

Feminine Sensibility in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

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Bharati Mukherjee was born in Calcutta on 27 July, 1940. She got B.A. Hons in English from the University of Calcutta and obtained M.A. in English from the University of Baroda in 1961. She went to the University of Iowa to attend the writers' workshop in 1963. There she met a Canadian fellow who was a journalist and Professor in the university and married him in North American style in 1963. She remained in Canada till 1980 and did the teaching at McGill University and Concordia University. She migrated to U.S.A. from Canada in 1980 and joined Queens College, New York for a short period. She ultimately joined as Professor of English at the University of California. She won many awards. She was awarded National Book Critics Circle Award for the collection of her short stories.

Bharati Mukherjee in her novels, through the protagonists, has exhibited the sensibility of the women who have asserted their identity through searching for new opportunities and questioning the prevalent situation of woman's subjugation and subordination in Indian society. They possess unique sensibility which is quite different from ordinary women and even the members of the family. They discard the imposed identity on them by their community and family and search for their own real self. Indo - English fiction has played very important role in this regard. Indian women writers in English like Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur, Arundhati Roy and many more have played crucial roles to assert women's identity of their own. They broke the traditional conventions of women's confinement and silence. Ratna Bhattacharya has rightly observed :

Women are surrounded by traditions, conventions and confinement but the Indian English Literature (IEL) provides us the glimpse of a new type of woman. The scope of woman empowerment is immense and has given a vision of elemental passion poised with deep rootedness in convention but concerned with vital gender issues. (*Literature and Society : Women Empowerment* 43)

Bharati Mukherjee has expressed very clearly the predicament of women's struggle for existence and overcoming the problems with firm resolution. The protagonist of the novel *Jasmine* is the fine example of such women's strength and power due to which she is empowered to murder her rapist. In her journey towards a self-dependent Americanised woman, she has to proceed through many phases of transformation. In this process, she has to adopt various ways and she changes herself from Jyoti to Jasmine and finally to Jane. She is always willing to change and open to transformation for new possibilities in her life. That is the reason she asserts:

I changed because I wanted to. To bunker oneself inside nostalgia, to sheathe the heart in a bullet-proof vest, was to be a coward. (*Jasmine* 185)

The protagonist of the novel *Jasmine* starts her life with change. She started her life as Jyoti at a small village in Punjab. When she marries to Prakash, he renames her as Jasmine. Now she becomes Jasmine from Jyoti. This change is a kind of transformation from a village to the city and from the traditional acceptance to new adoption. Unluckily Prakash is murdered in a bomb blast on the eve of departure to the United States and Jasmine is left alone. But she does not lose her heart. She migrates to America quite alone. When she reaches Florida, there also she has to face very difficult situation and to undergo the bitter experiences of life. She meets there the captain of the ship Half-Face on whose ship she entered the country. He thought her only as a sexual object and raped her. Again she does not lose her mind and does not take any negative step rather she becomes adamant to take revenge on him and she turns into violence. She stabs him to death; she recollects her strength of survival and continuance of life. She resolves to start a new life in America and does accordingly. She establishes her own identity passing through different peculiar situations. She meets Gillian Gordon who teaches her how to dress and walk like an American. She learns all the new ways of the Americans - of dressing and walking and she becomes a new woman. She emerges here as confident and independent new woman sustaining herself by her own efforts in an unknown place. She is called Jazzy (her nickname), a symbolic name for her acceptance of American culture. After sometimes she moves to New York in the family of Hashing where she finds herself stifled because of the style of the family which was completely isolated from American style. Her life is always in progression and again she starts a new life having separated herself from the family of Hashing. She moves

to New York City with Taylor, his wife, Wylie and their daughter, Duff and creates an another identity based on her new perception and ability. In this way, she always creates a new identity in every new situation and emerges as a specific woman exacerbating the tension which causes her to create more dominant identity. Taylor calls her Jase and again she attains newness in the form of Jase. Taylor's friends think that she has a South Asian identity and associates her with that community. They think that Jasmine is habituated to orientalism which assumes the knowledge of others. They seek her the essence of her own oriental background. In this way, she feels discriminated because they seek her racial identity. She is shocked at their prejudiced ideas and their bias against orientalism. Perhaps they are influenced with the idea of Kipling when he says: "Oh, East is East and West is West and never the twin shall meet." (Kipling) But Jasmine is very bold like Saru of Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* who says :

All right, so I am alone but so's everyone else. Human beings ... they're going to fail you. But because there's just us, because there's no one else, we have to go on trying. (Deshpande 220)

But Jasmine is very bold and always moving on. While living with Hayes, she masters the English language and remodels herself in American culture and empowers herself in American style. She becomes so up-to-date in American style that Taylor embraces her and is involved with her romantically. Jasmine changes herself for her personal development and success in her life. In the process of her changes she becomes Jane from Jasmine and she is very much satisfied to attain her new identity in the name of Jase. But there is the setback in her relationship with Taylor and it comes to an end. Again she is stressed by her anguished experiences of the world which makes her over – burdened with different identities and she goes to Baden Country, Iowa, leaving behind her conflicting identities.

In this new found land of Iowa, she meets an American banker, Bud Wipplemeyer who falls in love with her instantly. She marries him and becomes Jane as Bud renames her after marriage. She feels very happy and comfortable enjoying her conjugal love after her marriage with Bud. There she does not feel any racial discrimination. She feels completely free, confident having her own identity as Jane. In this way we find, that Jasmine has to move on different situations to assert her identity and to attain her freedom from traditional roles for women. She has to undergo

different changes for survival and development and ultimately assuring her position empowers herself as a new woman. She has to change herself from Jyoti to Jasmine and Jasmine to Jase and Jase to Jane and finally becomes a typical American woman having acquired her own assertive personality. Jane is her final evolution from Jasmine who has rejected the traditional cocoon of patriarchal subjugation. In the beginning of her journey to America, she stabs her rapist to death and realises her power of resistance and survival. She never looks back after murdering her rapist. She moves on and on passing through the various processes in which she has to adopt her roles. She adapts and becomes adept in the process of various changes and establishes her self-identity :

Once she realises her strength and power after murdering her rapist in the very beginning of her journey towards many transformations, she never looks back. Her is a clear-cut journey towards her being a totally Americanized, self-assured, and self-confident woman. Moreover, going through this process she adopts various identities in the form of being Jasmine, Jase, and Jane; proceeding westward both in location and in attitude. (Sumati 24-25)

The protagonists of Bharati Mukherjee do not believe in commonly held views of traditional society in the novel, *The God of Small Things*. Arundhati Roy has also denigrated such views satirizing it through the opinion of Baby Kochamma. She has the views, "As for a divorced daughter, according to Baby Kochamma, she had no position anywhere at all. And for a divorced daughter from love marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochamma's outrage." (Roy 45) Bharati Mukherjee's Jasmine believes in marriage for love. She thinks that marriage is not like the signing of bond of slavery which can't be broken at women's sweet will. She breaks her love affair with Taylor when she finds his discriminatory behaviour with her and she is married to Bud Wipplermeyer who falls in love with her. She remains with her and enjoys her life from the core of her heart.

The protagonist of the novel *Jasmine* is rebellious from the very beginning of her life. She does not believe in prejudiced ideas of society or astrologer's foretelling. This is why she rejects astrologer's prophecy of her widowhood and exile. She rejects his prophecy with her firm

determination and confronts him with these words, "I don't believe you". (Mukherjee 4) Her spirit is so high that she does not accept any rule of the family or society unless she is convinced with it.

Almost all the protagonists of Bharati Mukherjee's novels have more or less the same spirit of rebellion due to which they are never ready to accept the traditional rules of the society which discriminate with them. She herself is a woman of new ideas and innovative nature. She does not believe in prejudiced tradition of society and social customs which do not allow any woman to be married outside her own caste. This system is stricter for women. But Bharati Mukherjee breaks such a code of society and gets herself married to Clark Blaise, a Canadian when she meets him and falls in love with him. We find such an autobiographical note in her novel, *Desirable Daughters* in which Taralata Chatterjee, the protagonist of the novel who belongs to a Brahmin family of Calcutta like Bharati Mukherjee, marries David Cart Wright, an American who is completely a stranger to her family. When she came back to India after spending a few years of married life in America, she felt herself as a stranger. Bharati Mukherjee has the same identity as Taralata, the protagonist of her novel *Desirable Daughters*. Here we find the autobiographical note of the novelist. In her second novel *Wife*, the novelist has showed the same vigour and high spirit in Dimple, the protagonist of the novel *Wife* as we find in Jasmine. Dimple kills her husband when she finds differences with her husband who makes her life suffocating. She finds differences between Indian and American attitude which she can't tolerate like Jasmine who kills her rapist and survives in changing situation and establishes her own identity wherever she goes. Hanna, the protagonist of the novel *The Holder of the World* is always in the process of confrontation and in the quest of better world. She undertakes the journey from the west to the east in the quest of art and culture for her betterment. Almost all the protagonists of the novels of Bharati Mukherjee are in the process of change, repudiating the past and creating a new dynamic life having broken the so-called imposed restriction of traditional caste, culture and religion. Bharati Mukherjee herself has broken such restriction having married to a Canadian and adopting to a new life of new woman of post modern age. She has to undergo the continuous process of change and shifting from place to place till she obtains her identity and self-dependence :

For Bharati Mukherjee shift from India
to Canada and later to America was a
conscious shift; each phase required a

repudiation of all previous 'avatars'
(birth), an almost total rebirth (Tyagi 49)

In the novel, *Jasmine*, the novelist, Bharati Mukherjee has suggested that women must equip themselves with the ability and power to reinvent their fate having broken the bond of traditional code of conduct which teaches them to be subservient and to be exploited like a holy cow in the name of traditional prestige and honour. *Jasmine*, being a brahmin by caste does not hesitate to go abroad although she is left alone after the sudden demise of Prakash in a bomb blast on the eve of his departure to a foreign country. She never breaks the continuity of her journey from a small village of Punjab to U.S.A. For this, she has to adopt, adapt and become adept in handling the changing situation and circumstances. She never loses her heart and faces all problems boldly. She never looks back in the process of moving on. She always uses her sense and sensibility to assert her own identity. Now the scene and scenario have completely changed and there is no need to follow the prejudiced ideas which come in the way of asserting the identity of women. Today is the age of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation which imparts immense scope to women's identity and economic independence but they must be bold and adept in their ability to adopt and adapt in the prevailing situation as we find in *Jasmine*.

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