



Vibrant Colours of Womanhood in Bharti Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

Savita Punia¹

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*CORRESPONDENCE

Savita Punia
Savita1201@rediffmail.com

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Website: www.thescholarstime.in
Email: editor.scholarstime@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* published in 1990 presents various aspects of womanhood wherein the protagonist not only rebels against the age-old superstitions but also maintains an exact balance between tradition and modernity. In the New World she reincarnates herself as Kali, the Goddess of Strength and finally she can "reposition the stars".

¹ Associate Professor, Department of English, Govt. College, Jind, Haryana, India

INTRODUCTION

Feminine is a concept of womanhood which means the role of woman in relation to the patriarchal society where she is understood always in connection to the male. In this context Chaman Nahal observes, "I define feminism as a mode of existence in which the woman is free of the dependence syndrome. There is a dependence syndrome: whether it is the husband or the father or the community or whether it is a religious group, or ethnic group. When women free themselves of the dependence syndrome and lead a normal life, my idea of feminism materializes¹ This "feminism emerges as a concept that can encompass both an ideology and movement for socio- political change based on a critical analysis of male privilege and women's subordination within any given society"². In this postmodern world a feminist thought does not mean to be against men rather it wants to destroy the centuries old male dominance.

The purpose of present paper is to highlight vibrant colors of feminism in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* along with a celebration of the virtues of woman and not her weaknesses. The central idea of *Jasmine* is "an Indian immigrant's encounter with the New World and her gradual transformation as she thoroughly imbibes the new culture."³ As Sumita Roy points out, *Jasmine's* "search for self- recognition takes her in social and spiritual directions..... till she arrives at a time when she can view the future "greedy with wants and reckless from hope."⁴ The story of *Jasmine* can be called as the story of an 'identity in motion'. Just like Maya in *Cry the Peacock*, Bharati Mukherjee has delineated Jyoti of Hasanpur (who later on becomes *Jasmine*, and *Jase* and *Jane*) as a rebel against blind beliefs and superstitions.⁵ In the beginning of the novel she protests against all blind beliefs when the astrologer says: "Fate is Fate. When Beulah's bridegroom was fated to die of snakebite on their wedding night, did building a still fortress prevent his death? A magic snake will penetrate solid walls when necessary."⁶ She is not ready to believe this nonsense, and in a moment of heat, the man hits her, and she falls on the ground and bits her tongue and gets a star- shaped wound on her forehead. "It's my third eye.... "Now I am a sage" (3) is what she tells her sisters. The pain she feels, and the scar will always remind her of that moment in her life, when she tried to run away from her fate. That scar becomes her Third eye and through an archetypal image (Shiva's Third Eye) Mukherjee shows that already Jyoti was peering out into invisible worlds. The Third Eye gives her a wide and true perspective on life. She learns to look back to the past not like a coward bunkering herself inside nostalgia, sheathing her heart in a bullet-proof vest. For her, even memories are a sign of disloyalty. Similarly, with her Third Eye she learns to look into the future with pain and hope and when she embarks into her final journey in America she is "greedy with wants and reckless with hopes" and that is her final assertion as a feminist. It is as if like Shiva she has swallowed the cosmos whole. As she puts it so emphatically at the end of the novel:

We [her adopted child the Vietnamese-American Du and herself] have seen death up close. We've stowed away on boats like Half-Face's, we've hurtled through time tunnels. We've seen the worst and survived. Like creatures in fairy tales, we've shrunk and we've swollen and we've swallowed the cosmos whole. (240)

The other significant image that Bharati Mukherjee associates with *Jasmine's* rebellious spirit is the carcass of a small dog that she encounters as a child. When she runs to her sisters at the river, she swims a while in it and suddenly sees a rotten dog's body. The stench she smells and that picture follows her for the rest of her life. The protagonist does not want to become broken in body and spirit like the dog:

Suddenly my fingers scraped the soft water-logged carcass of small dog. The body was rotten, the eyes had been eaten. The moment I touched it, the body broke in two as though the water had been its glue. A stench leaked out of the broken body, and then both pieces quickly sank.

That stench stays with me. I'm twenty-four now. I live in Baden, Elsa Country, Iowa, but every time I lift a glass of water to my lips, fleetingly I smell it. I know what I don't want to become. (5)

When she is a teenager, Jasmine's father dies. He gets killed by a bull after stepping out of a bus. Her mother shaves her head afterwards as a sign that she has given up her own life. Jasmine knows a story of a woman who burned herself on her husband's grave after his death, so what her mother has done is not the worst case. But having experienced this sort of mental violence, Jasmine becomes strong and takes over the role of the mother in house. At that point in the novel Jasmine already takes over a new role in her life leaving the old behind. She is no longer only a daughter, but she has to take the responsibility for the rest of the family. The child is gone and she is reborn as a young woman. As a young woman, Jasmine is getting ready to find a husband for herself when she meets a friend of her two brothers and later on, they get married and move to a bigger city.

When Prakash was planning to move over to America, where his former professor lives and could help him, Jasmine's past comes back to her mind in the form of the prediction of her widowhood as her husband is killed through a bomb attack in a shop shortly before his departure to America. She is just seventeen at that moment. The bomb, the work of some radicals, was supposed to hit her and other woman in that shop for being "whores" (93), meaning "too modern". That cruel act of violence changes something in Jasmine. First of all, she goes back to her mother's home and they live isolated as two widows for a while. But Jasmine wants to do more with her life so she gets her brothers' help to get documents for a journey to America. She takes her husband's clothes with her and intends to burn herself with them at the university he wanted to study at. Jasmine, given that name by her husband when she still was named Jyoti, already has changed into the more modern woman as her name represents:

"Prakash wanted to break down the Jyoti as 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. Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttled between identities." (77).

She already has turned from Jyoti, the girl from Hasnapur, to Jasmine, the woman who immigrates to America. Bharti Mukherjee also shows her woman protagonist repudiating the centuries -old ugly Indian tradition of marrying after checking boy's horoscope. When her grandmother upbraids her for her modern outlook and says:

If you had married the widower in Ludhiana that was all arranged. If you had checked the boy's horoscope and not married like a Christian in some government office.....If you had waited for a man I picked none of this would have happened [Jyoti's husband Prakash killed by. the terrorists]. I am told you called him by his proper name. It is very clear. You were in the sarishop to buy something you could not afford to celebrate a separation from your husband and his desertion of India to make money abroad. God was displeased. God send that Sardarji boy to do that terrible thing

At this Jasmine's unorthodoxy blazes forth: "Dida, I said, if God sent Sukhi to kill my husband and then I renounce God, I spit on him."(98)

Another archetypal image that 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), the image here is more

relevant to the strength of a woman like Jasmine who has embarked on a perilous journey to a 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 canceledWe'd be on the other side of the earth, out of God's sight." (85)

Jasmine's first encounter with a man in America, after her long journey through three continents, is with a rapist. Her first shock of another country is not cultural but physical. She arrives in America and that very moment she is compelled to commit murder for self-defense. After her husband's death in order to reach USA she stows in a boat captained by Half-Face (Nickname, one side of the face having been damaged in a fight). But after landing in America when Half-Face demands his price (nothing less than the satisfaction of his lustful passions will do) Jasmine in a truly feminist gesture decides to kill the Devil Incarnate and Bharati Mukherjee brilliantly fuses two archetypal images to enact the killing of Kali: The Goddess of Destruction and Strength and the broken pitcher. "When a clay pitcher breaks..... the air inside is the same as the outside there are no insides and out-sides. We are just shells of the same Absolute." [15] After Half -Face has raped her she wants to kill herself but then checks herself because she feels her 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. I could not let my personal dishonour disrupt my mission. There would be plenty of time to die I extended my tongue and sliced it." (117-18) And as she does it she becomes Kali personified, the deity of avenging fury -Death incarnate, and the killing becomes so easy. And she enacts a kind of death for her too: the death of the old self (through the symbolic burning of her dishonoured clothes) and out of the ashes rises phoenix -like a new self. In order to show this death Bharati Mukherjee once again invokes the archetypal images of the broken pitcher:

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 (120)

The sanctity about the body is lost and she learns that body is a mere covering which can be discarded when corrupted "My body was merely the shell; soon to be discarded. Then I could be reborn, debts and sins all paid for". (121)

Abandoning the past like a baggage she feels light and reborn. And she has been reborn by killing not herself but Half -Face and she begins her journey in to America, "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". (121) Jasmine leaves the old Jasmine behind and now begins the life of an illegal immigrant and murderess: "I was walking death. Death incarnate" (119)

It is like she peels one of her skins off and appears as a new person, trying to overcome her past and start again. "Jyoti was now a sati-goddess; she had burned herself in a trash-can-funeral pyre behind a boarded-up motel in Florida." (176): the pitcher is broken, there is no difference between the inside and the outside and her soul, as it were, finds a new habitation and thus the feminist of the nineties marches on questing for a new identity. Thereafter, Mrs. Gordon supports and helps her to rehabilitate and transform 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."

After several steps and places to stay at, Jasmine gets a job as a care-giver in New York. The child's father, Taylor, is a man who embodies what it is like to be an American for her. Again, Jasmine is reborn, this time she feels like an American: "I became an American in an apartment on Claremont Avenue [New York]" (165). That rebirth is again combined with a new name, for Taylor calls her Jase instead of Jasmine. The village girl again displays courage. "America may be fluid and built on flimsy invisible lives of weak gravity but I was a dense object, I had landed and was getting rooted." (179) She tells Duff the story of Nachiketa ("Nachos" in American!) and Yama. She is not prepared to imbibe pseudo-modernity. That is why she is shocked when Wylie walks out on Taylor's life and the protagonist's comment:

In America, nothing lasts. I can say that now and it doesn't shock 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 disintegrate. (181).... The Claremont codes still bewildered me (182-83)

But as an apotheosis of true Feminist spirit Jasmine does not stick to a "dead nostalgia". Thereafter she falls in love with Taylor but once again her past comes back to destroy her present when she sees Sukhi, her husband's murderer in the park and decides to leave Claremont for Iowa. Jase feels that her journey is not yet ended, because she still cannot come to rest and must move to Iowa. Thereafter in Iowa Budd Ripplemeyer falls in love with her (and she gets a new identity: Jane Ripplemeyer). Budd is attracted towards her because to him Jasmine is the very embodiment of Eastern mystery. "Budd courts me because I am alien; I am darkness, mystery inscrutability. The East plugs me into instant vitality and wisdom. I rejuvenate him [Bud Ripplemeyer] by being who I am." (200) This convergence between tradition and modernity gave her a true perspective where she could see the traditional Indian and the contemporary American state of life unblinkered: When I was a child, born in a mud hut without water or electricity, the Green Revolution had just struck Punjab.... I was the last one to be born to that kind of submission [but she is no longer], that expectation of ignorance. When the old astrologer swatted me under a banyan tree, we were both acting out a final phase of a social order that had gone untouched for thousands of years. (203).

She also monologues:

'Jyoti of Hasnapur was not Jasmine, Duff Day-mummy and Taylor and Wylie's on pair in Manhattan, that Jasmine isn't this Jane Ripplemeyer having lunch with Mary Webb at the University club today. And which of us is the undetected murderer of a half-faced monster, which of us has held a dying husband, which of us was raped and raped and raped in boats and cars and motel rooms?' (227)

Bharati Mukherjee, therefore, emphasizes that there is a dire need to change the whole social order by passing the final judgment through her mouthpiece, Jasmine and the readers are once more startled by her words and her all powerful feminist convictions. "I am caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness." Thus, the different colours of her identity i.e., from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jane to Jase have no negative implications rather it is suggestive of the synthesis of various identities into one identity. The protagonist does not see her 'Indianness as a fragile identity to be preserved against obliteration, now it is seen as a set of multiple identities to be celebrated as one. "Nothing was rooted anywhere. Everything was in motion". (152) "That is the thesis of the novel--the moving identity, moving like an escalator, moving but still at the same time."7

Thus Jasmine, a docile Indian wife is transformed into an aggressive Indo-American woman, who displays an extraordinary combination of womanish qualities, strength, and rare feminism. The novel supports Bharati Mukherjee's assertion, "I am inventing an American for myself, I am writing an America that hasn't been written about. The 'frontier' is up there, in front of me; I am pushing it back all the time. This is what makes the new stories so different. They are a natural outgrowth of where I am. I feel it's the writer's business to write about his or her environment, whatever that may be."

Conclusion

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 all earthen pots. The suggestion is that the things we fight to guard-body, feeling and culture-are as fragile as the pitcher. 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 novel also comments on the American society where people and their relationships are always in motion.

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