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## **A Study of Marital Relationship in Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife and Jasmine***

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**Abstract**

The analytical study of the secondary works on Bharati Mukherjee reveals the in depth study of her works majorly with reference to the alienation or strangeness of the protagonist. Whereas, this article aims to examine the operation of the marital relationships and the problems associated with the interpersonal relationships, which has a consequent effect on the lives of the protagonist within the fictional framework. The research also makes an attempt to discuss the various expectations and roles imposed on women characters not only from the outside sources but from within as well, which results in their subsequent disillusionment.

The research further deals with the journey of the neurotic mental state of the selected protagonists portrayed through their frustrations and baffled desires, resulting in the final redemption, which leads to the final marital discord. Many psychologists have made an in-depth study of the interpersonal relationship of husband and wife, moving in and out of their marital relationship. While on the contrary, this article focuses to explore the factors, which affects the adjustments and maladjustments in a marriage, which results in harmonious or disharmonious relationships.

The article also aims to draw a parallel between the marriage institute of western culture where theory like 'complementary mate selection' is brought in the scenario, whereas, in Indian culture the marriage is still based on 'arranged' basis with elaborated traditional rites. It exposes the contemporary social structure of the modern world, where the need to stay bound in marriage has lost its importance to the happiness of an individual.

The overall objective of the article is to outline the cause of the plight of women characters, the expectation and roles assigned to them, the factors involved which affects the harmonious marital relationship and a journey to self-redemption within the fictional framework of Bharati Mukherjee.

**Key Words:** inter-personal relationships, societal expectations, gendered roles, institution of marriage, self-redemption

Bharati Mukherjee is a widely read and a prolific Indian novelist. She is settled in America and she claims the American identity. She very efficiently depicts the woman's world through her works. All her female protagonists are seen working hard to make their hold in a modern male dominated world whilst suffering from mental and psychic issues. Bharati Mukherjee's life experiences itself has a little influence on her works. She was born in 1940, into a Bengali Family settled in Calcutta and attended a convent school with her sister Ranu and then she went to America for her further studies. There she met Clark Blaise, and married him.

The novels of Bharati Mukherjee majorly explores the sensibility which is difficult to be explained in words not because of the lack of words to explain it but because the emotions say it all. All her novels have basic Indian themes like modernity and traditional, east-west variance and civilised-uncivilised division. She depicts her character's desire to leave their past and build a new future. Like Mukherjee, her female protagonists wish to be modern and western in their ways, but the consciousness of their past life weighs them down.

In this article, the novels *Wife* and *Jasmine* are explored through the marital relationship angle. In these novels, we witness the protagonists being trapped in their marital relationships and are trying very hard to find a way out of it. *Wife* is Mukherjee's second novel, where as the title suggests, she has depicted her female character in the role of a wife. F.A. Inamdar, a critic, in his article *Man Woman Relationship in Bharati Mukherjee's Tiger's Daughter and Wife* views that the alienation of the protagonist is not seated in the alien land but it lies within them. He believes that Dimple's strangeness doesn't lie outside but within her own head.

In *Wife*, the major objective of the protagonist's life is to prepare herself to be a wife. Since Dimple is a simple, middle class Bengali, she prepares herself to do as expected. Therefore, we witness the novel begins when Dimple has come to the age and her family is looking for a suitable match for her, while, "Discreet and virgin, she waited for real life to begin"(15). In the course of this work, we will study the journey of Dimple from her marriage to her disillusionment, along with her neurotic disturbed state and an attempt to redeem herself by trying to kill her husband. This cycle shows the marital discord and the life cycle of many Bengali girls like her.

During her parents were looking for a suitable match for her, she was anxious about her figure and complexion. She felt that, "Years of waiting have already made her nervous...she was twenty - lay like a chill weight in her body, giving her eyes a watchful squirrel and her spine a slight curve" (3). As expected of many girls, she imagines her husband as shown in various advertisements and believes that her life would magically change after marriage. She states, "That was supposed to be

the best part of getting married - being free and expressing yourself" (20). But soon after she met Amit, whom she married, she came out of her dream land and met with reality which was quite harsh on her, "Dimple wanted a different kind of life - an apartment in Chowringhee, her hair done by Chinese girls, trips to New Market for nylon saris..." (3).

The identity of a girl is trashed by the society. They expect a perfect woman, it is well illustrated when Amit's family came to see Dimple for marriage and they disapproved of her complexion and name at first but later agreed for the match. She was also renamed, Nandini after her marriage. The renaming process snatches every bit of her past identity symbolizing to start a new life with new identity shadowed by her husband and his family. Dimple was over burdened by the expectations she had to meet in order to be accepted by Amit and his family. She started wearing bright colours, tie her hair in a high bun, stopped eating chillies in order to please Amit. She had to agree to almost everything Amit tells her to do and bear his mood swings, in order to fit in their family. She got more entangled when she started waiting for his approval and "his know-how for everything. If she ever had to send a cable overseas or send a money-order, she would not know how to do it" (32). This added to her estrangement and her torments.

Soon later she started rebelling against the expected role of wife, firstly by convincing Basu family of her miscarriage, which helped her skip free from the pregnancy. This was the first time she showed her courage and strength under the veil of her docile and weak personality. Her retaliation was a result of the society and Amit's way of treating her, which made her think that the pregnancy was a way of consumption of her body with Basu's property in her womb. The act of killing a rat also symbolises her resentment, frustration and agony, which later gives rise to her being suicidal. Her violent expressions show her hatred towards the Basu family, who were trying to tame her like an animal. Not just this, her act of killing goldfish, destroying her foetus and Marsha's roaches depicts her mental state. Eventually Amit adds to her torment by telling her that he dreamt of marrying a, "tall girl. You know the kind I mean, one meter sixty-one or sixty-two centimetres tall and slim. Also convent-educated, fluent in English" (26), unlike her.

She finds hope during her hopelessness in marriage when she gets the opportunity to go to America with her husband. She feels that it will bring her freedom and happiness along with change and newness like she felt about marriage. To her disappointment, she felt more alienated and lonely than before because of the same relation she shared with Amit and her inability to speak the language to interact with people in America. Amit was occupied with the struggles to find a job, therefore the gap between them widens. This mental torment, frustration and anger makes her indifferent and

insensitive towards people. She didn't care much when her mother-in-law had a fracture or when Meena called to ask for name suggestions for her daughter. In order to rediscover herself and find freedom, she takes a violent path of murdering her husband and releasing herself from the trap of marriage.

This act of murdering Amit is seen as her way of cutting the ropes holding her to grow and Amit as being victim of a neurotic wife. But Dimple is also seen as being victimised by the social expectations where she is expected to be a wife and a mother and have no identity of her own. Therefore, the act of murder is seen as revenge.

Coming to Mukherjee's most recent work, *Jasmine*. It also depicts an immigrant woman's journey, which completely transforms her. Samir Dayal, a critic in "Creating, Preserving, Destroying: Violence in Bharati Mukherjee's JASMINE", states that:

The functionality of violence in Mukherjee's recent novel *Jasmine* is complex and ambivalent, as it is in her earlier *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Wife*, *The Middleman* and *Other Stories*, and even in the non fictional *Days and Nights in Calcutta*. That complexity and that ambivalence, it may be argued, coincide with the contradictions of postcolonial subject formation...The novel is an account of *Jasmine's* coming into her own as a woman, killing in order to live. (9)

Here the objective is to study the interpersonal relationships of *Jasmine* and the experiences with 3 major men in her life, i.e., Prakash Vih, who is her husband, Taylor Hayes, who is the Professor in New York and Bud Ripplemeyer, who is a banker. All these men have had a great influence in shaping the life of *Jasmine* and molding her into what she is at present.

Jyoti is a rural girl born in a peasant family with the destiny of widowhood, which she refuses to accept and as a result she is cross checked and marked a star on her forehead as a symbol of liability on the village. Since childhood, she believes in a special existence of herself being beautiful and intelligent, who always longs to flee away from her village. Unlike other girls of her time, she is brave to put away a good marriage prospect, but later at the age of thirteen, she accepts one that of Prakash. They both felt drawn towards each other based on their likings and their families felt it to be a good fit. Initially she liked everything about Prakash and liked his strong logical and argumentative voice. The first hurdle she had to face was her renaming as *Jasmine*, symbolic of the fragrance of flower.

Prakash is seen as an ideal husband any Indian girl could ever dream of. He allowed *Jasmine* to call him by his first name, which is very unconventional at that time and also after an year when she was fifteen and thought about motherhood, he explained that she is too young for it and he is poor

to run a family, they both agreed to comply by the golden rule of, "we shouldn't do anything if we didn't both agree" (78). This was a happy family time when the dream to go to America obsesses Jasmine. She states, "If 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" (85). But soon before their scheduled departure, Jasmine's life takes a turn and the astrologers' future predicament comes true. Just before their departure the Khalsa bomb kills Prakash and their desire to go to the other side of the earth remains unfulfilled. His death haunted Jasmine, she says, "Prakash exhorted me from every corner of our grief - darkened room. There is no dying, there is only an ascending or a descending, a moving on to other planes. Don't crawl back to Hasnapur and feudalism. That Jyoti is dead" (96).

Her journey from Hasanpur to America was not easy, as the society believes that widowhood is inauspicious whereas, Jasmine has crossed all the taboos along with the stereotypical view of people seeing a single, widowed woman without a job going into a foreign land with great positivity transferred in her by Prakash. Though the struggles of an illegal immigrant awaits her in America. She states:

We are outcasts and deportees, strange pilgrims visiting outlandish shrines, landing at the end of tarmacs, ferried in old army trucks where we are roughly handled and taken to roped-off corners of waiting rooms where surly, barely wakened customs guards await their bribe. We are dressed in shreds of national costumes, out of season, the wilted plunge of intercontinental vagabondage. We ask only one thing: to be allowed to land; to pass through; to continue. (101)

Despite many hurdles and challenges, she kept her identity of Indian Jyoti to Jasmine intact. The second important man came into her life was Taylor Hayes, who was a professor living in America with her wife and an adopted daughter, Duff. Jasmine becomes Duff's nanny and Taylor's subject. He taught her many ways, specially the way of being an American woman. She falls in love for him since he was the harbinger of joy and happiness in her life and according to Wylie he also fell for her. It was her orient and Indianness that he fell for. He didn't want to change her, but the change came when he named her 'Jase'. She says, "Taylor didn't want to change me. He didn't want to scour and sanitize my foreignness. My being different from Wylie or Kate didn't scare him" (185). But the change came because "I wanted to...on Claremont Avenue, in the Hayeses' big, clean, brightly lit apartment, I bloomed from a diffident alien with forged documents into adventurous Jase" (185-6).

During her two year stay with Taylor's family brought Taylor and Wylie's separation and made Jase realise her love for Taylor. She felt warm in his companionship and states, "May be Taylor was very fond of me. Even a bit in love with me. But in love with me in a different way than he was in love with witty, confident Wylie" (183). In his company, Jasmine feels the warmth of family. With time she was offered a job in the university and she used to spend money recklessly, which shows her Americanisation. She states, "Jyoti would have saved. But Jyoti was now a SATI...Jase went to movies and lived for today. In my closet hung satin blouses with vampish necklines, in my dresser lingerie I was too shy to wear in a room I shared with Duff." (176). She believes that it was different with Taylor, according to her experiences with other men, she feels that Taylor, "...was the only man I knew who didn't mind getting caught looking silly. Prakash had wanted to be infallible, and Professor acted pompous. Taylor was fun" (176). She admits that, "The love I felt for Taylor that first day had nothing to do with sex. I fell in love with his world...I wanted to become the person they thought they saw...Not illegal, not murderer, not widowed, raped, destitute, fearful" (171).

Soon later, she had to leave Taylor and run to Iowa thinking that Sukhwinder had found her, who has murdered Prakash and will kill her too. In Iowa she meets Mother Ripplemeyer, who gives a helping hand on Wednesdays to refugees. She met Bud Ripplemeyer, a fifty years old man there too. Here a new dimension of her identity is explored when Bud gives her the name, Jane, which brings a new identity to her. He is a divorced man with two grownup kids and falls in love with Jane. He believes that she is mysterious, exotic, orient and sexually intense. Jane gets seriously involved with Bud and is called Jane Ripplemeyer in Baden County. She steps into the phase of motherhood with Bud, as she conceives Bud's child. Though she isn't married to him, but she acts like a wife to him and Bud is also very possessive about her.

Bud wanted to marry Jane before the child comes but since Jane had a harmonious married life with Prakash, she didn't want to stain it, therefore refused. She wanted to bring him out of his sadness caused to him by his job as a banker and by his wife Karin. Till this time she was in dilemma whether to marry Bud or not when Taylor comes and asks her to move back with him to west. He was genuine enough to accept her even with Bud's child. It was difficult for Jane to leave Bud and Du, whom she saw as a little Prakash and was caught between being free with Taylor or caregiver to Bud. She made her choice and left with Taylor to her freedom, "...greedy with wants and reckless from hope". (241)

Other than these three men, she also encounters Darrel at Baden county, who was also in love with Jane and told her that she and Bud makes an uneven couple therefore they shouldn't be together.

But when Jane refuses to his proposal he kills himself. Second such encounter is in Vadhera, where she meets Half-Face, who would treat her like a sex object and call her petty names like, baby, honey, prime little piece, etc. This is when her violent expression is seen like Dimple and she kills him. In a very short period, she is born several times or her identity is shaped and reshaped several times in her relationships with these above discussed men. During her combat with Half-Face, she claims that:

For the first time in my life I understood what evil was about. It was about not being human. Half-Face was from an underworld of evil. It was a very simple, very clear perception, a moment of truth, the kind of understanding that I have heard comes at the moment of death. (116)

According to S. Sivaraman, the Indian writing in English is enriched as the writers have not abandoned their Indianness in order to achieve better in life but rather kept the emotional ties with their home. He explains:

Introduction into the human condition and understanding that works intensely to celebrate the awe and the mystery of the human conditions, which have been absent from the earlier writings in English, suddenly find expression in her writing, especially in the novel *Jasmine* (1990).

Even the New York Times says that:

Mrs. Mukherjee is less interested in giving us a realistic depiction of one woman's peripatetic life than in creating a fable, a kind of impressionistic prose poem, about being an exile, a refugee, a spiritual vagabond in the world today.

To summarise, the journey of Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine's* protagonist Jasmine has been well explained in the prologue of the novel taken from James Gleick's *Chaos*, stating, "The new geometry mirrors a universe that is rough, not rounded, scabrous, not smooth. It is the geometry of the pitted, pocked and broken up, the twisted, tangled, and intertwined." As, Jasmine goes through deep and various identities. Similarly, like other Mukherjee's protagonists, Dimple is seen as a victim of a society, which is weak because it doesn't have voice. Dimple struggles throughout her life because of her inability to communicate and express her views. Whereas on the other hand is Meena Sen, who is also in the role of wife, but she faces no problem, since she has accepted her fate or maybe because she doesn't expect much from her life.

The male dominated society expects a woman to hold and maintain the harmonious and happy relationships in the family. Also as mentioned above, the woman is responsible to make the adjustments before and after marriage to have a prosperous relationship. But Mukherjee's modern



day female protagonists break the cages of societal expectations and do not feel guilty about breaking the marital ties when they start suffocating them. These women, just like men in the society, demand equal freedom, to have interpersonal and physical relationships, responsibilities to take decisions for their life and make their own choices, good or bad. Mukherjee depicts an orthodox society, which demands traditional old ways but sketches her female protagonists in the modern day women, who are free and aware of their rights in the society. She paints her protagonists with a spirit that their primary duty is not towards what society expects out of them rather towards themselves.



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