

Negotiation with Identities in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

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Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee is a prominent novelist, short-story and non-fiction writer. She has portrayed the experiences faced by Indians in the foreign land. In her novels, her protagonists feel identity crisis, but they are liberated at the end, without any feeling of guilt and prove themselves as pioneers. Jasmine is such a novel, in which the title character feels herself encountered with many identities, yet she is not succumb to any of these identities. Rather, she proves herself to be a pioneer. The present paper has been focused on the character of Jasmine and her change in identity with the change in location, yet she does not succumb to any identity, whether it is ethnic, cultural, diasporic or gender identity. Rather she liberates herself from all kinds of boundaries.

Key Words: Negotiation, Jasmine, Bharati Mukherjee, identity, liberation, patriarchal, female self.

In literature, the themes of self-awareness, search for individual self or identity are in vogue, whether it belongs to any class, country, caste, language or culture. Indian women writers have their protagonists in conflict with the dominant tradition in a patriarchal society. Similarly, the women writers writing about diasporic experiences like Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai provide their protagonists various possibilities to escape from the traditional norms of the society. Their migration makes them feel like an individual free from the shackles of the society. Moreover, introduced to the culture of the host countries, they try to assert their ethnic, gender and cultural identities. Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* is such a novel in which its protagonist does not succumb to any fixed identity. She transforms herself

into an individual who is not bounded by any ethnic, cultural identities. She is neither a passive person nor does she victimise herself; rather she negotiates with every new identity imposed upon her by others.

Bharati Mukherjee is an Indian-born American novelist, short-story and non-fiction writer. In her works, the main focus is on the phenomenon of migration, the experiences faced by immigrants, the struggle faced by the female protagonists to achieve autonomous selfhood in the new lands, and in some of the works she has described the contentment experienced by the immigrants in the country of the immigrants. Instead of the feelings of nostalgia, Mukherjee writes about the experiences of the expatriates, whether they are happy or sad. Born in Calcutta (now Kolkata), West Bengal, Mukherjee's works reflect Indian culture and western experience. Her works include novels: *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971), *Wife* (1975), *Jasmine* (1989), *The Holder of the World* (1993), *Leave It to Me* (1997), *Desirable Daughters* (2002), *The Tree Bride* (2004), *Miss New India* (2011); short-story collections: *Darkness* (1985), *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988), *A Father*: a memoir, *Days and Nights in Calcutta* (1977). Her works of non-fiction include *The Sorrow and the Terror: The Haunting Legacy of the Air India Tragedy* (1987), *Political Culture and Leadership in India* (1991), *Regionalism in Indian Perspective* (1992). Out of these *Days and Nights in Calcutta* and *The Sorrow and the Terror* are written jointly with her husband Clark Blaise.

Title of the novel *Jasmine* denotes a delicate flower, but the protagonist defies her name, as she does not prove herself a delicate person, but a pragmatic, hard woman, who has courage to live life on her own terms. She does not accept but defies even the name which is the symbol of delicacy.

In the words of Stanley M. Stephen, "*Jasmine* is a female bildungsroman" (71). It is the story of growing up of the protagonist. It deals with how an ordinary woman of rural background develops into a strong, independent woman, who takes decisions of her own life.

Jasmine is the story of a seventeen-year-old girl Jyoti from Punjab who wants to lead her life according to her own wishes. But after her husband is murdered in a communal attack, she leaves India for the US. During her journey she has to face many problems

including rape and eventually she positions herself as a caregiver after a series of jobs. Through the course of the novel, the title character's identity changes, along with her name: from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jazzy to Jase to Jane. It is the story of a girl who makes many mistakes but has the courage to take risks. The protagonist of the novel prefers American individualism to Indian traditionalism and duty; that is why she chooses Taylor who is the representative of the America with endless possibilities.

At the early age of seven, an astrologer predicts that she will end up a widow and an exile. But she does not agree with him that "You don't know what my future holds!" (3) and whispered, "I don't believe you" (4). Due to her argumentation she has to bear the anger of the astrologer, and due to it, she gets a star-shaped scar on her forehead. This scar is seen as a curse to her but she does not treat it as a curse but her "third eye" and feels like "a sage". The third eye is the symbol of power, shakti incarnate, and she wants to prove that even a female like her can possess a third eye like Lord Shiva.

Jasmine belongs to a society where women were assigned specific duties and they were expected to show some "feminine" traits. As Toril Moi, an eminent feminist critic, in her essay "Feminist, Female, Feminine", states, "Patriarchy has developed a whole series of 'feminine' characteristics (sweetness, modesty, subservience, humility, etc.)" (123) and "[F]eminine' represents nurture, and 'female' nature in this usage. Femininity is a cultural construct: one isn't born a woman, one becomes one, as Simone de Beauvoir puts it" (Moi 122). Women are culturally nurtured and these characteristics are imposed on them. According to Beauvoir, these feminine traits are "a myth invented by men to confine women to their oppressed state" (qtd in Walters 99). But Jasmine rejects the feminine identity of being modest, subservient and passive. Her protest against the astrologist is a symbol of it.

Jasmine creates a balance between tradition and modernity. She accepts the qualities of both the cultures – Indian and American. She takes goodness, charity, adaptability, care from Indian culture, whereas she takes free spirit, careless confidence, ease and self-absorption from the American culture. The ideas like adoption and widow remarriage appear strange to her firstly, but she adopts these ideas: "Adoption was as foreign to me as the idea

of widow remarriage” (170). She feels surprised that Duff is an adopted child, later she herself adopts Du along with Bud.

Jasmine does not accept Indian culture and widowhood in particular. She has seen the condition of widows in her village Hasnapur where “Vimla set herself on fire” (61) after her husband’s death, and after her father’s death her mother “tried to throw herself on his funeral pyre” (61) and when she was not allowed to do that, she “shaved her head with a razor, wrapped her body in coarse cloth, and sat all day in a corner” and fed only “once a day” (61). According to Babu:

Jasmine rebels against the system, whenever she finds herself differing from it. It is time that the poverty and violence prevailing in the background call into play with her initiative and resourcefulness and force her to “fend” for herself. (62)

As Helen Cixous opines that in patriarchal society there is prevalence of binary oppositions in which each opposition can be analysed as a hierarchy where the ‘feminine side is always seen as negative, powerless instance. In the end, victory is equated with activity and the male is always the victor, and in such a society, “Either woman is passive or she does not exist” (qtd in Moi 125). But Jasmine tries to subvert this ideology. She not only survives, but proves herself to be victorious. Rejecting the social role and life of a widow, Jasmine alone travels illegally to the United States with forged documents.

She does not accept God and religion if they are not for the betterment of others and only for killing her near and dear ones. When her grandmother Dida says that her husband dies because she goes against the religion by marrying Prakash in a Christian way and calling him by his name and celebrating his desertion from India to make money abroad as God was displeased. But Jasmine does not accept all this. She says, “. . . if God sent Sukkhi to kill my husband, then I renounce God. I spit on God” (98).

Even in America, Jasmine resists the stagnation of Indian culture when she is taken in by Professorji and family who are representatives of Indian culture and tradition. She stays there for five months in Queens. Professorji’s family tries to guard the purity of their culture. And they have made their own means of entertainment which they enjoy on weekends, eat

food of their native land and give way to nostalgia. But Jasmine feels life in Queens has the same stigmas and limitations for widows as it has in Hasnapur. Even after migrating to America, this community has not left its “feudalism”. So she desires to leave this feudal community as early as possible as Prakash has made Jasmine out of Jyoti and Jasmine has no desire to go back to that traditional place which she has rejected much time back.

Jasmine is always ready to shed her cultural traits or ideologies. Whenever she thinks that there is need to change according to the environment, she does so. She learns the American way of life-style from Lillian Gordon. She comes to know that a person can live only if he/she adapts himself/herself according to the alien environment.

Jasmine shows courage by killing Half-Face, who raped her in a motel in Florida. She killed her tormentor emerging as Kali. After that incident, she rejects her decision to commit *suttee*. She decides to live a new life by burning all the things which belong to the old world. According to Jyoti Tabia Hermit: “This act of Jasmine is a kind of self-assertion and reflects a self-affirming transformation” (6).

Another feature of Jasmine is that she experiences motherhood even without giving birth to a child. Duff is the adopted child of Taylor and Wylie whereas Du is adopted by Bud and Jane herself. Although she is not a real mother of Du, yet she feels attachment with him. When he leaves his house, it brings a great shock to Jasmine. Thus, Jasmine experiences the stereotypical roles without entering into any relationship successfully. This is also true in case of her wifehood. She acts as a wife for Taylor and Bud even without marrying them:

Bud cries, “Wife? Did I hear wife? . . . Marry me before the baby comes.”
(213)

But actually she has a live-in-relationship with Bud whereas she acts as a “Day- Mummy” for Duff in Taylor’s house. She takes Bud’s child through artificial insemination, which is also a step towards rejection of traditions. This quality of Jasmine is fully feminist as she rejects the social stereotypical roles of mother and wife and enjoys that status without bounded by any relationship.

Jasmine defies the societal norms by having live-in-relationship with Bud without marriage. As Bud is maimed after being shot, Jasmine has to play the male-role in their

relationship. Many critics term this feature of Jasmine as the exploitation of third world woman by the first world man. But Mukherjee in an interview with Francisco Collado Rodrigioz discards this by saying that, for Jasmine “sexuality” is “a pleasure rather than as dutiful procreation”. For her, “sex is a way of taking charge of her own body” and “a metaphor for liberation” (304) and “self-control takes the form of sexual liberation” (Gabriel 132).

Jasmine transforms into a “true immigrant”. In the beginning, she dwindle between the two worlds, whether to remember her past or forget it for her present. She has been expecting the child of Bud, acts for some time as a mother of Du who is an expatriate like her; she leaves Bud for Taylor, whom she thinks she really loves. She changes and adapts as the time demands. Doing this, she proves herself to be a typical migrant, a diasporic person, who shifts from place to place. This kind of assimilation is not easy for the immigrants and most of them feel uprooted from their own country and face a new and unfamiliar culture, new set of rules and regulations and a hostile community of people who do not mix very easily with them. But Jasmine welcomes the freedom and possibilities given by America. Jasmine takes every change in her life as usual. She has no nostalgia for her past life except reminiscences of her husband Prakash. She changes locations, and her change in locations provides her opportunities to reject the traditions and live a life of her own choice. Her loss of identity cannot be called a restriction, but rather liberation. With her shedding of her previous life, she sheds the oppression. Her previous self dies when she burns her husband’s suit and her sari. Then she learns from Lilian Gordon that one should live a life forgetting past, “Let the past make you wary, by all means. But do not let it deform you” (131). She proves herself to be an independent person, who has an urge to survive. That is why she murders the Half-Face instead of herself. She does not want herself to be cowed down by any circumstances or difficulties. That is the reason that she does not allow anyone to make decisions for her.

After growing more confident in her powers to shape a new identity for herself, she is able to express her sexual desires more candidly; as is the reason for her decision to leave Bud and live along with Taylor, grasping at yet another chance of happiness. She asserts that she is not choosing between men, but using her right to try to reposition the stars instead of

accepting her fate passively. She does not want to condemn herself for what she does not want for herself. Rejecting Bud, she frees herself from duty towards the man, who has refused to acknowledge her roots; she chooses Taylor who loves her Indian's. Her rejection of old world dutifulness and acceptance of new world of hopefulness is an indication of her being ready to come to terms with the past.

The patriarchal system of the society does not allow the women to think about their own happiness and they are expected only to care about the happiness of others. John Stuart Mill, in his work *The Subjection of Women* (1869), writes that: "All the moralities tell them that it is the duty of woman, and all the current sentimentalities that it is their nature, to live for others" (qtd in Walters 47). But she subverts the existing norm of the day and lives for her own self and not for others.

All through her adventurous journey, Jasmine faces many situations where she has to make choices or take decision. She does not lose time in taking decision because her future depends upon it, whether it be the departure from Taylor and Duff's world, killing of Half-Face, pleading before Professor Vadhera for making a fake green card or to go with Taylor and Duff leaving Bud, she makes decisions instantly and also profitably. At all costs, she does not give anyone the right to make decisions for her. This quality of hers makes her different from other stereotypical women.

Furthermore, in *Jasmine*, Mukherjee has given prominence to the sexual relationships in a person's life. For establishing her sexual relationships, Jasmine does not succumb to any relationship nor is she bound by dutifulness. Jasmine takes the place of Karin in Bud's life and later she goes with Taylor, whom she loves. In a patriarchal society, a woman who desires a man is considered bold. So this act of Jasmine is bold and feminist.

At the end of the novel, Jasmine emerges as an independent woman, liberated from the restrictions, who does not need any support from her male counterpart and who lives according to her own ideas and wishes and is not steered by the dominant male society. Her influence on characters like Bud, Karin, Du, Taylor and Darrel is an ample proof of it. The untimely death of her husband, her rootlessness and the initial exploitation is the cause of her quest for her female self. These incidents make her sensitive to her own happiness and reject

the way she has been living her life. Moreover, her change in location and exposure to another culture provide her opportunities to a free and more liberated self.

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