

ISSUES OF IDENTITY AND CONFLICT BETWEEN PRESENT AND PAST VALUES: A STUDY OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S *JASMINE*

Dr. Anil Sehrawat

Assistant Professor,

Jaypee University of Information Technology,

Waknaghat, Solan.

Himachal Pradesh 173234

Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee has given a new voice and direction to the women's literature in English. Though it is tough to categorize her fiction, she mostly deals with the ideas concerning identity, multiculturalism, post colonialism, and globalization, etc. She does not like to be called an Indian migrant author and very firmly positions herself as an American author writing American literature. While talking about her position as an American writer, she says, "I totally consider myself an American writer, and that has been my big battle: to get to realize that my roots as a writer are no longer, if they ever were, among Indian writers, but that I am writing about the territory, about the feelings, of a new kind of pioneer here in America" (Tandon 135). But most of the times her women are of Indian origin, rooted initially in their culture and traditions, struggling for their identity. Through these characters, she has talked about the concept of New Woman which may be considered "the emotional segregation of women and man, which brought about and led to the development of a specifically female world" (Gupta 154). The present paper deals with her novel *Jasmine* in which the protagonist fights against the superstitions and feudal traditions in an attempt to find a dignified and independent existence. The novel shows the protagonist's zeal which makes her rise against all the odds that come in her way during her journey. She "takes her life into her own hands and makes herself an American, very much like her creator" (Tondon 134). It was in that alien land that Jasmine finds her identity and meaning of her life. The novel is one her most celebrated and powerful novels which presents to us a powerful woman who refuses to be led by others.

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Jasmine may be considered as the protagonist's journey to find her real self and identity. From the very moment of her birth, Jasmine struggles to live and never descends to a status of a hopeless, passive victim till the end of the novel. Though she has to lose many people and make numerous sacrifices on this journey, she never gives up. In a way, she turns out to be victorious even in her most difficult times. She never accepts her defeat in her quest for a dignified life.

Jasmine was born as Jyoti in an Indian village named Hasnapur in Punjab. She was "the fifth daughter, the seventh of nine children" (*Jasmine* 39). Considering the attitude of people in many places towards a girl child, it is obvious that her birth is neither welcomed nor celebrated. In fact, it is considered a sin for a woman to bear a girl child. Therefore Jasmine tells us:

If I had been a boy, my birth in a bountiful year would have marked me as lucky, a child with a special destiny to fulfill. But daughters were curses. A daughter had to be married off before she could even enter heaven, and dowries beggared families for generations. Gods with infinite memories visited the girl children on women who needed to be punished for sins committed in other incarnations. My mother's past must have been heavy with wrongs. (*Jasmine* 39)

Her struggle to live a life against the dictates of a patriarchal society starts from her birth itself which she continues till the end. She does not believe in compromising and continues to move ahead braving every odd that crosses her path to attaining her identity. We come to know that Jasmine survives even when her grandmother tries to kill her at her birth:

When the midwife carried me out, my sisters tell me, I had a ruby-red choker of bruise around my throat and sapphire fingerprints on my collarbone...I survived the sniping. My grandmother may have named me

Jyoti, Light, but in surviving I was already Jane, a fighter and adapter.
(*Jasmine* 40)

When Jasmine was seven only, she was told by a fortune teller that she will become a widow at the age of seventeen and also talk about her journey to an alien land. Jasmine, at the time even doesn't accept what he says. She strongly disagrees with him and tells fortuneteller: "You're a crazy old man. You don't know what my future holds!" (*Jasmine* 3). At this when the fortune teller hits her and she gets a wound on her forehead, she considers the wound to be her third eye which she thinks will help her see her future. She maintains her faith in her bright future and thinks that she will not accept her fate as such without struggling for a better and dignified life:

"It's not a scar," I shouted, "It's my third eye." In the stories that our mother recited, the holiest sages developed an extra eye right in the middles of their foreheads. Through that eye they peered out into invisible worlds. "Now I'm a sage." (*Jasmine* 5)

On many occasions, critics have tried to see autobiographical elements in the novels of Mukherjee. Many of her heroines resemble her in their actions and the preferences and decisions they take in their lives. Mukherjee does not deny some similarities in her life and her characters' but she, at the same time, does not consider any of her novels autobiographical. In *Jasmine*, for example, the protagonist's aspirations for a new life, her position as a girl child in the family, her desires to change her destiny in some ways match Mukherjee's personal life. Mukherjee herself accepts in an interview:

Jasmine contains the shape of my life and my desires, but no incident is at all autobiographical...I do believe in personal striving. Like Jasmine I want to reposition the stars. At the same time, I'm aware of a larger design. My way of solving this is to say that every single moment has a purpose. I want to discover that purpose. (Edwards 34)

Jasmine's marriage to Prakash starts an altogether different chapter in her life. She gets married to him contrary to the tradition and even her expectations. There is now dowry and big marriage party for her as she tells us, "Ours was a no-dowry, no-guests Registry Office wedding in a town, a 250-rupee taxi ride south of Hasnapur" (*Jasmine* 75). Her husband is a modern man who has revolutionary ideas regarding life. He considers men and women to be equal. He is strongly against the patriarchal beliefs that degrade a woman and put her on a lower pedestal than a man:

My husband, Prakash Vihh, was a modern man, a city man. He did trash some traditions, right from the beginning... "There's no room in modern India for feudalism," he declared... For the uncle, love was control. Respect was obedience. For Prakash, love was letting go. Independence, self-reliance. (*Jasmine* 75-76)

Though Jasmine likes the treatment that she receives from her husband but at the same time, she feels dangling between her past and the present. This in fact proves to be a transition phase for her where she "felt suspended between the worlds" (*Jasmine* 77). Like other girls of her village, she wanted to have children as soon as possible. But Prakash always discouraged her and told her that there are more important things in their lives which they should take care of first. He would say:

We aren't going to *spawn*! We aren't ignorant peasants!" Prakash yelled every time I told him that I wanted to get pregnant. I was fifteen, and girls

in the village, and my mother, were beginning to talk. He said he was too poor to start a family and I was too young. (*Jasmine* 77)

Though she resists mildly and takes time to understand his ideas and decision, but she eventually feels at peace. She starts dreaming of a better future with her husband when he decides to go abroad for his studies. He makes her call him by his first name. It was at this time that she gets her name Jasmine from her husband. He gives her a new identity and helps her come out of her past as she says, “he gave me a new name: Jasmine. He said, “You are small and sweet and heady, my Jasmine. You’ll quicken the whole world with your perfume” (*Jasmine* 77).

Unfortunately, everything does not turn out to be what she had expected as her husband gets killed in a bomb attack. The bomb was in fact implanted for women who were considered to be modern by some radicals. All her dreams shatter in a moment and she is left alone. She goes to live with her mother for a while but refuses to live the life of widow there. During her stay there, she gets reminded of her husband’s dreams and his views regarding the status of women. She remembers that he wanted her to go ahead in life. He had told her: “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” (*Jasmine* 96). Jasmine decides not to waste her life there and prepares to live the dreams of her husband and leave for America. She says, “Prakash had taken Jyoti and created Jasmine, and Jasmine would complete the mission of Prakash” (*Jasmine* 97). With the help of her brothers, she makes arrangements to illegally move to America. Though the transformation of Jyoti had already started with her husband in India, but this visit to an alien land puts her on a path that totally changes her life.

The first shock that Jasmine receives after her departure from India in the foreign land was in the form of ‘Half-Face.’ He had helped her in travelling to Florida. He was called so because he had “lost an eye and ear and most of his cheek in a paddy field in Vietnam” (*Jasmine* 104). ‘Half-Face’ not only rapes her but also humiliates her for her Indian origin. He makes fun of her husband. He ridicules her purpose of coming illegally to America when she tells him about her dead husband and his belongings which she was carrying with her. Overcoming her initial thoughts of bringing an end to her life after this humiliation, she revives back. This time also, she proves her zeal to live better than her adversaries and kills ‘Half-Face.’ She not only kills him but goes through a purification ritual by burning the things that she had carried from India:

Jasmine’s rape signals a crucial moment in her successive transformations and in the formation of her ethics of survival. Instead of killing herself and passively conforming to an identity politics that would define her solely as a victim, she decides instead to kill her attacker. With ritualistic attentiveness, she first thoroughly cleanses her body, and then she purifies her soul through prayer. (Myrsiades and McGuire 399)

The incident changes her life and her value system completely and she emerges as a totally changed human being. She abandons her mission of coming to America and begins a new journey for herself:

I took out a blue-jean jacket bought for me in Delhi by my brothers... With the first streaks of dawn, my first full American day, I walked out the front drive of the motel to the highway and began my journey, travelling light.” (*Jasmine* 107-108)

In America, it is Lillian Gordan who introduces Jasmine to the American life. Once again, Jasmine gets a new name and this time from Lillian. She calls her Jazzy. Jasmine gladly accepts her new name and also tries to accept and adjust to her new life there. Lillian helps her get rid of her past and become an American. She tells her, “Now remember, if you walk and talk American, they’ll think you were born here. Most Americans can’t imagine anything else” (*Jasmine* 134-35). After this, Jasmine moves to Mr. Vadhera’s house. But there also, she does not stay for long. The Punjabi atmosphere of the house reminds her of her Indian origin and her past life. Jasmine, now Jazzy, refuses to be tortured by the images from her past and moves on by leaving Professor’s house. She moves to Manhattan and starts living with Taylor as his daughter Duff’s caretaker. This time, she is named Jase by Taylor. One more time, Jasmine accepts her new name and identity, but in a different way. In fact, it is in Taylor’s house that her real transformation starts. Jasmine herself accepts that, “I became an American in an apartment on Claremont Avenue [New York]” (*Jasmine* 165). She starts internalizing American ways and values in a natural way. She happily accepts the changes that this new life brings to her life and personality. She confidently says, “I changed because I wanted to. To bunker oneself inside nostalgia, to sheathe the heart in a bulletproof vest, was to be a coward. On Claremont Avenue, in the Hayeses’ big, clean, brightly lit apartment, I bloomed from a diffident alien with forged documents into adventurous Jase” (*Jasmine* 185-186).

She shares a sense of belongingness with Taylor as they get intimate with each other. She starts finding a meaning in her troubled life. Jasmine’s life, however, once again gets derailed when she unwillingly has to take the decision of leaving Taylor. She takes this decision for the safety of Taylor and his family when she sees Sukhwinder, her husband’s assassin there.

Jasmine moves to Iowa from Manhattan where she meets Ripplemeyer. She promises to help her find a job in her son’s bank. Here, Bud falls in love with her and she finds her happiness with his adopted son Du. At this time when she gets pregnant with Bud’s child she finds herself struggling with guilt as she thinks that she is spoiling his relationship with his wife. She feels torn between her present and her past values once again. As she says, “I am caught between the promise of America and old world dutifulness” (*Jasmine* 240). Taylor also comes back into her life at this time and asks her to join him. Finally rising above her dilemma and her indecisiveness, she takes a conscious decision of going with Taylor. In choosing Taylor she does not feel that she has deserted Bud. She consciously takes a practical decision for her life without getting tortured by false morals and values.

Eventually Jasmine transforms completely from an “Indian village girl, whose grandmother wants to marry her off at 11, into an American woman who finally thinks for herself” (Robertson 139). By taking the decision to go to America alone using forged documents, by deciding to stay there even after getting raped and facing numerous other setbacks, she proves the prevalent myth wrong that, “Village girls are like cattle; whichever way you lead them, that is the way they will go” (*Jasmine* 46). When she had to choose between Taylor and Bud, she does not go for sacrificing her happiness just because Bud needed her care. She boldly asserts herself even at this difficult time. The path that takes Jasmine to this place was chosen by her only. Like many other heroines of Bharati Mukherjee, Jasmine also finds her many a times struggling with her Indian values and morals and faltering between traditions and modernity. However, she never lets these ambiguities to be an impediment in her path towards freedom and progress.

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