the apartment of artificially maintained Indianness; I from everything wanted to distance myself from everything Indian, everything Jyoti-like. To them, I was a widow who should show proper modesty of appearance and attitude”(J.145).

She tries to shed everything that reminds her old self and determined to overcome any obstacle on her self search journey. She flights from Professor Vadhera's house because, there she is treated as a widow, not worthy for intimate relations. She leaves Taylor's family as she sees the radical Khalsa terrorist who had killed Prakash in India. At last, she leaves Bud Ripplemeyer because, Bud's love for her is emotionless, she is used only as a sexual companion without any feelings. This is against her self-esteem so she takes her bold and mature decision to return back to Taylor by listening her own heart and for her own sake. Yet now she lived for others, but at the end she determines to live for her self and will command her fate according to her own wish: “watch me reposition the stars”(p 240)., to the Fakir who predicted her widowhood and exile in her childhood under the Banyan tree.

Jasmine is like a wild stream flowing from Jyoti to Jasmin, Kali to Jazzy and Jase to Jane is a long expedition “hurtled through the time tunnel”(p240). After Prakash's murder Jasmine stops dreaming about

anything, she marries with the reality of every day life. When she left India she was in a mood of do or die because in India a widow's life is more similar to the death. She thought of living a life with reality, might be short( for her ignorance of American society anything may happen with her ) than to live a condemned life as a widow may be longer. So in her restless moment she never bewilders or puzzles because she knows everything is real and she is ready for any fight like a path finder. Every experience adds to her self confidence as she goes on hugging the harsh realities.

Fate is the fillip for which Jasmine starts her journey but it's her strong free will that determines her course. Fate and Free will are mutually exclusive

and cannot exist, fate is a done deal not open for revision and free will is the ability to act at own discretion in a real world. Jasmine challenges her fate by her free will and at the end wins also. Life is rooted in the ground realities and role of real world is powerful in Jasmine. But as a dexterous artist Mukherjee is not less powerful in picturing the fairy tale world of imagination through the character of Dimple in her novel Wife. Both are Indian immigrant women in America, like the writer herself but both represent two opposing worlds. Here, the protagonist although physically lives a common life, her fantasies are overpowering her normal self. Fantasy is the product of imaginative galaxy without any root any location; is beyond the understanding of Dimple in Mukherjee's novel Wife. This is the story of a Bengali girl Dimple whose sole aim in life is marriage. Dimple Dasgupta, a young woman in the beginning of the novel is anxiously waiting for the her marriage by arranging her unreal dreams for her would-be Prince charming. She dreams of marrying a neurosurgeon, but being a supposed arranged marriage her choices are limited. Her parents are worried for her marriage; mother helps her in maintaining her beauty and father is busy in searching a suitable bride groom and Dimple, “Discreet and virgin, she waited for real life to begin”. In search of a suitable bride groom, her parents has to labour a lot as Dimple is not extremely fair and beautiful like other Bengali girls. Her premarital waiting is painful as Mukherjee writes:

“Years of waiting have already made her nervous, unnaturally prone to colds, coughs and headaches. Wasted years she was twenty-lay like a chill weight in her body, giving her eyes a watchful squirrel and herspine a slight curve”(Wife).

Dimple's fantasy in view of her would-be husband is very funny, see pictures a man from different ads and makes it complete by borrowing various body parts and qualities from different advertisements. She sees marriage as, “that was supposed to be the best part of getting married-being free and expressing yourself”. Her illusion starts breaking when Amit's family come to see her, Mrs Basu, Amit's mother objects on Dimple's name as frivolous and un-bengali and Amit sister says about her as a little darker than the photograph send earlier as a marriage proposal. Asher first shock to realises the distance between illusion and the reality. Her

in-laws house is very small, she has to fill water from down below, there is no light in the staircase. Her chandelier-fitted dream castle is far far away from this ordinary house, “... how hard it was



for her to keep quiet and smile though she was falling apart like a very old toy that had been played it, sometimes quite rapidly by children who claims to love her". Her life as a newly wedded bride is not pleasant. She has not been given sufficient privacy and time with her husband. She feels her dreams turning into nightmares and passions in to meaninglessness. Amit, her husband is little conservative and traditional in his attitude, he has taken wife for granted and doesn't know how to praise and please his newly wedded wife. He wants his wife to stay at home and engage with household works rather go out to work and earn.

However she thinks that all the problems are short lived, with the confirmation of immigration they will migrate to USA. With the passage of time she realises, that the dream of marriage was better than being married in real life. She becomes pregnant and her marriage excitement ends. In Indian culture a woman is considered as a career of generation. But Dimple doesn't feel ease with her pregnancy. She is about to migrate but she doesn't "want to carry any relics from her old life" (p.42). Her decision to terminate of her pregnancy by skipping rope, shows her sense of cruelty.

Dimple's such act of self abortion, stands Bharati Mukherjee in the scapegoat of criticism for her understanding of Indian culture. Rosanne Klass in a review of *Wife* comments;

For an Indian wife, childishness is a disaster, pregnancy the achievement that seals and status. To overturn such ingrained r values would involve a major emotional upheaval; yet Dimple acts on the vaguest and most undefined impulses, and things no more about it (Klass 88).

The next phase of the novel starts in the UK where Dimple's life is quite changed. She is thrilled as well as scared with the magnificence of the New York city because she has not seen a city bigger than Calcutta. Here her life is encircled with diaspora characters the people those who had migrated from India to UK for their professional success in a different social Milieu and cultural atmosphere and cherish the value for their own native land.

Thousands of IT professionals, doctors, engineers, management personals are buzzed in the city in search of a better future from India. Add Jyoti Sen confesses, "If it we have not for the money, I'd go back tomorrow. This is too much the rat race for a man like me" (p 55). Basically as a diaspora writer Bharati Mukherjee is very authentic in describing the diaspora cross culture sentiments.

Dimple's first culture shock is very traumatic as she fails to understand the reason why a man selling beef cannot sell cheesecake. What is the law of America? She helps Meena Sen in domestic works and spends time in watching TV or reading newspaper. Usually what ever shown in newspaper and TV are about murder, smuggling and unethical works, that gradually make Dimple away from the reality.

In meantime, Amit is running from pillar to post for a job but everywhere he fails and his frustration accelerates. In different parties and get together meetings he feels useless and neglected. As days pass on he becomes impatient and imbalanced; obviously callous towards his wife. He fails to understand the woman psychology, that a woman doesn't need only food to fill her belly rather emotional foods like love and affection from her husband. "Amit didn't feed her fantasy life; he was merely the provider of small material comfort. In bitter moments she ranked husband, blender, color TV, cassette, tape recorder, stereo, in their order of convenience" (p.113).

Because a husband for an Indian wife is like her second-self and she tries to embody her whole existence with that particular person. Here Amit fails to understand the growing abnormality of Dimple. Later Amit gets a job and both decide to move to Greenwich in Marsha's flat but the underlying abnormality in Dimple's mind remain intact. She fails to accommodate in American society for her inferior complexity neither she can imitate the free and open life style of American woman nor she love to maintain distinctiveness of Indian woman. She remains alienated from the society - she lives exclusively for her weakness in English; "how could she live in a country... where every other woman was a stranger, where she felt different, ignorant, exposed to ridicule in the elevator?" (p.112). Secondly she things that she is not able to win her husband's love and affection, so she is deceived. Her loneliness accumulates triggered by her negative thoughts like murder, rape, suicide and mugging. Can't trust anybody but media and contemplates as many as seven ways of committing suicide. The desire for death has already been with Dimple from her Calcutta life. In two significant incidents she encounters the death, one symbolic and other is in the reality. The first what is the sadistic killing of a mouse out of anger. The mouse looks pregnant coincidentally at the same time Dimple herself is also pregnant symbolically by terminating her pregnancy Dimple rejects Amit and her motherhood. Here her traumatic encounter with the alien culture



mixed with Amit's unsympathetic and callous response trigger her into a chaotic mental condition. Her feeling of failure in every sphere of life shimmer and shimmer within herself and come out like a volcanic eruption ,in a state of delirium she kills Amit with a kitchen knife:

“She sneaked up on him and choose a spot, her favourite spot just under the hairline , where the mole was getting larger and browner, and she drew an imaginary line of kisses... she touched the mole very lightly and let her finger's draw a circle around the delectable spot, then she brought her right hand up and with the knife stabbed the magical circle once.,twice, seven times, each time a little harder, until the milk in the bowl of cereal was . a pretty pink and flakes were mushy

....”(p 212-13)

. Dimple, the bubbly girl from Calcutta who was in love with own self, too much caring for her own beauty and conscious of her body structure now lost her lust for life and she decides to end her self. She knows she has no meaning in life and she has released her self from the wedding oaths of saptapadi by stabbing seven times on the favourite parts of her husband's body. Mukherjee portrays Dimple's madness as a deviation against the male dominance and the dimmed existence of females in Indian society.

The stereotype identity of Indian womanhood ; as a daughter, a wife or a mother- this idea is challenged by the writer through the characters of Jasmine and Dimple. To demonstrate her own existence Dimple's violent attitude can never be appreciated whereas Jasmine has gone through many horrible experiences ,like rape and murder but strongly manifests her identity

Jasmine is a warrior who believes in action and she knows how to snatch her rights if it is not given. But Dimple is introvert she believes in begging her ' rights and inflict herself if her demands remain unfulfilled. But both the ladies tried their best to solemnised their marriages. After Prakash's murder Jasmine goes to USA to be sati in the Florida University campus where her husband is supposed to study and Dimple in a violent but unusual way ends everything by committing suicide after killing her husband. One free - flows with life by taking her husband's dream and gets wide scope to prove her power and potentiality but other one, enslaves self in illusion and ends everything. However, marriage is the essential beginning for an Indian girl from which life has started for both Jasmine and Dimple; one proves her self as a woman with action and and other as a woman with passion.

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