

WE ARE NOT OURSELVES - FEMALE CHARACTERS IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S NOVELS

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Abstract

Louis A. Sass, borrowing from Shlovsky's *defamiliarization* discusses certain patients, affected by specific mental disturbances, as "taking a very distant or else fragmentary microscopic view of an object, avoiding standard causal/narrative schemas of meaning and describing an object in terms of its mere existence or geometrical form (that is, by avoiding use of its name and suppressing all references to its usual functional role in human life)". With the above quotation suggestive for the theoretical framework employed, the present study aims at discussing the Indian-American writer, Bharati Mukherjee's three works- the novel "Wife" and "Jasmine", the story and the novel- from a Gothic perspective, focusing on the psychology of the characters, in order to argue for madness and monstrosity as both subversive survival strategies and/or escapes from narrow patriarchal, political, social and cultural confines.

Key Words: *Gothic, madness, patriarchy, strategy, womanhood*

JEL Classification: Z

1. INTRODUCTION

One becomes invariably obsessed with Gothic and its excessive tropes when reading texts informed by this protean genre. This is even more the case when the interpretation somehow revolves around mental disturbances of various sorts, transitory or permanently damaged psychologies, *monstrosity* and ultimately *madness*. As mentioned by Brewster, the issue in discussion is "whose pathology is in the question" when "defining madness in a Gothic text", in other words, when capturing the essence of monstrosity as deviation from the norm? Is it possible, at the present stage of literary studies to contend ourselves with the approach taken by traditional psychoanalysis according to which we should be able to "detect" traces of madness in the very biography of the authors and their characters, and interpret the texts accordingly? Moreover, isn't this kind of

approach invariably luring us also, as readers, into fictive madness, thus hindering *objective* interpretation and offering instead a critical re-production of madness which may be or not be there in the text, in the first place? (Brewster,2001:281) If we are to escape this vicious circle, then we should get somehow empowered and avoid what Punter calls “the Gothic delirium” of which we may all suffer at certain times.(Punter,1996:186) However, there are poems, short stories, plays and novels which simply cannot be approached in the absence of the deep immersion into the Gothic tropes of *madness* and *monstrosity* which, in turn, can provide answer to more ‘quotidian’ and poignant issues, such as family relations, economic status, alienation, cultural and geographical mobility, etc. Expressed differently, in Brooks model of psychoanalytic criticism, relating to madness in Gothic fiction involves “a willingness, a desire, to enter into the delusional systems of texts, to espouse their hallucinated vision, in an attempt to master and be mastered by their power of conviction.” (Brooks,1987:16) *Mastering and being mastered by the texts* where *madness* plays an important role means, in my opinion, both succumbing to their aesthetic power *and* attributing *meaning* outside *irrationality*, thus reading beyond the disguise and the ‘discourse’ of pathology. With these observations in mind, the present paper is going to focus on Mukherjee’s *Wife*, and *Jasmine* (both the story and the novel) and attempt to analyze the various ways in which *madness* and *monstrosity* are either staples of the texts or they subtly insinuate themselves on the substance of the texts (characters, plot, atmosphere). Moreover, the aim of such an interpretation is also to argue for madness and monstrosity as both subversive survival strategies and/or escapes from narrow patriarchal, political, social and cultural confines.

2. TEXTS’ ANALYSIS

When discussing the distinctions between *Female Gothic* and *Male Gothic* Ellen Moers emphasizes the fact that Gothic novels-particularly Anne Radcliffe’s-put forward the archetypal “travelling woman: the woman who moves, acts, who copes with vicissitudes and changes.”(Moers,1977:126). De Lamotte argues for the fate of the Gothic woman, focused on “escape”, even if the escape is “fraught with difficulty”, even if the heroine might “know too little”, might have “no place to go if she gets out” (DeLamotte,1989:178). Deleuze and Guattari, although without a specific reference to Gothic women, also discuss “woman”, “not in the conventional sense of a discrete identity tied to a bodily form and represented according to cultural types and signifying structures: there is no final or fixed subject position in Deleuze and Guattari, only composite, multiple points of movement, change, process.”(Deleuze and Guattari,1988:173). Interestingly enough, the same “multiple points of movement, change, process”, or “lines of

flight” can be visible when comparing Mukherjee, the author, to the female characters she has penned so far. Therefore, before plunging into the *mad* interstices of interpretation, a few words about the author might be of help in facilitating the understanding of the characters.

Bharati Mukherjee is an Indian-born American writer, of Bengali origins. She was born in Calcutta (now ‘Kolkata’), in a well-off Brahmin family. She got her BA from the University of Calcutta, her MA from the University of Baroda, and then moved on to study in the USA, the University of Iowa, from where she obtained another MA and a Doctorate. After living for a while with her husband in Canada, they returned to the USA, where she is currently Professor of Comparative Literature at Berkeley University, California. Mukherjee’s works cover several genres: novels (*The Tiger’s Daughter*-1971, *Wife*-1975, *Jasmine*-1981, *The Holder of the World*-1993, *Leave It To Me*-1997, *Desirable Daughters*-2002, *The Tree Bride*-2004), short stories collections (*Darkness*-1985, *The Middleman and Other Stories*-1988, *A Father*), non-fiction (*The Sorrow and the Terror: The Haunting Legacy or Air India Tragedy*-1987, *Political Culture and Leadership in India*-1991, *Regionalism in Indian perspective*-1992).

Especially in her second and third novel, Mukherjee draws heavily on the themes of *madness* and *schizophrenia*, perceived as leitmotifs of the immigrant’s experience. Mukherjee’s second novel *Wife* is, like *Jasmine*, a study of immigration, but not the much-celebrated type, hailed by the critic Andrew Gurr and the main voice of immigrant writing, Salman Rushdie. As both Gurr and Rushdie state, being an immigrant means, at least ideally speaking, being able and willing to enter a process of self-reconstruction. The focus of such process is on the reconstruction of an identity, in no way one-levelled, but based on a plurality and an openness which embrace without being limited to the petrified social codes of either the native or the adopted country.(Gurr,1981:7, Rushdie,1991:394). In her stories and interviews, Mukherjee situates herself at the antipode of this celebratory position. She dismisses comfortable answers that might be given to the obsessive questions that haunt the psyche of the immigrant. Such flight from complacency and what she regards as facile definitions for the true condition of the immigrant is particularly visible in the novel *Wife*.

Dimple’s destiny seems to be doomed from the very moment readers learn her name. Although an extremely popular and chic one for Indian girls in the early ‘70s, this name also suggests slight mental disturbances. The name-omen thus takes over the character, who resorts to *homicidal aggression* as the only strategy to solve the issues of uprootedness, the sense of personal, cultural, social

alienation and confusion. Thus, after perceiving her husband as the main culprit for her present state, she murders him. Dimple's immigration manifests itself as *insanity, madness*; thus, *schizophrenia* is depicted as the only path available to a troubled consciousness, forced to function in unusual and trying circumstances. Dimple is thus caught in the *no man's land* space between on the one hand, the need to repress any traces of her Indianness if she hopes to fit in the new environment, and on the other hand, the betrayed promises of a so-called liberated world, which, nevertheless rejects her. Thus *madness* may be read here as the very essence of the immigrant condition, an alternative metaphor for it. The equally *maddening* models according to whom Dimple measures her own domestic and psychological performances are none other than Sita and Savitri, Indian mythical figures of 'heroism' and 'devotion'. Both Dimple and Jasmine have to contend with the subtly disguised tyranny of such 'heroic' role models and at the same time attempt to escape this petrifying mould. However, their responses differ profoundly, with Dimple getting crushed by her quotidian existence divorced from any trace of heroism, and displaying an inability to cope with new experiences, and Jasmine walking away freely towards yet another 'incarnation.' Thus, read from the perspective of Deleuze and Guattari, the female characters' attempts to *flee* their fate may result in two alternatives; it can either produce "a sort of delirium", a going "off the rails", in Dimple's case, or, fleeing can be active and "put a system to flight", in Jasmine's. (Deleuze and Parnet 1987:36, 40). *Schizophrenia* reclaims the whole of Dimple and is depicted by Mukherjee as *the* reality of immigrant experience which in *Wife* will ultimately lead to the murder and later on, suicide:

She brought her right hand up and with the knife stabbed...each time a little harder, until the milk in the bowl of cereal was a pretty pink and the flakes were mushy and would have embarrassed any advertiser, and then she saw the head fall off – but of course it was her imagination because she was not sure anymore what she had seen on TV and what she had seen in the private screen of three A.M. – and it stayed upright on the counter top, still with the eyes averted from her face, and she said very loudly to the knife..."I wonder if Leni can make a base for it; she is supposed to be very clever with her fingers." Women on television got away with murder. (Mukherjee,1987:212-213).

As pointed out by Andrew Hock Soon Ng in his *Interrogating Interstices; Gothic Aesthetics in Postcolonial Asian and Asian American Literature* a comparison between *Wife* and *Jasmine* renders "*Wife* (...) more 'truthful' in its reflection of the immigrant dilemma...In killing him, she is merely realising what she has all along believed themselves to be –dead, or at least, not "really

alive.”(Ng,2007:142). In Ma’s words, Dimple’s act of violence and aggression also displays all the symptoms of *schizophrenia*: “Prior to (...) homicide, characters exhibit classic schizophrenic symptoms of a skewed perception of the external world and of themselves, one marked by microscopic and macabre details signifying a fracturing psyche on the verge of self-annihilation.”(Ma,1998:47 qtd. in Ng:142). I would notice here that regardless of how “more ‘truthful’”, in the sense of “truth” assimilated with and irreversibly subjected to murderous and self-murderous *schizophrenia*, Dimple’s solution to the immigrant dilemma is but a stage in Mukherjee’s fiction. As we shall see further on, although Jasmine in the eponymous novel also heavily relies on acts of violence, aggression and short lapses into *madness*, apparently inescapable stages in what may be seen as a process of negotiating identities, she nevertheless masters them in a different, self-empowering manner.

The protagonist of the novel *Jasmine* has her origins in a short story of the same name included in *The Middleman* collection of short stories. However, although there are similarities between the novel and the short story characters, Mukherjee’s replacement of the omniscient narrator of the short story with the first person narrative of the heroine in the novel signifies an important shift in the authorial attitude. In the short story Mukherjee engages in a refutation of Naipaul’s argument, as she perceived it, that “if you are born far from the centre of the universe, you are doomed to an incomplete, worthless little life.” (Connell, Grearson and Grimes,1990:25).The short story *Jasmine*, Mukherjee advises us, should be read as the story of a “smart” and “desirous”(27) girl who knows “exactly what she wants and what she is willing to trade off in order to get what she wants.”(27). The end of the story presents us with a *Jasmine* making love with her employer, and favourably comparing the present circumstances with the past ones. Now, she thinks that “she’d never felt this good on the island where men did this all the time, and girls went along with it always for favours. You couldn’t feel really good in a nothing place.”(Mukherjee,1988:135) The seemingly celebrating and victorious note of her incipient integration in the American society, which is supposed to mean a newly-found but all the more precious freedom, is nevertheless obscured by the observation that “she forgot all the dreariness of her new life and gave herself up to it.”(Mukherjee,1988:135). *Jasmine*’s new existence is still drudgery, it still lacks the attributes of liveliness, cheerfulness and resourcefulness, which are the qualities of the character, unable to be projected onto the new circumstances; the readers are made aware of it, too. Thus, it can be inferred that the use of the omniscient perspective marks a female character’s saga, which is still not a story of success, but a tentative way of

adapting to a new existence, which is, in spite of the appearances of emancipation and self-determination, not much more than a perfected replica of the former one.

Judie Newman, in her chapter on the novel *Jasmine* in *The Ballistic Bard: Postcolonial Fictions* argues that the shift in the narrative voice from the third person to the first in the novel “restores her own voice to Jasmine”, “avoids reduplicating the male gaze” and, she infers, the Western imperial gaze, which in either narrative would construct the “Third World Woman as Other” in the very process of “looking” itself. (Newman,1995:146). Newman’s appreciation of the independence of the protagonist of *Jasmine* – the novel – was replaced by a lot of recent discontent among post-colonialist and feminists alike. As observed by Warhol-Down, who attempts to refute what she perceives to be recent unjust critiques of the text, stemming from “ironic readings of the novel trajectory”, “among feminists and postcolonialist readers, practically everybody hates *Jasmine*.”(Warhol-Down,2008:1).

The novel’s plot revolves around Jyoti born in the small village of Hasnapur, India. She then immigrates to the USA as a very young widow, to fulfil her late husband’s wishes, only to turn there into a figure of revenge and ‘unforgivable’-to some- adaptability. The arguments that the harsh critics of *Jasmine* invoke are connected to the way in which Mukherjee seemingly indulges in painting a less-than- flattering image of ‘paralyzed’ India vs. ‘marathon-runner’ America. Anu Aneja, Gurleen Grewal, Sangeeta Ray and Kristen Carter-Sanborn more or less agree on the fact that in *Jasmine* Mukherjee *orientalises* India, depicted as “locked into the inertia of stasis, the land of Yama/Death”(Grewal,1993:186), as a “regressive world stricken by poverty, communal violence, and oppressive social practices”(Ray,1998:227-228), where womanhood is depicted as “an oppressed caricature”(Aneja,1993:79). Carter-Sanborn furthermore vilifies *Jasmine* by suggesting parallels with *Jane Eyre* and especially the victimised figure of Bertha Mason, and wondering “whether Jasmine’s ‘discovery’ of an American selfhood covers up a similar complicity in the elision of the ‘third world’ woman Mukherjee’s narrator purportedly speaks as and for.”(Carter-Sanborn,1994:574-75).

It goes without saying that such readings of *Jasmine* are largely unhelpful. As Reiss notices, especially feminist and postcolonialist theorists tend to analyze texts from a position of establishing and promoting binaries, undoubtedly in an attempt to gloss over their “own historical situation and (...) the historical determinants of their chosen cultural object” and be able to both promote their own agenda and manoeuvre under the matrix of nationalism. (Reiss,2004:118).

Very frequently and very unnecessarily, such critics tend to obfuscate the text itself and emit bitter judgements either on the blameable inability or unwillingness of writers such as Mukherjee to deplore the situation of the third world woman and represent her as forever trapped in her subaltern position, glorifying only Indian traditions and rejecting as impure any other cultural influences. Especially when India and Indian social, political, cultural realities are depicted in less than encomiastic tones, the critical discourse becomes incensed.

Furthermore, with such articles focusing on Jasmine's supposed *unrepresentativeness* for the larger category of immigrants, and immigrant women particularly, the more important issue of the heroine's struggle against being taken over by *madness*, read as *irreversible self-destructiveness*, maybe a more facile solution at different moments of crisis in the character's life, has received comparatively less attention. In this I am aware that I tend to *universalize* Jasmine's "management of pain" and see it as symptomatic for mankind as a whole, but I consider this essentialist approach more constructive in discussing the character's *plight*. For, in spite of the seemingly happy-ending which presents us with a heroine ready to embark on yet another adventure and add a new layer of selfhood to an already hardened core, we should keep in mind the fact that this novel stubbornly refuses to achieve closure and offer the bourgeois comfort that postcolonialists unanimously vilify and feminists regard as complacency with patriarchal norms. In other words, we should not opt for conveniently overlooking the fact that although Jasmine has managed to perform psychological surgery on herself. Throughout her odyssey, she remains, to employ Bhabha's concept, "transnational yet homeless". (Bhabha,2005:13-26).

There are numerous instances in Mukherjee's text which depict the Jasmine as *active subject* and not as *passive object*, functioning under the sign of difference, out-of-the-ordinariness, violence and rebellion. Such moments are also representative for brief but powerful encounters with physical and psychological traumas, as well as *madness* and/or *stasis* as some of their potential effects. At the very beginning of the novel, in the opening scene we are in the village of Hasnapur, where the astrologer discloses Jyoti's future widowhood and exile; the seven-year old girl strongly rejects the predictions, and manages to transform both the physical violence against her, as well as the image of a fractured future into a profoundly personal gain. "Chucked hard" on her head, the heroine "fell": "My teeth cut into my tongue. A twig sticking out of the bundle of firewood I'd scavenged punched a starshaped wound into my forehead. I lay still...I was nothing, a speck in the solar system. I was helpless, doomed. The star bled."(Mukherjee, 1991:1) However, she tells her sisters that the wound is in fact

a “third eye” which, according to their mother’s stories and her own appropriations of such tales, from now on will qualify her as a “sage”.(2) I am reading the above scene as the first instance when Jyoti rewrites her position from passive object to empowered subject. As if to wash away the weight of the astrologer’s implacably pronounced fate of doom, she plunges into the water, swims furiously and “suddenly my fingers scraped the soft waterlogged carcass of a small dog”, whose “body broke in two” letting a terrible “stench” leak out. The stench will “stay with her”, even when “at twenty-four” years old, she lives in “Baden, Elsa County, Iowa” and will forever remind her of “*what I don’t want to become.*”(Mukherjee,1989:2-3, italics mine). I read the haunting image of the small dog whose body broke into two, as a metaphor of annunciation, symptomatic for the Self that the heroine needs to forge, if she is to survive in her new environment, permanently cut from her roots and her former life. Therefore, throughout her odyssey Jasmine will have to perform a certain kind of *splitting*, if her story is to be read as a relative success of immigrant assimilation. However, this *splitting*, unlike the literal one translated in the horrible decay, stasis, rot and disintegration of the small dog is voluntary, that of a “splitting subject.” As mentioned by Benjamin: “Unlike the ‘split subject’, a concept that is set up in opposition to ‘unity’-relying on the falseness of its binary Other to generate its oppositional truth – the notion of splitting does not require that we posit a preexisting unity or an ideal of unity to which splitting gives the lie.”(Benjamin,1998:89)

The symbolism of the encounter with the figure of the *dog*, either dead and decomposing, or rabid, *mad* and ferociously aggressive is replicated when the heroine is attacked by a rabid animal, “a dog but not a dog”, “bigger than a pariah” sidling and snucking around “like a jackal”, making “low, terrible, gullety growls”, who clearly “had picked me as an enemy.”(Mukherjee,1991:49). In killing him with her staff, it appears clear that the protagonist assumes *agency* and even, it may be said, *moral agency*, in the Utilitarian philosophers’ sense, i.e. the *conscious avoidance of suffering*. Thus, this scene is also representative for the character’s close escape from being taken over by rabies, falling into *madness*, and eventually dying a horrible and gruesome death.

Arguably the most Gothic scene, charged with physical and psychological extremes, *madness* even, is the episode in which Jasmine, who has finally reached America after an enormous set of tribulations, is raped in a hotel room by a horribly-disfigured smuggler called Half-Face whom she then kills. Carter-Sanborn reads in the mentioned scene a divorce from agency, sustained in the many ritualistic gestures, as well as the general atmosphere of a dissociation of

will. After the shower, in the steam, the heroine's face becomes indistinct in the bathroom mirror, a detail from which Carter-Sanborn infers that the revenge is not her own, but rather the result of the temporary possession by the Hindu goddess Kali. After the murder Jasmine feels that she has become "walking death", "death incarnate" (Mukherjee,1991:106), the very embodiment of Kali, in Carter-Sanborn's reading. It is precisely this recourse to the Hindu goddess that the critic reads as a "dissociative state" or as blocked access to "agency."(Carter-Sanborn,1994:589).

Contrary to Carter-Sanborn's arguments, in my and other critics' readings, the murder scene is pivotal in the economy of the novel for an overpowering claim to agency and an irreversible split *from madness*, the initiating of a state of freedom and self-empowerment, polished to perfection during her American odyssey. Thus, Jasmine's decision to kill her rapist is an entirely voluntary act, divorced from any sort of external pressures; seen from this perspective, the invocation of Kali recalls "the double motif that characterises the Gothic", but this time it is "redeployed to recuperate the traumatised self", so that "Jasmine's alter ego actually *saves* her."(Ng,2007:145). For this particular instance, which seems to be the result of joint efforts, but not indicative of an identity erasure, I also consider Deleuze and Guattari's statements in *A Thousand Plateaus* to be the most suggestive description applicable to the character Jasmine and her deeds: "We are no longer ourselves. *Each will know his own*. We have been *aided, inspired, multiplied*."(Deleuze and Guattari,1987:3). Read from this perspective, it is inescapable to remark on the underlying concept of the dormant but not dead Indian mythological heritage, 're-activated' in times of need, *inspiring and multiplying* Jasmine. However, at least in Jasmine's case, multiplication does not signify possession; it rather confesses respectful allegiance to the past while making the present and contemplating the future.

I am far from suggesting that Carter-Sanborn's speculations lack insight. However, I read her statements about Kali and her invading presence, demanding possession of Jasmine as valuable in a different context. What seems to even supersede this otherwise tremendously powerful episode in *Jasmine* is the story of its "genesis", told by Mukherjee herself. Accordingly, she did not start out intending to write such a *violent* passage; what happens when she writes is that *the characters take over* and create their own stories:

I didn't know I was going to write it until I started that paragraph. Very often I don't know what my character is going to do. I have a vague sense when I start out with the first draft, and then when the writing is really going well I become so

dead to the real world around me and so alive, alert to the character's tissue, I'm so deeply inside the skin of my character, that the scenes write themselves. I didn't know until I wrote that scene that Jasmine was going to do it. (http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/arts/features/womenwriters/mukherjee_work.shtml)

3. CONCLUSION

In view of the authorial confession, once can address the question of *madness* in the text as metaphorically gliding, surfacing in character and author alike; its evocation is a fictive or speculative process but then, so is writing itself. As pointed out by Brewster: "writing *at the edge of delirium*-creatively and critically-is the condition of thinking, the unavoidable crisis of reason." (Brewster, 2001:283). Therefore, Mukherjee's self-confessed 'possession' by her character, the 'possession' of Jasmine by Kali (if Carter-Sanborn's reading is in any way correct) converge in an act of *creative madness*, *delirium* of creation of a new world, forged in *violence* (either psychological, or physical, or both), not guaranteed to be successful, but with an obvious potential for personal, material and spiritual growth. In *Jasmine* and, as seen from the above, in the author's surgery on the psychodynamics of the process of writing *madness*, *the formation of self*, *the refusal of stasis* are closely linked to *violence*. Jasmine's life creed is probably what lies at the heart of the mystery of her problematic becoming: "There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake ourselves. *We murder* who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the image of dreams." (Mukherjee, 1991:25). Jasmine's cynical musings on the *madness* of tackling violent personal and trans-cultural transformations are a clear translation in fiction of Mukherjee's own odyssey related to her own multiple relocations (Bengal-U.S-Canada-U.S.):

We (immigrants) have experienced rapid changes in the history of the nations in which we lived. When we uproot ourselves from those countries and come here, either by choice or out of necessity, we suddenly must absorb 200 years of American history and learn to adapt to American society. Our lives are remarkable, often heroic...Although they (the fictional emigrant characters) are often hurt or depressed by setbacks in their new lives and occupations, they do not give up. They take risks they wouldn't have taken in their old, comfortable worlds to solve their problems. As they change citizenship, they are reborn. (Mukherjee, 1988:28).

The reality of being *hurt* and *depressed*, therefore forever trapped in-between worlds, selves, expectations and self-expectations *doubles* and *uncannily haunts*

the celebrating tone of the transformational process, which, on the one hand motivated Mukherjee, on the other annoyed so many of her critics. Jasmine's story of forging multiple identities also infers the inescapability of such a plight and the *madness*, albeit seemingly contained, of simultaneously living past, present and future. Therefore, it can be argued that although the character evades the expectations of her very author and after heroically negotiating states of physical and psychological liminality, nevertheless ends her odyssey with the words: "Watch me reposition the stars, I whisper to the astrologer who floats cross-legged above my kitchen-stove...I cry into Taylor's shoulder, cry through all the lives I've given birth to, cry for my dead."(Mukherjee, 1991:214).

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