Bharati Mukherjee’s 1989 novel Jasmine is the story of the 24-years-old pregnant widow from Punjab. She, who is born as Jyoti in the village of Hasnapur in Jalandhar district eighteen years after the partition riots, is predicted by astrologer of her widowhood and exile. Since her birth, she experiences sufferings and obstacles that were prepared for her by her patriarchal system of her society. Like most of the Indian women, she is born as the disappointing and unwanted child to the family as she is the fifth daughter and the seventh of nine children. Her mother wants her to be killed when she is born because she is not an asset rather punches holes in pocket when married off. Additionally, girls are seen as belongings of their future husbands. That is why families are reluctant about educating them or giving them extra facilities. Jasmine becomes a survivor with “a ruby-red choker of bruise around her [my] throat and sapphire fingerprints on her [my] collarbone.”(New York: Fawcett Crest, 1989). So she is almost strangled to death who wants to be doctor. In short, they are named as curses directed towards women “who needed to be punished for sin committed in other incarnations” (Mukheerjee: 34) according to religious belief. But she survives that attack and remembers, “I survived the snipping. My grandmother may have named Jyoti, light but in surviving I was already Jane, a fighter and adapter.” (Mukherjee: 40) Thus, the first conflict Jyoti experiences is the one between the dominant patriarchal system and the modern life that she desires. She loses her sense of belonging to the life and traditions of rural India.

“When sorrows come, they come not single spies,

But in battalions”.(Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act-4, Sc-5). Similarly, there is no letup of hardships in the life of Jasmine. Instead of the expectations of the traditional Indian society, Prakash, her liberated outlook husband, wants to see Jasmine as an individual with a difference. So when he is planning to go America for higher studies, Prakash is killed by the Sikh fundamentalist-the Khalsa terrorists on the
eve of their departure. Her dream is shattered at the unexpected and sudden death of her husband. Grief-stricken and frustrated, she leaves for America to perform “Sati”.

Although she is willing for migration, she is not welcomed in America since her journey which she calls her “odyssey” (Mukherjee: 91) is an illegal one and she is able to enter the dreamland she desires so much only from back door:

“ The first thing I saw were the two cones of a nuclear plant, and smoke spreading from them in complicated but seemingly purposeful patterns, edges lit by the rising sun, like a gay, intricate map of an unexplored island continent, against the pale unscratched blue sky. I waded through Eden’s waste: plastic bottles, floating oranges, boards, sodden boxes, white and green plastic sacks tied shut but picked open by birds and pulled apart by crabs”. (Mukherjee: 95).

Jasmine’s American Dream collapses at this very first sight, but the worst is yet to come at the remote motel in Florida where she has to stop for her first night on this alien land. With a sad note of her American journey, she is raped by the ugly monster Half Face.

“He looked at me and at the suitcase…He hefted the bag onto the bed and unsnapped the catches. Out came my sandalwood Gampati. He propped it up against a picture on the dresser. He noticed my photo album and picked it up. Pictures of Praksh and of Pitaji, wrapped in an old sari …At the bottom, the blue suit.

“Who is this for”? he demanded. “A kid”?

“It is my husband’s”, I said.

“Kind of a scrary little bastard, ain’t he”? He laughed and dropped the jacket back in the suitcase”. (Mukherhee:101)

Half Face, who had “lost an eye and ear and most of his cheek in a paddy field in Vietnam”. (Mukherjee: 104), was the Captain of the ship in which Jasmine sailed Florida.

Jasmine is so traumatized by his abasement that she wants to kill herself, being robbed of her chastity. But she does not. She slices her tongue and pours blood in the mouth of the rapist. She stabs Half Face.

She feels everything that is dear to her is invaded by the dirty hands of half face. Therefore, she burns them all in a metal trash bin imitating a ‘sati’ ritual before leaving the motel.

After the nightmarish brutality, Jasmine, then, is rescued by a kind hearted American lady Lilian Gordon who provides her with shelter and her daughter’s clothes. Ms. Gordon gives Jasmine her first American identity by renaming her ‘Jazzy’. With her help, she is taken to meet Professor Vadhera who helped Prakash in securing admission in an engineering college. But the home of the Vadheras was not much different to the one she had in Hasnapur. In short, the Vadheras, being traditional and conservative, follow the strict Indian principles, order and authority. She ends up looking after the old folks in the household just like a widowed daughter-in-law. She finds herself ‘a prisoner doing unreal time’ there and made her life difficult at the Vadhera household. Her only option there was total silence and she finds losing herself in the superficial rituals and cultural adherence in that house.

Means, the constricted life Jasmine has in Flushing does not make her happy. She does not want to go back to the home and the identity she experienced in Hasnapur. As she states:

“I could not admit that I had accustomed myself to American clothes. American clothes disguised my widowhood. In a T-shirt and cords, I was taken for a student. In this apartment of artificially maintained Indianness, I wanted to distance myself from everything Indian, everything Jyoti-like. To them, I was a widow who should show a proper modesty of appearance and attitude. If not, it appeared I was competing with Nirmala”. (145)
Playing the role of the Indian widow, enacting the identity of the old home Jyoti leads Jasmine to depression:

“I was spiraling into depression behind the fortress of Punjabiiness. Some afternoons when Professorji was out working, and Nirmala was in her shop, and the old Vadheras were snoring through their siestas, I would find myself in the bathroom with the light off, head down on the cold, cracked rim of the sink, sobbing from unnamed, unfulfilled wants. In Flushing I felt immured. And imaginary brick wall topped with barbed wire cut me off from the past and kept me from breaking into the future. I was a prisoner doing unreal time. (148). She is then stuck in her old way of life, playing the limiting role of the Hindu widow and that makes her very unhappy because now she yearns for different experiences. “Living in Flushing makes Jasmine enact the role of widow much the way she did in Hasnapur. Because of her widowhood, her life options are very limited. The artificial safety of that home is actually responsible for her confinement, unhappiness and suffocation”. (Helenice Nolasco Queiroz: Desirable Relations: Diaspora And Gender Relations in Bharati Mukheerje’s Jasmine and Desirable Daughters)

However, she gets Mr. Vadhera to arrange a green card for her and on getting it, flies to a new terrain. She seeks the help of Lillian Gordon’s daughter Kate to arrange a job for her. Thus, Jasmine gets a job as a baby-sitter or ‘day-mummy’ in the house of Taylor and Wylie Hayes in Manhattan. While working as a care-giver, she also takes up part time jobs like answering phones and tutoring graduate students in Punjabi in the University. The Hayes’s treatment of her as the ‘caregiver’ rather than a domestic help, helps her tremendously in her Americanization. After his wife Wyle left him, he feels that he needs emotional support and confesses his love to Jasmine. She is overwhelmed by his sincerity and gentleness and gets closer to him. She says, “I became an American in an apartment on Claremont Avenue across the street from a Barnard College Dormitory. I lived with Taylor and Wylie Hayes for nearly two years. Duff was my child; Taylor and Wylie were my parents, my teachers, my family”. (Mukherjee: Jasmine, New York: Fawcett Crest, 1989)

“All things are subject to decay and when fate summons, monarchs must obey”. (Dryden, Mac Flecnoe-1-2) Basing on this, her happiness, however, is over when she believes that she is being followed by Sukhawinder, the Khalasa Lion terrorist who killed her husband. The protagonist, then, in order to protect Taylor and Duff from her violent past, flees to Iowa in search of another home. Then she leaves her role as ‘caregiver’ and moves to Iowa to become the common-law wife of Bud Ripple Meyer, a middle-aged divorcee. She is impregnated with Bud’s child through live-in relationship and artificial relationship. She becomes the step-mother of Du, a sixteen-year old Vietnam War victim adopted by Bud. Bud is separated from Karin and his grown-up sons leave him. She is now called Jane, the unofficial wife of the fifty-two-years-old wheeled-chair local banker.

Jasmine is born to suffer. Violence struck her life again after a disgruntled farmer shot Bud leaving him crippled.

She cares and serves him. And now her pregnancy has been a catalyst in reuniting Bud and Karin, making Karin understands that she (Jane) does not want to marry him. To quote Mukherjee, “Bud would have left Karin on twisted in midlife until he dropped. I was catalyst. Not a cause”. (P-200)

As the novel moves towards closure, it is seen that to Jane’s utter surprise she gets a letter from Taylor expressing his wish to take her. The unexpected letter worries her about the impact on Bud when Du decides to go California and stay with his sister and family. She understands Du’s condition as she herself faces the heat and dust of exilement. Taylor convinces her that there would be no wrong to leave Bud and she agrees to go with him. Her suffering ends. She quotes, “The moment I have dreamed a thousand times finally arrives” (P-237) and I am not choosing between two men…A caregiver’s life is a good life, a worthy life…It is not guilt that I feel it’s relief”. (P-240)
CONCLUSION

Suffering is the synonymous with Jyoti-Jasmine-Jase-Jane who traverses through a series of obstacles and hardships in life. A victim of society, she is not only neglected and ignored but also subjected to psychic torment and angst. While many of her problems rise mostly situations in the Indian context, to the maximum extent Jasmine’s problems are her own creations. She is a self-made person and her ego and innate love for power create a number of problems. Right from her early days we find her opposing traditional codes and marry in her own will. She even defies social conventions to advance her career and economic independence. She realizes that obstacle and misfortune are inevitable in life; inextricably inter-woven. Since hardship is a part and parcel of life, one has to have it. There is no solution in escapement. This was what Fyodor Dostoyevsky said in Crime and Punishment, “Pain and suffering are always inevitable for a large intelligence and a deep heart”. As a protagonist, she understands and brings home the message that negating suffering means negating success.

Her pain, her suffering cannot be uttered in public. But that shame and harassment bring a kind of metaphorical transformation. Jasmine feels that she is raped not only physically but also psychologically. To be a woman, thus, is to embrace forced sickness, both physically and mentally.

REFERENCES

3. Helenice Nolasco Queiroz: Desirable Relations: Diaspora And Gender