

Thirst for Emancipation in Bharathi Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

N. Lavanya

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Abstract- Indian English Literature from the last two decades has gained immense recognition all over the world. Writers started to rediscover the literary heritage with fascinating richness and variety of folklore culture and literature. Women have empowered themselves to free their hands from men. To establish their identity many Indian women writers have been flourishing since independence. Even diasporic women writers have made their contribution to the rise of women empowerment through their writings. Bharathi Mukherjee is one of the pioneer writers who came to give her point of view about the influence of western culture in her novels. Though she is an immigrant her novels are incorporated with cultural dichotomy and women empowerment.

Index Terms- Diaspora, Empowerment, feminism.

I. INTRODUCTION

Bharati Mukherjee being an expatriate and an immigrant, her writings largely reflect her personal experience as a woman. Bharati Mukherjee is caught between two cultures. She is an Indian born American novelist who has received considerable attention from all the audience in a short period. She has been widely acknowledged as the voice of expatriate-immigrant sensibility.

In her novel *Jasmine*, Mukherjee has indulged autobiographical elements and through the protagonists, she reflected herself in close projections. Being a Bengali-Indian woman, she found it difficult to limit herself in India, so she crossed boundaries and enabled herself as a pioneer of new experiences and literature. Anita Myles in her book *Feminism and the Post-Modern Women Novelists in English* quoted the words of Mukherjee given in an interview, "Fiction must be a metaphor. It is not a transcription of real life but it's a distillation and pitching at higher intensification of life. It's always a distortion" (108). From her statement the readers can get a clear idea that her novels have distillation and distortion form.

Jyoti was her real name and this name had banned her identity and kept her idle. Masterji, her school master was the first person to break her shell. The character Jyoti is presented as a young child. She is academically brilliant and good at English, but all that did not help her pursue her education. The following lines by Masterji to Jyoti's father implies the significance of girl's education: "It is important that modern ladies go for secondary-school education and find themselves positions. They are not shackling themselves to wifehood and maternity first chance. Surely you know, sir, that in our modern society many bright ladies are finding positions?" (*Jasmine* 50).

Masterji pleads with Jyoti's father to permit Jyoti to continue her education. Masterji feels that the society is transforming into a modern society. As the society changes, the recognition for women also change and their positions should change into educated women. Masterji is the first person to engrave the change in Jyoti's life. Through Jyoti's life he tries to create awareness about women's education. As a man he senses that these changes are palatable for a woman's life. No other woman in the village is as educated as Jyoti.

Jyoti is a unique girl in the village Hasnapur. She has the tendency to instill her individual growth in her society. As the story opens the astrologer foretells her widowhood and exile till the end of her life. She does not believe his words and feels nothingness. Jyoti's life transforms at each stage and she baptized as Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase and Jane at different stages of her life. Feminism bloomed in Jyoti's life when she was transformed from Jyoti to Jasmine. Her life flourished her liberty from the hands of male dominance through the help of Masterji and Prakash. As the title signifies, Jasmine is the seed for a new beginning of her life. The story progresses with her present life as Jane in Iowa who is pregnant and unmarried. She often flashes back to her life in India and the United States.

When her identity was Jyoti, her brothers were proud to have a brilliant sister who unlike other village girls. They had smuggled her to their examination and made her write their exams because she can write English well. Masterji has told already that she had written the best English compositions and also made her to translate manuals and instructions. Not only her brothers but also her neighbours liked her very much. They would keep her with them for she is good at numbers which proves useful for them in the market. She says, "The women liked having me with them because I could add fast in my head, and because I always caught the lime and chillies vendor when he cheated them" (*Jasmine* 47). She has all those talents to become a brave girl in her village but no one valued her uniqueness. Only after the appearance of Prakash she gained an identity of her own.

Prakash plays the role of a modern man of twenty-four years old who is an electronic student. He wants to go abroad in order to live an enlightened life in a foreign country. He marries Jyoti who is a sister to his friend. Jyoti was fourteen when he married. He is one of the best men in the village. He admits that women were not slaves anymore and they are worth enough to free themselves from hegemonic authority. Not only his thoughts show respect to woman but also, he proves it in his married life. He refuses dowry from Jyoti and takes her to Punjab to create a new beginning in her life. Her life with Prakash has been a drastic change where he truly cares her as a better half in his life. She says, "He wanted me to call him by his first name. 'Only in feudal societies is the woman

still as vassal,' he explained. 'Hasnapur is feudal.' In Hasnapur wives used only pronouns to address their husbands" (*Jasmine* 77). Prakash could not change the feudal society but he has initiated the progress from Jyoti. He treats her as his equal which is revealed from the above lines. The change he wants from Jyoti is reflected in the following lines:

He wanted to break down the Jyoti I'd been in Hasnapur and make me a new kind of city woman. To break off the past, 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 perfumes. Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttled between identities. (*Jasmine* 77)

He gives her a new name to cherish her liberty as a feminist. Jasmine's topsy turvy life starts after her change of name from Jyoti. Jasmine's character is well known for feministic approach. Not only her character but also the characters around her support her as a feminist. She lives her happy life as a woman of freedom with Prakash. He gives his manual to read and educates her. He teaches her modern values so that she can survive in United States to lead a peaceful life with him.

Unfortunately, her life becomes unhappy when Prakash dies due to a bomb blast. The death of Prakash pushes her to widowhood, "I wanted to scream, 'Feudalism! I am widow in the war of feudalisms'" (*Jasmine* 97). Her transformation did not continue after the death of Prakash. Jasmine, the woman of bravery and individuality was devastated and was made to sit in a corner as a widow. This painful state led to frustration and anguish. Her new life was created by Prakash and after much thought she decides to fulfill her husband's mission to open a store 'Vijh & Wife'. From that moment onwards, with the confidence instilled by Prakash she plans to go to America. "A village girl, going alone to America, without job, husband, or papers? I must be mad" (*Jasmine* 97). Her husband's vision had created perseverance in herself to travel abroad with no hope. She would face many obstacles through her travelling but she her determination changed the ideology that women are not only fit for household works but also eligible to imprint their individuality in the society.

As an Indian girl, no other woman is as challenging as Jasmine. When she leaves India she forges her document as she is an underaged woman. As a minor girl, she initiates her big step into an alien country. This shows that a woman can achieve anything in this world if they have perseverance and a will to face challenges. Rather than sitting idle at home, Jasmine leaps into the world of the unknown. This strong and courageous self evolved only with the confidence which she had imbibed from Prakash. He was the only man who had sown the seeds of feminism in Jasmine. As it was a seed Prakash had to nurture it by preaching the modern values and making Jasmine brave enough to fight for her rights. After the initial orientation, the seed took shape and emerged as a fine individual. By all the courage and perseverance, she manages to fulfill his dream by visiting his husband's favourite professor Dave Vadhera.

She travels to New York by ship where she gets to know about the captain of the ship, Half-Face. He is the person who had ruined her early life in the US. He drags her to a motel rips off her clothes and rapes her despite her protest that she is a Hindu widow. Jasmine steeped in Indian culture, tries to kill herself but something strikes at that time and she plans to kill her molester. She feels, "It was the murkiness of the mirror and a sudden sense

of mission that stopped me. What if my mission was not yet over? I didn't *feel* the passionate embrace of Lord Yama that could turn a kerosene flame into a lover's caress" (*Jasmine* 117-118). Losing her chastity on a foreign soil and from all those sufferings she tries to overcome her personal feelings in order to complete her mission. She kills him cruelly by slitting his body with a blade. He could not stop his bleeding as he was unable to find where the cut was. At that moment she transforms herself as Kali, the Goddess and devastates the man who had ruined her life on her first day in the U.S. According to Sengupta, Bharati Mukherjee uses to bring out the protagonist's feminist trait is that of Kali, the Goddess of Destruction. But since in Hindu Mythology Kali is an incarnation of Durga, the Goddess of Strength (shakti), is more relevant to the strength of a woman like Jasmine who has embarked on a perilous journey to the New World to fulfil her husband's dream (200).

She regains her strength and tries to live by leaving her life to fate. American life to Jasmine is unforgettable. For many days she wandered in the streets of America in starvation. All her thoughts of American life were broken until she meets Lillian Gordon. With her help she visits professorji and stays with him. Professorji lives with his parents and his wife Nirmala. America changes her and once again she goes back to her identity as Jyoti and she lives again as a widow. The liberty of a woman is concerned neither in India nor America. In India she proves her individuality whereas in American she leads the life of a traditional Indian girl who sits idle after the death of her husband. With the name of the country each person can understand the status of people in that country. For instance, people might think America might change their life style when compared to their native place. In reality the people in America still follow their life style which they had followed in their native country. Professorji, is an immigrant but the life style is still same as an Indian and Jasmine being a new makeover from Jyoti is pushed again to Jyoti in American not in India.

Jasmine moves away from Professorji's house and with the help of Kate, Lillian Gordon's daughter she gets the job as a caretaker in Taylor Hayes home. According to Monica Balyan Dahiya, she lived her life there as an American and her life changed back to Jasmine where she can complete the mission of Prakash's wish. Her changeover is totally American and takes care of Taylor and Wylie's adopted daughter Duff. After her meeting with Taylor and Wylie, Jasmine gets back her brave personality to handle her life forever. Within few months she returns the debt that she owes Professorji. She then takes up her study after all the hurdles she has faced before and after America. She is proud of her education:

With Columbia employment I was eligible for free tuition in Columbia extension courses, if I could convince them to overlook the fact that I was a sixth-grade dropout. There was nurse's training at Columbia-Presbyterian. There was English as a Second Language, but they told me my English was too good... There was nothing that seemed too exotic, nothing that did not seem essential to my future. (*Jasmine* 180)

The woman who lost her father at a young age, lost her husband in a bomb blast, pushed to widowhood at a young age, expatriate to America and raped by the Captain and then her murder of the Captain and her refugee life in Professorji's house and later Taylor's home, in all these situations she is the victim but everyone blames her as she is a girl. Being a girl child people think

that she has brought curse to the family and because of the curse her family has been destroyed. America has changed all the curses into boons. She has cherished her life with her intelligence.

Her destiny does not stop her to stay with Taylor. She runs to Iowa away from Taylor because she sees the murderer of her husband's death. There she meets Bud Ripplemeyer who works in a bank and paralysed. He was not paralysed before he meets Jasmine. He was shot by Harlon Kroener as he had some misunderstandings with Bud. In Iowa Jasmine is again transformed into Jane Ripplemeyer, pregnant with Bud's child. Bud wants to marry her officially but something stops her from doing so, for she thinks that she is not ready to accept his proposal. The reason could be that she is betraying Karin. Karin divorced Bud after Jasmine's arrival. This can be a part where she might object his marriage proposal or the love she still has for Taylor. Even though she is pregnant with Bud's child, her heart still aches for Taylor. As the story paves through the end she gets a message from Taylor, "Duff and I're heading your way. She still doesn't know and I'm hoping you'll help. She's quite a young lady and she remembers you perfectly. As do I. Wylie doesn't consider my trip insane. Stay put. Don't dare run away again" (*Jasmine* 209). On one side she feels wrong to leave Bud at his position on the other side she feels happy at the bottom of the heart for the arrival of Taylor. Taylor can be a portrayal of Prakash where both the characters support Jasmine to be an independent woman. Prakash gives the liberty to Jasmine as a gender of equal rights. She is able to take the right decision and she can enlighten her life. Taylor also grabs the attention of Jasmine and instills feminist traits in her.

Jasmine felt her femininity when she was with Prakash. After Prakash's death she felt the same comfort with Taylor. She ran away from Taylor in order to save Taylor not like Prakash who was killed because of her. She was not able to save him when she was with him but now atleast she could save Taylor to atone of Prakash's death so that her heart could rest at peace.

According to Sengupta, Bharati Mukherjee passes the final judgement through her mouthpiece, *Jasmine*. The readers are at once won over by her scintillating prose, her cadenced rhythm and above all by her powerful feminist convictions: "I am caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness." And as she, the eternal caregiver, walks away with Taylor and Duff, leaving Bud (whose child she is carrying but for whom she feels only pity and not love): "It isn't guilt that I feel it's relief. I realize I have already stopped thinking of myself as Jane. Adventure, risk, transformation: the frontier is pushing indoors through uncaulked windows. Watch me reposition the stars, I whisper to the astrologer who floats cross-legged above my kitchen stove" (*Jasmine* 240). This is the final affirmation of a true feminist (Sengupta, C. "Feminine Mystique in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*" 203).

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AUTHORS

First Author – N. Lavanya