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Social critique in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

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The authors' aim in this paper is to observe, examine and present the existing position of women and the problems they face both in India and abroad. Through the main character, Jasmine, 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 constraints. The social issues that the protagonist raises are of cosmopolitan significance. The picture that emerges from the study of the novel 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. Through the paper the endeavor is to encompass the social and cultural issues through the mouth of a very dominant female character who is successful in bringing about a cultural and social change by presenting her condition in cinematographic manner.

Key words: Female sexuality, immigrants, criticism, Jasmine, Bharati Mukherjee.

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary feminist criticism is the historical outgrowth of the feminist movement that began in the 1960s and continues to flourish into the twenty-first century. Like their predecessors, the contemporary feminists explore the relationship between gender and language and the issues of both overt and tacit discrimination against women.

In the social structure of World, Women were expected to focus on practical domestic pursuits and activities that encouraged the betterment of their families only, and more particularly, their husbands. In most cases education for women was not advocated, it was thought to be detrimental to the traditional female virtues of innocence and morality. Women who spoke out against the patriarchal system of gender roles or any injustice ran the risk of being exiled from their communities, or worse; unmarried women in particular were the targets of witch-hunts. Because of this great gender inequality and somewhat non-uniform social hierarchy, male and female, in spite of becoming two individuals, have been

caste as two different cultural beings having utterly different life experiences. In this reference the comments of a great writer, Simone de Beauvoir throws light on the condition of the fairer sex in the society:

This humanity is male and man defines women not in herself but as relative to HIM, SHE is not regarded as autonomous being...she is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not HE with reference to HER; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, HE is the absolute - SHE is the other (Beauvoir, 1983: 86).

Female sexuality is not seen as a personal or private matter, but a family concern whether it is marriage, education or any other activity associated with their lives. Feminism is a reaction against the gender biasness. It is an attempt to throw a challenge on the age-long tradition of gender differentiation and to analyze, comprehend and

clarify how and why the feminine sensibility is different from masculinity or masculine experiences treating them as two equal individuals. As democracy is of the people, for the people and by the people, so feminism can also be interpreted as a people movement - of, by, and for the females. Feminism looks into the relationship between men and women with a new insight through literature in the form of visionary reinterpretation of writings by men and their effects on women, representation of women in the texts, texts by women and women's portrayal of men and their reaction towards the gender roles. So feminism with its main thrust on gender and sexuality plays a vital role in studying the construction of masculine and feminine identities. So in literary texts, Feminism brings to scrutiny the portrayals of gender roles, which tend to impose social norms, customs, conventions, laws and expectations on the grounds of gender discrimination. In this context, Suswhila Singh, a critic on feminist literature, observes that:

As a philosophy of life, feminism opposes women's subordination to men in the family and society, along with men's claim to define what is best for women without consulting them; thereby offering a frontal challenge to patriarchal thought, social organization and control mechanisms (Singh, 1991).

Another feminist critic, Chaman Nahal elaborates it by saying that:

I define feminism as a mode of existence in which women is free of the dependence syndrome. There is a dependence syndrome: whether it is husband or the father or the community or whether it is a religious group, ethnic group, when women free themselves of the dependence syndrome and lead a normal life, my idea of feminism materializes (Nahal, 1991).

The present day feminist thought is not anti-men but seeks to destroy the traditional masculine hierarchy because the concept of completeness is in both men and women and the two understanding and supporting each other.

ANALYSIS OF THE NOVEL

Novel captures the various facets of man's relationship in a concrete societal context and women figure inevitably in such relationships. A study of women characters in Indian fiction assumes added significance because of the ambivalent attitude they engender among men in general and their male creators in fiction in particulars seeing in

her both a goddess and a mere means of sexual gratification. It is this duality which one comes across in varying proportions in different Indian novelists. The woman has been the focus of many literary works in the period under scrutiny. The wide variety of the portrayals of women in Indian Literature after Independence in 1947, coupled with the curious lack or absence of any systematic study of the general literary sensibility of the period towards the women has prompted this study.

In an age of alienation, of growing intellectual crises, even more in a developing nation like India, the woman serves as a symbol, as a rallying point for the artist's dissatisfaction and disorientation with the 'status quo'. There is no doubt that The Indian women are now beginning to stir out of their placid stoicism. Arising political and social consciousness in a fertile milieu has brought them out into open in protest marches against discrimination, dowry deaths, rape and exploitation. The woman in the Indian novel now reflects the shift in the sensibility of the writers as well as the readers' whole human being, regardless of difference in sex, color, religion, caste and country.

DISCUSSION

Bharati Mukherjee is an established voice of Indian Diaspora in North America and a significant feminist novelist. Born into a Bengali speaking, Hindu Brahmin family in Calcutta in 1940, Bharati Mukherjee left India for the University of Iowa in the United States of America in 1962 where she met and married the writer Clark Blaise. She first lived at her husband's ancestral home at Canada as a citizen till 1980, then moved to U.S., and finally to San Francisco, California, where she continues to live and work. Mukherjee became a naturalized U.S. citizen in 1988.

In her creative career of more than thirty years, Mukherjee has been engaged in redefining the idea of feminism and the diaspora as a process of gain, contrary to conventional perspective that depicts immigration and displacement as a condition of terminal loss and the condition becomes worse in terms of female immigrants. But in her fiction woman is always strong, determined, and assertive. Her fiction convinces that gender is a category open to variation and changes according to place time and situation. Most of her novels present the issues related to women and their identity in the society. They are typical representatives of young women particularly of the Third World countries, who cherish their dreams of immigration to America in pursuit of higher education, higher wages and finally to settle down there permanently. Mukherjee's depiction of women and their different relationship portrays the dominance of patriarchal practices of traditional society and their liberation and empowerment from this set status. All her

novels are the celebration of womanhood but mainly *Jasmine* (1989) can be interpreted as purely feminist novel. The protagonist not only break the older social taboos related to women and society but also rebels against the old patriarchal values. Then also she is able to maintain a proper balance between the traditionalism and modernism. Her various transformations and incarnation present her strong feminist spirit/soul.

The purpose of this paper is to admire Bharati Mukherjee's spirit of celebration of strength of women. It is also an attempt to have a deep insight into the life of the protagonist and put forward her multi-dimensional pathetic and rebellious feminist emergence from village girl Jyoti to Americanized Jasmine of the new World and to whom Mukherjee has created a model of the fighters, women who have to adopt and struggle for their own survival.

This is the story of Jyoti, an Indian immigrant who is a village girl of Hasanpur in Punjab. Jyoti's childhood was spent in a small village. She being the seventh child of her parents is undesirable and curse for them. It is observed that Jyoti is a very smart, bold and intelligent girl. In fact the novel *Jasmine* is an account of the protagonist's various transformations from Jyoti to Jasmine, from Jase to Jane- and each time we encounter a different woman in her. She is a fighter, a survivor, and an adapter.

In the midst of her traditional village, Hasanpur, Jasmine is in quest for freedom. Her soul longs to fly high in the sky without having any bondage. She rebels against the blind beliefs and superstitions prevailing in her small village and argues against the fate which is adumbrated by the astrologer by saying:

Fate is fate. When Beulah's bridegroom was fated to die of snake bite on their wedding night, did building a still fortress prevent his death? (Mukherjee, 1990:2)

The star shaped wound on her forehead, which she gets while defying the astrologer's prediction about her widowhood and exile is treated as a third eye by her, like those of lord Shiva, and she says that through this third eye she will have a wider and true perspective of life. This assumption of Jyoti definitely reveals the stronger and modern side and also shackles the older rotten notion of Hindu tradition where the fate of a child, from birth till death, dances on the tune of astrologers. Not only this but Jasmine also withdraws all the notions set for the marriage by the society. Bharati Mukherjee shows Jasmine repudiating centuries old ugly Indian tradition of marriage after checking the boy's horoscope. She marries a Christian boy Prakash in the court and from there Jyoti becomes Jasmine-a city woman and wife of a modern man. The heroine's problems do not culminate in the resolution of tying a knot of marriage or walking out of

it but to combat the challenges. The emphasis is on the passion for life and an establishment of a woman's right to live and love. The narrative treatment is an attempt to 'defamiliarize' the traditionally accepted image of an Indian woman. The collapse of the heroine's submission to convention, aims to establish her independence.

But, unfortunately, Jasmine's husband, Prakash's life proves to be very short and he falls a prey to the Khalsa Lions, the rebel demanding a separate land of Khalistan for Sikhs.

Her grandmother reproaches her for her modern outlook of her marriage and says:

If you had married a widower in Ludhiana that was all arranged. If you had checked the boy's horoscope and married like a Christian in some government office...if you had waited for a man I picked none of this would have happened...God was displeased. God send that Sardarji boy to do that terrible act (Mukherjee, 1990: 98).

The reaction of Jasmine against this shows the assertive side of the heroine and the strong-willed power of her character. She blazes forth:

Dida, I said, if God send Sukhi to kill my husband and then I renounce God, I spit on him (Mukherjee, 1990: 89).

Jasmine decides to go to America, on forged papers and documents, to burn her as 'sati' in the campus of the same engineering college where her husband was admitted for study, as it becomes clear from the following statement:

A village girl going alone to America without job, husband or papers? (Mukherjee, 1990: 97).

Here we see Jasmine getting attached with the ancient Indian traditional practices where a woman becomes *sati* after her husband's death. But actually what comes into mind at this course of action is that though Jasmine is a freedom loving woman at global level, yet her heart is purely Indian and it denies continuing the life without the love of her husband. Besides this another thing that comes into light is that she does not want to live the life of a widow and suffer all those that a widow in the society is subjected to. Here we can see the strength of a woman who has decided to move on a perilous journey to the new world to fulfill her husband's dream. Let's hear it in the protagonist's own words:

My husband was obsessed with passing exams, doing better, making something more of his life than Fate intended...If you could first get away from India, then all fates would be cancelled...

We'd be on the other side of the earth, out of God's sight (Mukherjee, 1990: 85).

Here the pain of a woman can be clearly felt who wants to do anything in order to fulfill the last wish of her deceased husband. Jasmine too with the same spirit to fulfill the dreams of her husband leaves for America without having any clue of her forthcoming life.

She travels to New York on a ship, where the captain of the ship, an ugly fellow, half-faced (a nickname as one side of the face was badly damaged in war) who had lost an eye, ear and most of his cheek, remorselessly rapes Jasmine and this outrage is too much for an Indian widow to tolerate. She decides to finish her life but before she could do so, the woman inside her realizes that actually she wants to live and her personal dishonor cannot disrupt her mission. She decides that in spite of ending her life she will destroy the devil that has outraged her chastity. She transforms herself into the image of vengeful goddess Kali. She extends her tongue and slices it; the blood oozing out gives her the perfect image of the goddess of destruction. She kills the demon and for some moment gets perturbed and in this state of mind she reacts:

No one to call to, no one to disturb us. Just me and the man who raped me, the man I had murdered. The room looked like a slaughter house, blood has congealed on my hands, my chin, my breast...I was in a room with a slain man, my body blooded was walking death, death incarnate (Mukherjee, 1990: 119).

Jasmine's killing of half face is a kind of herself assertion. Her decision to kill herself first is a decision of a woman who lives for her deceased husband but the woman who kills half faced is prompted by her will to live and continue her life facing the challenges that come on her way. She says:

I didn't feel the passionate embrace of lord yama that could turn a kerosene flame into a lover's caress. I could not let my personal dishonor disrupt my mission. There could be a plenty of time to die...i extended my tongue and sliced it (Mukherjee, 1990: 117).

Bharati Mukherjee brilliantly fuses two archetypal images to enact this killing: the one of kali, the goddess of destruction and strength and another of the broken pitcher in which there is no difference between the inside and the outside and "we are just the shells of the same absolute." (p.15). It also symbolizes the death of her older self by the symbolic burning of her dishonored clothes and out of the ashes raises her new self that wants to live. Samir Dayal, a critic on Indian writing, writes that:

In killing half-faced she experiences an epistemic violence that is also a life time transformation (Dayal, 1993: 71).

The credit goes to Bharati Mukherjee for transforming a village girl into the goddess of strength and showing that women are not meek and submissive but they are strong willed and assertive by nature. Her silence preserves the biggest storm in her and when it comes to personal honor, she, like the goddess, can punish the wrong doer and also kill and finish the biggest demons. She also brings out the agonizing evil side of the society where the other sex becomes demon when it comes to physical gratification. At one place, Jasmine says:

For the first time in my life I understood what evil was about. It was about not being human....It was a very simple, very clear perception, a moment of truth, the kind of understanding that I have heard comes at the moment of death (Dayal, 1993: 116).

She is reborned by the act of killing; to punish the monster in disguise she begins her journey. She had burned herself in the funeral pyre of her clothes behind in a motel in Florida. Here the novelist once again invokes the archetypal image of a broken pitcher and says that the pitcher is broken now and her body, which is merely the shell, is soon to be discarded to get reborned and her soul will find a new habitation:

I said my prayers for the dead clutching my Ganpati. I thought. The pitcher is broken. Lord Yama, who had wanted me, who had courted me, and whom I'd flirted with on the long trip over, had now deserted me...My body was merely the shell, soon to be discarded. Then I could be reborn, debts and sins all paid for (Dayal, 1993: 120-121).

The sanctity about the body is lost and she learns that body is a mere covering, which can be discarded when corrupted.

The setting of the novel is of ninetieth century. The situation of women during this period was that women were expected to remain subservient to their fathers and husbands. Their occupational choices were also extremely limited. The middle- and upper-class women generally remained captive at home, caring for their children and running the household. The lower-class women often did work outside the home, but usually were too poorly-paid domestic servants or laborers in factories and mills. During this time the strong outcome of Jasmine by Bharati Mukherjee was widely accepted by the critics and readers because it showed the assertive side of the female protagonist. Now this feminist of nineties marches

on in quest of new identity.

Mrs. Gordon, another strong willed woman who supports and helps her to rehabilitate, transforms her totally. Within a week Jasmine gives up her shy side of personality and dresses up on a jazzy T-shirt, tight cords and running shoes. With the change in clothes comes the change in the culture so much so that the intrinsic qualities of her personality start disappearing. With this change she moves from being a "visible minority" to being just another immigrant. She becomes Jazzy from Jasmine. This adoption of different names and personality is another part of her feminine sensibility. At Vadhera's (Professor of Prakash) place, the freedom loving spirit of Jasmine finds it very difficult to cope with the conservative and "artificially maintained Indianness" (p.145) of them and after spending a few frustrating months she moves to Manhattan and becomes day-mummy, a caregiver of Duff, Taylor and Wylie's adopted son. Here she becomes more Americanized. As a true feminist she does not hold any nostalgia of the dead and buried past. Rather she says:

Let the past make you wary, by all means. But do not let it deform you (Dayal, 1993: 131).

But even after adopting the patters of the dominant culture she maintains the basic traits of Indian culture. For instance ,it is quite unimaginable for her to have a non-genetic child like Duff and to her it seems a monstrous idea .Again she feels uncomfortable in sleeping alone and Wylie's statement at this totally shocks her: "What you do on your time is your business" (p.172.) Jasmine in spite of many transformations remains an Indian woman from heart and is never bifurcated from her till the last. The stories which she uses to tell Duff were about Indian Gods, demons and mortals and it supports the Indianness of hers. And thus the woman inside her becomes totally shattered when Wylie walks out of Taylor's life and the protagonist comments:

In America nothing lasts can say that now and it doesn't shocks me, but I think it was the hardest lesson of all to learn. We arrive so eager to learn, to adjust, to participate only to find the monuments are plastic, agreements are annulled. Nothing is forever; nothing is so terrible that it won't be disintegrate (Dayal, 1993: 181).

She felt that there was no concept of feeling of shame in this society and comes to realize the liquidity of relationship in America. She is outwitted at Wylie's decision of leaving Taylor for another man in search of real happiness. Here the woman of Jasmine is unable to have an empathy with the women of Wylie. In fact, here

her thinking is like that of an Indian woman in American milieu. But in the later part of the novel we see the woman of Jasmine comprehending this course of action of Wylie. During this course of action Jasmine falls in love with Taylor and tells him everything about her past. She is now happy in her family with Taylor and Duff but again her past comes in front of her in the form of Sukhi (her husband's murderer) and she has to run to Iowa.

Jasmine's life in Iowa begins with her chance of meeting with Bud Ripplemayer, who not only gives her a new identity but also a new name - Jane Ripplemayer. Here the change in name is again symbolic. As clay modules according to the hands in which it goes, so is the nature of a woman who willingly or unwillingly imbibes herself according to the place, society and culture. When Jane first met Bud he was a tall, handsome, fifty years old banker, a husband, and father of two children. But after six months he is a crippled divorcee living with an illegal immigrant and an adopted son Du, whom he had brought from the Vietnamese refugee camp. Bud courts her because of her mysterious Indian beauty as she accepts it like:

Bud courts me because I am alien. I am darkness, mystery, inscrutability. The east plunges me into instant vitality and wisdom. I rejuvenate him by being who I am (Dayal, 1993: 200).

She identifies her dreams and wishes with Bud's and sacrifices all her individuality to prove herself to be perfect. But somewhere she was not happy with all this and Taylor's arrival at this is a welcome relief to her. She walks out of Bud's life and now the woman inside her could understand Wylie's course of action of leaving Taylor. This is the final affirmation of a true feminist. Her walking out of Bud's life symbolizes that her free spirited woman wants to fulfill all her unfulfilled dreams. She says:

I am not choosing between men. I am caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness (Dayal, 1993: 240).

Here we encounter a changed Jasmine who appears to be a chance taker who moves with her former lover breaking all the silent promises that she had made with Bud, in order to enjoy all the world of new hopes and excitements:

Greedy with wants and reckless from hope (Dayal, 1993: 241).

Thus, in the end, her powerful feminist convictions win and the synthesis between the traditional India and contemporary America, very perfectly brings out the

feminist side of the protagonist. She, in the end, thinks about herself and chooses the path where she will find real happiness:

It isn't the guilt that I feel its relief. I realize I have already stopped thinking of myself as Jane. Adventure, risk, transformation: the frontier is pushing indoor through uncaulked windows. Watch me reposition the stars, I whisper to the astrologer who floats cross-legged above my kitchen stove (Dayal, 1993: 240).

The story does not become a pathetic story of an immigrant but explores the 'state-of-the-art expatriation' where the woman aggressively waits for the future without regretting the past. The novel seeks to highlight the human needs which are essential for life and which can be realized only by rising above the cultural conditioning. The compelling urge to live, breaks Jasmine emotionally, physically and culturally like an earthen pot. The lesson is that the things we fight to guard-body, feeling and culture-are as fragile as the pitcher. The shifting of her identity from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jane to Jase is also suggestive of the death of one personality and an emergence of a new one but it does not have negative-implications. The protagonist does not see her Indianness as a fragile identity to be preserved against obliteration. Now it is seen as a set of fluid identities to be celebrated. The recurring reference to the broken pitcher indicates the death of Jasmine's different selves. While talking to Dr. Mary Webb Jasmine admits that as a Hindu she believes in rebirth though with different meaning in time-context. She is reborned many times in the present birth only, for Jasmine has seen that the Indian immigrants live a meaningless life and are forced to bury their native identity. Prof. Vadhera, in the novel, is not a professor but an importer and sorter of human hair which he gets from India through the middlemen from Indian villages. Watching Prof. Vadhera at work makes Jasmine reflect 'A hair from peasant's head in Hasnapur could travel across oceans and save an American meteorologist's reputation. She feels nothing is rooted anywhere. Everything is in motion. The novel reflects the moving identity, moving like an escalator, at the same place again and again and after a certain time will become still.

The Americanization of Jasmine is her liberation, though it hints at breaking of the rigid behavioral norms of the traditional Indian society. Being bold and assertive, still Jasmine as character never delimits the definition of woman as a function. Though In America she takes the support of men such as Prof. Vadhera, Mr. Taylor or the banker Bud Ripplemeyer, she has never subjected herself to their mercy. The only positive step in the direction of establishing her self-hood is that she has exercised her freedom of choice. Mukherjee's women characters act like Americans but they think like Indians. Jasmine reflects a combination of womanism and

feminism. The novel supports Bharati Mukherjee's assertion. In totality the novel projects the strength of a woman to fight and adapt to a brave New World and not the damaging effects of immigration. The tale from Jyoti to Jasmine, Kali to Jazzy-Jase and Jane is a long and arduous, eventful and uneven odyssey. The protagonist's name changes according to her geographical shifts. The process of continuous uprooting and re-rooting goes on, and the image is that of the celebration of the feminist protagonist who comes out as a fighter, adapter, and survivor.

Thus, through the analysis of Bharti Mukherjee's present novel in particular and the novels of feminist writers, it is observed that the women seek to be emancipated even though poor and independent though bound by age customs and traditions. In short, what is wanted by women everywhere -Indian or otherwise-is the same emancipation for the female as for the male. The aim is to be a whole human being, regardless of difference in sex, color, caste, creed, and country.

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