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MARRIAGE MOORINGS IN BHARATHI MUKHERJEE'S *JASMINE AND WIFE*

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**Abstract**

The institution of marriage is structured by persistent contradictions: while it is the dominant source of status, security, validation, and pleasure, its "rules" also inhibit individual experimentation and provide powerful machinery for disciplining nonconformity. Three traditional marriage practices are especially culpable in this context, namely early marriage, patrilocal marriage in which a woman is absolutely dependent on the extended family for approval and even sustenance and patrilineal inheritance in which men keep in possession the means of producing wealth. With a woman's father, husband, and son marking the phases of her life, the orbits of her responsibility, and the standards for her self-validation, obedience to the father, submission to the husband, indulgence of the son, are expected to be the most decisive measures of a woman's value in society. Marriage rescuing her from the ignominy of spinsterhood, the birth of a son redeeming her from the curse of useless barrenness, and an early death excusing her from the permanent effacement that is a widow's fate are the expected norms of marital life in an Indian set up. This research paper is an attempt to explore the strategies used by the protagonists to face these moorings in life.

**Keywords:** Marriage, Family, responsibility, non-conformity, tradition, values, society

Marriage is not a ritual or an end. It is a long, intricate, intimate dance together and nothing matters more than your own sense of balance and your choice of partner.

-- Amy Bloom

Ever since the union of Adam and Eve, very many definitions and meanings for marriage have been evolved in the society. The institution of marriage was begun so that a man and a woman might through their joy, their strength and their

communion become creators of life itself. This relationship between a man and a woman has been codified by cultural and social norms where man always dominates the family. Edward Carpenter in *Love's Coming of Age*, defines marriage as:

A marriage so free, so spontaneous that it would allow of wide excursions of the pair from each other, in common or even in separate objects of work and interest, and yet would hold them all the time in the bond of absolute sympathy, would by its

very freedom be all the more poignantly attractive, and by its very scope and breadth all the richer and more vital--would be in a sense indestructible. (103)

Marriage has often been upheld to assure woman of her husband's continued support and to focus more attention on the rearing of her progeny. Marriage is a mixture of both high and low states and social security has been stronger where divorce has been difficult to obtain. A woman is seen not for what she is but for what she represents about her family. Marriage and motherhood are still seen as woman's ideals. Olive Bank declares, "The radical Feminists allege that marriage is at the very root of woman's subjection to the man because through it man controls both her reproduction and her person" (230). Potential complications arise in marriages that involve persons of widely different social classes or cultures and get manifested as possible identity crisis and alienation. As suggested by Menander that marriage is but a necessary evil, the positivity of marriage has been sidelined and the negativities of marriage, of being victimised is on its rise. Literature began exploring these issues long before the science of child development undertook a scientific study. Strindberg's play about Miss Julie (1888), a major milestone in European realism, describes the unfavorable outcome of such an uncongenial union, coupled with parental teaching of scorn for the opposite sex.

As for daughters-in-law, the relationship is constantly noted in women's writing as a notorious point of betrayal to women's solidarity. Being a daughter-in-law is the one relation of pure power traditionally known by women, and a depressing number of these relations become channels of "retaliation" for the abuse and exploitation senior women have felt in their own lives. No experience remains unmixed; every concrete relation carries intense reminders of the pressurized space of gender, as the infant boy grows--cognitively, psycho-sexually and socially, as he develops the capacity to 'put it all together,' he senses that he cannot do without his mother nor remove himself from her presence, but at the same time he is incapable of giving her what she unconsciously desires.

Mukherjee, born and bred in Calcutta for about twenty years still respects Indian culture and the reverence attached to the institution called 'marriage.' Threatened by the forces of modernization and urbanization on marriage, the meeting point of two souls according to ancient thinking has got its meaning shifted. What Mukherjee has tried to focus through her works is the need for redefining the institution of marriage.

Bharati Mukherjee has fearlessly put forward in her novels this basic concept of marriage--as a social contract based on human convenience and biological needs. The protagonists dissociate the factor of love from marriage. The characters struggle with their hard destinies and the question of self-destruction of individuals on the dictation of others become the major concern. With no escape from this absurd situation, they seek freedom through actions, violent and bizarre. But freedom from marital bond does not provide freedom from unhappiness and it turns yet another futile search for meaning of life. The three basic factors that disrupt the harmony of the marriages are

- The dislocation of the bride from her birthplace that effectuates a cultural, social and economical change in her family
- The discord that erupts due to lack of communication between the partners
- The pre-marital expectations and fantasies of young girls and the disappointment after marriage leading to disintegration of their psyche.

Mukherjee's women, Jasmine of **Jasmine** or Dimple of **Wife** are not passive women. Bharati Mukherjee herself in an interview with Tina Chen and S.X. Goudie comments, "They quite literally cross oceans, transform their worlds and in the process leave behind a heap of bruised hearts and bleeding bodies!" (9).

The novel **Jasmine** focuses on an under-aged village girl from Punjab who as an undocumented woman and widow goes to the United States, where her fate is rewritten. The novel unfolds in Hasnapur village, when Jasmine is aged seven. There is a dialectic interplay between the

past and the present representing the two cultures, Indian and American and 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 from her past.

Jasmine actually Jyoti, is dubbed an unlucky child which she regrets from her childhood,

God's cruel, my mother complained to waste brains on a girl. And God's still more cruel, she said to make a fifth daughter beautiful, instead of the first. By the time my turn to marry came around, there would be no dowry money left to gift me the groom I deserved. (J 40)

An astrologer predicts Jyoti a life of widowhood and exile. Jyoti, even as a child reacts to this forewarning and refuses to be reduced to nothingness by falling down and making a star shaped mark on her forehead which she interprets as "my third eye" (J 5). This provocation forced her to have a different perspective about marriage and Jyoti decides that this is the point of departure from "the war between my fate and my will" (J 12).

Jyoti marries Prakash, an electronic student and a friend of her brother whose voice she was in love with. Prakash, faces untimely death in the hands of fundamentalists leaving her grief-stricken and frustrated. True to the prediction of the astrologer, Jasmine is widowed. She makes an agonizing trip to America with a forged passport and as a gesture of protest she decides to burn herself with her husband's suit at the university campus where he had plans to graduate. It is a symbolic trip of transformation, displacement and an idealistic expression to realize the dreams of her husband.

Mukherjee uses travel or journey as a metaphor for aesthetic experience or transformation extensively in almost all her novels. Kathleen Wheeler explicates,

The metaphor of the journey also expresses the process of the discovery of love and sexuality, their relation to art and culture, energy in general and its role in violence and in loving relationships. (2)

Mukherjee poses transformation from Jyoti to Jasmine as an optimistic journey. Jasmine creates

a new world of new ideas, values, desires and she claims to have achieved a new beginning, "With the first streaks of dawn, my first full American day, I walked out of the front drive of the motel to the highway and began my journey, traveling light" (J 121). Having grown under a rigid, patriarchal Indian society, the transformation is rapid and vast. The metamorphosis of identity from Jyoti to Jasmine for the sake of Prakash, to Jane and to Jase for Bud and Taylor were necessitated because of marriage. From a dutiful submissive widow to an assertive individualistic woman, the shift was characterized by traumatic experiences. The transformation was triggered when she could not protect her from the ferocious attack of Half-face. After killing Half-Face she declares,

The room looked like a slaughterhouse. Blood had congealed on my hands, my chin, my breasts. What a monstrous thing, what an infinitesimal thing, is the taking of a human life; for the second time in three months, I was in a room with a slain man, my body bloodied. I was walking death. Death incarnate. (J 119)

Having adorned one incarnation, Jasmine becomes a willing slave of multiple re-incarnations, more of the nature of a serial killer.

Jasmine possesses the capacity to transform but in the process, seizes a longing to belong, to survive and to acquaint herself with the destined roles, "I wanted to become the person they thought they saw: humorous, intelligent, refined, affectionate. Not illegal, not murderer, not widowed, raped, destitute fearful" (J 171). Existence becomes meaningless for most, more so in the predicament of Jasmine. The statement of a Lahori friend,

Crying is selfish. We have no husbands, no wives, no fathers, no sons. Family life and family emotions are all illusions. The Lord lends us a body, gives us an assignment, and sends us down. When we get the job done, the Lords calls us home again for the next assignment (J 59), reveals the abject existence of women who have been governed by stars, caste, money and family status and where marriage is more a financial deal than an emotional one.

As the novel moves back and forth in time, Jasmine lives in villages in India, travels aboard a boat overflowing with illegal immigrants, and resides in apartments in New York City. In Iowa, Jane introduces Indian food to the local people and heats leftovers in the microwave. Though some of the lands Jasmine inhabits are familiar, through her eyes, they seem new. Transformation is universal and in Jasmine, it was extraordinary, "Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttled between identities" (J 77). From Jyoti a village girl to Jasmine a city woman, to Jase a nanny to an American and to Jane the Iowan woman, her transformation is significant, "I bloomed from a diffident alien with forged documents into adventurous Jase" (J 186). With conscious knowledge of transformation she evolves strategies to assert the effect. She finds fate as the predominant factor of these identities in her life, "Jasmine lived for a future, for Vijn and Wife, Jase went to movies and lived for today...For every Jasmine the reliable caregiver, there is a Jase, the prowling adventurer" (J 176).

Jasmine when confronted with the dilemma of choosing between Taylor and Bud, voices out, "I have had a husband for each of the woman I have been. Prakash for Jasmine, Taylor for Jase, Bud for Jane, Half-Face for Kali" (J 197). Bharati Mukherjee in her interview with Tina Chen and S.X. Goudie, responding to a query on the multiple transformation of Jasmine says, "Yea, Jasmine goes through several transformations and I like to think that she is still open to many more self-inventions"(3). But Jasmine replete with metamorphosis despondently cries in awe, "How many more shapes are in me" How many more selves? How many more husbands?" (J 215). Her life, which involves rapes and murders, challenges and tears strengthened the shifts and triumph in her journey to self-assertion. When Jasmine is suddenly widowed at seventeen, she seems fated to a life of quiet isolation in the small Indian village where she was born. But the force of Jasmine's desires propels her explosively into a larger, more dangerous, and ultimately more life-giving world.

Mukherjee reveals the unconventional mode of thinking about marriage by the bizarre reaction to pregnancy by the protagonist. An average normal

woman exults in motherhood and looks forward to it with a zest for companionship and emotional fulfillment. But Jasmine feels it an entrapment of a wife due to the social conditions imposed by a patriarchal society. In an attempt to "reposition her stars", "she ventures out, greedy with wants and reckless from hope" (J 24). Jasmine, despite her expecting Bud's baby, is unwilling to co-habit with him and feels obliged to Taylor. Simone De Beauvoir's description of a woman in **The Second Sex**, "she is too much divided against herself to join battle with the world; she limits herself to a flight from reality or a symbolic struggle against it" (375), captures the precise picture of Jasmine in this context. Marriage, for Jasmine has given no real address or identity but only an escape route to overlook her traumatic experiences of her momentary marital life with Prakash in which she has been violently victimized at every point of adventure.

Throughout the novel, Jasmine gives birth to other selves, such as Jane, the common-law wife, or Jase, the sweetheart to Taylor. But the overall self is developed strictly through her relationship with her late husband, Prakash. During their marriage, it is Prakash who begins to open Jasmine's mind to other ways of life besides her traditional, subservient roles taught to her as a young girl. By the end of the novel, she has come to accept the person she has become and lives it faithfully to her finest.

The change in lifestyle after marriage is universal but in the Indian context the pattern varies and is exceptional in certain cases. Sunita Rai discussing the man – woman relationship explains,

The fictional situation of young hearts broken up by compulsions of marriage and call of new love suggests that marriage is not just sexual relationship it means companionship on equal terms. The cause of disturbance in the relations between man and woman partly lies in man's own inherent debility to indulge in adultery and partly in the unnatural position of the husband or the wife in the family. There is something at the very core of human dreams and longings that is fatal to fulfillment through marriage. (175)

Like *Jasmine, Wife* is a novel depicting the hollowness of the Bengali institutionalized marriage. Jyoti, the Hasnapur based girl journeys to US on a different saga but Dimple Dasgupta, a docile, obedient and submissive daughter of a middleclass Bengali family marries Amit Basu, an ambitious engineer and migrates to the US. Preparing to leave for America, Dimple induces miscarriage by skipping rope until her legs are numb, which is an initial indication of her developing rejection of her role as a subservient "other."

In the United States, Dimple is left alone and lack of job makes Amit self centred, and despair sets in their life. The honour and respect for Amit has turned to mental turmoil in Dimple. The social critic and writer George Bernard Shaw has rightly pointed out in one of his Prefaces, "Man and wife do not, as a rule, live together, they only breakfast together and sleep in the same room. In most cases, the woman knows nothing of the man's working life and he knows nothing of her working life"(11). Raised to be passive and dependent according to traditional Indian standards of femininity, Dimple lacks the inner strength and resources it takes to cope with the fear and alienation in New York City as a young wife in an arranged marriage. She tries to reconcile the Bengali ideal of the perfect, passive wife with the demands of her new American life, but fails to make the transition from one world to another.

A newly wedded bride, Dimple has romantic and fanciful ideas but for Amit, a down-to-earth realist, joblessness has become a nightmare. As Alladi Uma explains the pathetic situation of jobless men,

Often a man's frustration at not finding employment, at not being able to get along in the world outside, at being impotent to protect either himself or his family, from the hostile environment makes him a tormentor at home. (13)

The agonizing situation transforms Dimple into an introvert and she strongly accuses that, "marriage had betrayed her, had not provided all the glittering things she had imagined" (W 102). The stereotypical expectations of a young girl is strongly embedded in her psyche that she reproves of any

deviation in her marital life, however comfortable it may be for an immigrant.

Amit fails Dimple physically, mentally and emotionally and "on her first day in the NYV Apartment, she felt like a star collapsing inwardly"(W 69). All her fears and forebodings, nightmares and psychological imbalance seep in because, "...her own body seemed curiously alien to her, filled with hate, malice and insane desire to hurt, yet weightless, almost airborne" (W 117). Though she longs for a change, when she is uprooted from her family, Dimple becomes sore over Amit and reminiscences the faith that accrued in her before marriage as, "Marriage, she was sure, would free her, fill her with passion. Discreet and virgin, she waited for real life to begin." (W 13)

The authorial definition of marriage is delivered through an article in a magazine,

Marriage is the song of the road and we should all sing it. Otherwise the virtues of our culture will wither and fall off by the wayside. Are you forgetting the unforgettable Sita of legends? Marriage alone teaches the virtues of sacrifice, responsibility and patience... if 'happiness' is our only goal in marriage as you claim, we should all be "happy as monkeys" and then where would our culture be? (W 27)

Through Dimple, Mukherjee seems to portray the hollowness of Bengali institutionalized marriage. Dimple's mental aberrations cannot bridge the hiatus between the dream world of imagination and the drab world of reality. When she marries him, she thinks it as a proper choice but fails to realize that it is not her choice.

Projecting her disappointment over the lives of many Indian girls in India and abroad, Mukherjee has established a strong favour for a radical change in the attitude of her protagonists through Dimple. The inability to bear the conflict within herself compels her to inflicting dangerous consequences upon her. And Dimple's consciousness is full of repulsive revolting images representing her repressed psyche. Amit's inattentiveness forces Dimple to alienation, psychosis and psychosomatic



disorder. Dimple's problem is within her, which plagues her constantly.

The literal meaning of the term Dimple being any slight surface depression is also suggestive of the psychic defect in the protagonist. She herself detests the name and cries despondently "The name just doesn't suit me" (W 18). The depression is not only superficial but also inherent in her psyche. Mukherjee has artistically maneuvered the character of Dimple that the depression in all the physical, mental and emotional planes gets projected in the name itself. The unhealthy introspection by the hypersensitive Dimple, results in taking recourse to the abysmal depth of psychosis. Neurosis results when one is compelled to repress one's desires and feelings, which generally is not in the accepted norms of society. In the Indian context and in particular, the feminine sensibility is closer to neurosis, in matters relating to marriage as in the case of Dimple. When restricted of expressing the true feelings, Dimple feels dejected and forlorn and seeks to resolve the problem neurotically.

Finding herself in a fragile and futile marital life, Dimple leads a life of emotional frigidity. When there is no meaningful communication with her husband, she finds the conception of a child also meaningless. Hence Mukherjee has metaphorically emphasized the act of destroying the pregnancy with the killing of a mouse. S.P. Swain has attributed the killing of the mouse with Dimple's destruction of her pregnancy as "in killing the mouse she has destroyed her own self" (86). The abnormal streak of violence is seen in her skipping her way to abort the unborn,

She had skipped rope until her legs grew numb and her stomach burned; then she had poured water from the heavy bucket over her head, shoulder, over the tight little curve of her stomach. She had poured until the last of the blood washed off her legs; then she had collapsed. (W 42)

In a typical Indian fashion, Dimple moves in with her mother-in-law, whom she loathes, and soon becomes pregnant, which she sees as an impediment to her new beginning. Severing the ties of traditional roles and constraints of womanhood,

She began to think of the baby as unfinished business. It cluttered up the preparation for going abroad. She did not want to carry any relics from her old life; given another chance she could be a more exciting person, take evening classes perhaps, become a librarian. She had heard that many Indian wives in the States became librarians. (W 42)

Dimple rejects the conception because she does not belong to the world of reality any more, "vomiting was real to her, but pregnancy was not" (W 31). Nagendra Kumar in his critique ascribes a motif to her act,

Symbolically, by revoking her motherhood, Dimple liberates herself from a traditional role of a Hindu wife of just bearing and rearing a child. Like the Western feminists, she asserts her will but her abortive act is a kind of moral and cultural suicide. (46)

For both Amit and Dimple, marriage is secular, a means toward individual happiness which needs no loyalty and she thinks "marriage was a chancy business; it would easily have been Jyoti Sen instead of Amit that she had married since both were of the same caste, and both were engineers" (W 85). Amit is also a victim in the hands of Dimple. She kills him for no fault of his and without warning as well. Dimple also fails Amit miserably by breaking the traditional role of a wife. Fruzetti M Lina in **The Gift of a Virgin** defines marriage in Hindu culture as,

A husband gives his new wife the symbols of a married woman; iron bangles and vermillion. Similarly a woman offers gifts of a santan (child) her reproductive organs, and her sexuality to her husband. (103)

Bharati Mukherjee has portrayed this hollowness of the Indian institutionalized marriage and the loss of old culture through Dimple, which is neither exciting nor exhilarating. Her shift to the US, the rootlessness that erupts out of immigration, free from caste, gender and family because of the dislocation and a new society, leaves her lonely and desolate, "a dying bonfire" (W 119). Like Jasmine, Dimple through torturous, physical, mental and emotional agony is driven to become violent and bizarre, ending in a cultural conflict within herself.

Janet M. Powers in her essay, comments on Dimple's illicit relationship with Milt Glasser as,

Like Sita, the good Hindu wife, Dimple has left Calcutta and gone with her husband to the forest, enduring not only physical comfort but also psychological distress. Yet because of the prison inadvertently created by Dimple's fear of New York City, her insensitive husband and the expected immigrant wife's role, she becomes vulnerable to 'kidnapping' by Milt Glasser, who is Ravana in American guise. (W 94)

Dimple, who has believed that she would be "free" to experience a life different and distanced from that which she had left behind in India, finds her existence in a nebulous, undefined social space that, paradoxically, reinforces her indigenous cultural moorings and she is most reminded of her "Indian-ness" among the "Americanized Indians" (W 77).

The shallowness in Dimple, frustration over her initial dream of marrying a neurosurgeon, drab surroundings leading to cultural alienation, the guilt of an illicit relationship, the disenchantment of married life and an inattentive husband are various reasons for the violence in Dimple. The pervasive spirit of violence in killing a mouse, "I'll get you, she screamed, there's no way out of this my friend" (W 35) is actually a rehearsal for the murder she commits later. Dimple, being neurotic moves to a state of lifelessness, builds up the tension and discharges it in the doing-away of her husband. While she is disintegrating wholly, Amit is uncaring and helpless,

... he never thought of such things; never thought how hard it is for her to keep quiet and smile though she was falling apart like a very old toy that she had been played with sometimes, quite roughly by children who claimed to love her. (W 212)

Her frustration finds expression in the cold-blooded murder of her husband, which actually is humiliating and degrading for a woman to have premeditated upon this idea. Like a woman trained to execute the action, Dimple advances to Amit;

She sneaked up on him and chose a spot, her favourite spot just under the hairline, where the mole was getting larger and browner...she brought her right hand up and with the knife stabbed the magical circle once, twice, seven times. (W 213)

Ironically, the disharmony in her marital life, transforms her from a docile charming girl to a kalli-like figure, "I'm terrible in crises" (W 204). A victim of marriage, Dimple totally devastated of her dreams and visions of a fairy tale like marital life, transforms herself to a ruthless murderer.

In a conservative society, both men and women become victimizers and fail to empathize with the victims, usually women. Neena Arora quoting Karl Marx views has observed, "Marriage is incontestably a form of exclusive private property" (58). But the social conditioning does not permit women to have a personal space in any social set up. Failed marriages pose a threat to the patriarchal structures in the Indian families. The women are entrapped in marriages with men who are not cruel but are impervious to the pleas of their wives for life and respect for their individuality. The dislocation and discord in the marital life and the ensuing disappointment in the psyche of the partner directs to disintegration of the marriage itself. Such relationships incomplete and fatal to the female psyche, forces them to nurture a sense of alienation leading to transformation. Virginia Woolf has propounded that "women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice the normal size"(37). The concept of woman as subservient to man is deep rooted in Indian culture. To conclude in the words of Rashmi Gaur in **Women's Writing: Some Facets**,

The chains of traditional marriage are heavy. In the absence of any escape route, wives often seek consolation in obsession, masochism or mental slavery leading to physical decay, disease and death. (29)

Existence is made possible for these victims only through their transformation from one identity to the other. Most of them transform from being a passive victim to a violent victimizer. Bharati

Mukherjee has projected her heroines with this kind of disreputable transformations which of course are true in real life situations. Jasmine of **Jasmine** imposes multiple reincarnations only to become a serial killer and Dimple in **Wife** devastated of her failed dreams becomes a ruthless murderer. The common chord that binds the victims is their victim position. The subtle contrast that is evident is the difference in the person who occupies the victim position. The protagonists of Mukherjee move from being a victim to that of a victimizer.

The ideas of the protagonists are progressive in both the novelists and the actions take different turns in the novels. The actions are also progressive in Mukherjee's novels. While they fail to succeed in making their marriage a success, they succeed in fulfilling their desires in their own way.

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