

**STATE OF WOMEN IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S *JASMINE AND WIFE***P. Bindu Madhavi<sup>\*1</sup>, Dr. Geetha Senthil Kumar<sup>2</sup><sup>1\*</sup>(Research Scholar, Karpagam University, Coimbatore.)<sup>2</sup>(Associate Professor, Department of English, Amrita School of Engineering, Amrita University, Coimbatore)**ABSTRACT**

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The image of women in fiction has undergone a remarkable change during the last four decades. Women writers have moved away from the traditional portrayals of enduring, self-sacrificing women characters, towards conflicted women searching for identity and no longer characterized their status as victims. Bharati Mukherjee is a prolific Indian – born American writer. She represents the contemporary women's struggle and dive deep into the distorted psyche of those immigrants who have been surviving in the conflict of traditional Indian values inherent in their personality and their fascination for western mode of living that they have chosen to achieve greater freedom in the liberal and dynamic Western Society. This paper is an attempt to put forth the state of immigrant women and their suffering at different phases of life as portrayed in the novels of *Jasmine, Wife* by Bharati Mukherjee.

**Keywords:** *Cross-Culture, Dispossession, Expatriation, Exile, Identity, Immigration, Oppression.*

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Indian women writers have been abounding in full bloom spreading their unique aroma in the vast field of literature. They are identified for their freshness, versatility and native flavour. The patriarchal set up that has been transforming, resulted in the emergence of many Indian women writers who are known for the vigorous and poignant feminine confession. Many women writers have subsequently taken up such themes and published flock of works in India and abroad. A lion's share has been taken by these writers in such thematic works. A host of Indian women writers have been trying their hands in channelizing greater discontent and disgust on various social problems. They have raised their voices against a range of serious problems faced by women that are accepted under the array of customs and traditions. The treatment of women characters in the novels of many of these women writers, particularly in the works of Bharati Mukherjee transcends boundaries and universalizes their female subjectivity. Her works reveals the actual position of women in the Indian society and the treatment they are subjected to with all diversities in the guise of 'Unity'. On the whole, she wrote about the urban middle class people, the segment of the society they know the best. These writers reveal the characteristics of diasporic fiction which expresses a deep felt concern for the fate of the immigrants in cross cultural contexts and the state of 'in-betweenness'. The confrontation between tradition and modernity is the key factor behind the works of acclaimed migrant writer like Bharathi Mukherjee.

"Women write differently not because they are different psychologically from men, but because their social experiences are different." – Virginia Woolf

Bharati Mukherjee is one among such most sensitive writers of modern India who is undoubtedly a perfect artist capturing the complex subtleties of human relationships in the smooth textures of simple and lyrical idiom. Her writings display the struggle, anguish and rebellion of women in a society of prerogatives and imbalances. In such a literary world that is quickly being packed with many local but foreign authors. Bharati Mukherjee, a scholarly writer who has lived in India, Canada, and the United States, is uniquely positioned to examine the fragmentary nature of characters with "multiple identities".

Politics of identity permeate Mukherjee's texts. Her novels, *Jasmine* and *Wife*, and explore the shifting identities of diasporic women, both in the present-day United States, Canada, and India, and in the past literary texts. Samir Dayal describes the title character of *Jasmine* as "a perpetual nomad" who "shuttles between differing identities".

This paper is an attempt to study, observe and present the position of women and the problems they face both in India and abroad. Through the chief characters, Jasmine and Dimple, the attempt is made to give a picture of women who suffer from man-made cultural and traditional prescriptions as well as sanctions which do not allow them live a life free from such restraints. The social issues that the protagonists raise are of cosmopolitan significance. The picture that emerges from the study of the novels is not only that of female being victimized by male but also that of female coming out as strong character to combat the challenges that come on her way. Thus, the paper discusses the construction of politics of identity in Mukherjee's *Jasmine* and *Wife*.

Bharathi Mukherjee's characters redefine themselves with each new spatial pattern. However, in *Jasmine*, Mukherjee explores what happens to a gendered identity that has been smashed by hammer blows, and melted down to triviality. Jasmine, the title character and narrator of the novel, was born approximately 1965 in a rural Indian village called Hasnpur. She tells her story as a twenty-four-year-old widow who is pregnant, living in Iowa with her crippled lover, Bud Ripplemeyer. 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. These 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. Throughout the course of the novel, the title character's identity, along with her name, changes again and again: from Jyoti to Jasmine, Jasmine to Jazzy, Jazzy to Jase and Jase to Jane. In chronological order, Jasmine moves from Hasnpur, Punjab, to Fowlers Key, Florida (near Tampa), to Flushing, New York, to Manhattan, to



Baden, Iowa, and finally is off to California as the novel ends.

The state of exile, a sense of loss, the pain of separation and disorientation makes *Jasmine* symbolic of the quest for identity in an alien land. Jasmine, the protagonist of the novel, undergoes several transformations during her journey of life in America, from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jane, and often experiences a deep sense of estrangement resulting in a fluid state of identity. This journey becomes a tale of moral courage, a search for self-awareness and self-assertion. Uprooted from her native land India, Jyoti does her best to introduce herself into the new and alien society as an immigrant; the culmination finally indicated in Jasmine's pregnancy with the child of a white man - Bud. Jasmine changes herself constantly, ferrying between multiple identities in different spaces and at different times. Jasmine shows the most predictable crusade towards Americanization and its obvious uncertainty and without feeling infuriated she survives to make a new start in the host country.

Geographically, the story begins in India and takes off from Europe to America, where it bounces back and forth from Florida through New York to proceed to Iowa, then finally lands in California. The novelist deliberately transports her in time and space again and again so as to bring in a sense of instability into the novel. She is seen against the backdrop of the rigid and patriarchal Indian society in which her life is controlled and dominated by her father and brothers.

However, Jyoti seeks a modern and educated husband who has no faith in dowries and traditions, and thus finds a US based modern-thinking man, Prakash. Prakash encourages Jyoti to study English, and symbolically gives Jyoti a new name Jasmine, and a new life. "He wanted to break down the Jyoti as I'd been in Hasnapur and make me a new kind of city woman. To break off the past, he gave me a new name; Jasmine....Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttled between identities." (Jasmine- 77)

Jyoti's transformation starts here from a village girl under the shell of her father and brothers to a wife of an American traditional husband who gives her all liberties. Jasmine's happiness is short-lived. She is widowed and returns to India to her family. Now she has to choose between the rigid

traditions of her family and perform Sati (a woman jumps into fire after her husband's death), or continue to live the life of Jasmine in America. Jasmine sways between the past and the present attempting to come to terms with the two worlds, one of 'nativity' and the other as an 'immigrant'. Hailing from an oppressive and a rural family in India, Jyoti comes to America in search of a more fruitful life and to realize the dreams of her husband, Prakash. Jasmine sets off on an agonizing trip as an illegal immigrant to Florida, and thus begins her symbolic trip of transformations, displacement, and a search for identity.

Jasmine undergoes her next transformation from a dutiful traditional Indian wife Jasmine to Jase when she meets the intellectual Taylor and then moves on to become Bud's Jane. It seems likely that as Jasmine leaves for California with Taylor and Duff, her identity continues to transform. The author depicts this transformation and transition as a positive and an optimistic journey. Jasmine creates a new world consisting of new ideas and values, constantly unmasking her past to establish a new cultural identity by incorporating new desires, skills, and habits. This transition is defined not only in the changes in her attitude, but more significantly in her relationship with men.

She continues to transform from Jasmine to Jane and Jase. The author depicts this transformation and transition as a positive and an optimistic journey. Jasmine creates a new world consisting of new ideas and values, constantly unmasking her past to establish a new cultural identity by incorporating new desires, skills, and habits. This transition is defined not only in the changes in her attitude, but more significantly in her relationship with men.

In New York, Jasmine clearly recognizes her ability to adapt. "I wanted to become a person they thought they saw: humorous, intelligent, refined, and affectionate. Not illegal, not murderer not widowed, raped, destitute, fearful." (Jasmine- 171) The abilities to adjust to the requirements of a changing environment and to free from the past are Jasmine's survival skills. They allow her to deal with the ethics and culture of two dissimilar worlds and her occurrence with different identities of Jyoti and Jasmine, where Jasmine feels hanging between the



traditional and the modern world and with controlled and independent love, offered by her Indian husband, Prakash.

Jasmine then meets Lillian Gordon, staying with whom begins her process of assimilation by learning how to become American. Lillian bestows upon her the nickname 'Jazzy', a symbol of her entrance into and acceptance of American culture which she welcomes gladly. After that, she moves in with a traditional Indian family in Hushing, New York. Jasmine soon finds herself stifled by the inertia of this home for it was completely isolated from everything American. Considering it to be a stasis (motionless) in her progression towards a new life, she tries to separate herself from all that is Indian and to forget her past completely.

*Jasmine* proceeds with her migratory pattern and moves to New York City, to become the 'au pair' (*Care Taker*) for an American family. With Taylor, his wife Wylie and their daughter Duff, she creates yet another identity upon a new perception of herself. But though Jasmine creates a new identity for every new situation, her former identities are never completely erased. They emerge in specific moments in the text and exacerbate the tension, thereby causing Jasmine to create another more dominant identity, different from all those that came before. While living with the Hayes, Jasmine begins to master the English language, empowering herself to further appropriate American culture. Taylor begins to call her 'Jase' suggesting that she does not have power in the creation of her new self. Also, for the first time in the Hayes household, Jasmine becomes aware of her racial identity because Taylor and his friends understood that she was from South Asia and tried to associate her with that community. Jasmine constantly shuttles in search of a concrete identity. Bharati Mukherjee ends the book on a novel note by emphasizing the complex and alternating nature of identity of a woman in exile.

In the novel *Wife*, the protagonist Dimple wants to break through the traditional taboos of a wife. The opening sentences of the novel introduce the protagonist and set the ironic tone. She marries Amit Basu who is migrating to U.S.A. She is expected to play the role of an ideal Indian wife, stay at home and keep the house for the husband. Her frustration

is built up gradually by the circumstances. She resents being a wife in the Basu family and rebels against wifedom in feminists perspectives as seen in Bharathi Mukerjee's novels in many ways. One such way is including a miscarriage by skipping herself free from her pregnancy, which she views as a Basu's property even in her womb. But her self-identity is avoided by her marriage. She aspires for herself recognition and fulfillment of her dream. But Basu behaves in a different way. He wants her to be a docile and submissive wife. So Dimple hates Basu and his behaviour. He needs her only to satisfy his sexual desires. Finally, in a state of depression, she kills Amit in an act of self liberation and commits suicide. Her act, in this sense liberates her as she disregards the discourse that culturally and ideologically has so far construed her identity by harmonizing her feelings and desires as a woman. In *Wife*, Mukherjee iterates the concept of marginalization of woman by explaining- and exploring the way in which culture and ideology construct feminine identity.

In *Wife*, we see Mukerjee's enigma of existence than constructing identity leading to psychological imbalances which causes neurosis. But throughout the novel the protagonist Dimple has been portrayed as a free minded and rebellious wife. She has no inhibition in expressing whatever she feels. Thus, we observe two different characters Jasmine and Dimple in two different dimensions.

Finally, it can be understood that the protagonists of the two novels of Bharathi Mukherjee experience a sense of loss, alienation, and thrive for identity. But they desperately try to get adjusted in the West to the extent possible to them in order to meet their ends successfully and satisfy their long cherished dreams. Thus the words of Rabbi Sofer - "No woman is required to build the world by destroying herself" rightly justify the perspective.

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