

Feminine Psyche in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine and Wife*

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ABSTRACT: Post-independence literature reveals the woman's quest for her identity giving rise to a number of issues. Women writers in India successfully adopted the fictional mode to deal with various social and psychological issues. Bharati Mukherjee attempted to project women as the central figure in her novels. The female protagonists are mostly women-ethnic women who migrate from India to America. They find it difficult to break away from the ties of their parent country, and are seen to be nostalgic very often. There is a longing to lead a better life. Their view of America is that it is a country which celebrates liberty, openness and individualism, and anyone including an immigrant, can certainly succeed in life. But, reality proves to be different because the experiences of the ethnic women are unsavoury. They are now in the dilemma whether to remain in America and continue to suffer, or return to their native land where life may not be according to their expectations. Their dilemma results in a sense of identity crisis. These people are psychologically affected. Their physical and mental resources are challenged by every new experience in America. This paper focuses on the identity crisis and psychological trauma undergone by the female protagonists of Mukherjee's novels.

Key words: ethnic women, expectations, alienation, new experience, sense of exile, psychological sufferings

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I. INTRODUCTION

'Woman' has been the pivotal theme of literature all over the world. Women, who are also creators of Literature, constitute a major part of contemporary fiction by focusing generally on the role of women in society. This is true of Indian English fiction too. Women writers in India successfully adopted the fictional mode to deal with the 'woman-subject': their role, position and status in society. These 'women novelists' raised their voice on such themes by psychologically probing into the psyche of their characters. Hence, the woman presented in contemporary literature is different from the earlier one in terms of physically and psychological needs of woman as an 'individual'.

The female protagonists of Bharati Mukherjee's earlier novels are characterised by their rootlessness and their incapacity to belong; while even their attempts to find roots are either half-hearted or unrealistic. Mukherjee is an expatriate writer who says she is "writing about the here and now of America". The Diaspora sensibility comes through in the writings of Bharati Mukherjee. She has established herself as a powerful member of American literary scene. Her novels and short stories have been steadily winning acclaim in literary circles. The main theme throughout her writings revolve round the condition of Asian Diaspora with particular attention to the changes taking place in South Asian women in new world. Her works deal with issues emanating from the encounter with the world outside the homeland.

Transformations in the world scenario engendered large movements of people all over the world. The world gradually transformed into a 'global village'. Movement across the world posed myriad dilemmas. With this, cross-cultural consciousness has also assumed great significance in the present world of globalisation, speaking of consequent tensions of adaptations and assimilation. The painful experience of isolation, sense of exile, crisis of identity and efforts to bond with adopted lands expose English literature with cross-cultural narratives. These narratives are brought together into a unified whole, generally referred to as 'Diaspora' writings. The narratives of cross-cultural clashes have established 'Diaspora studies' as an academic field in the late twentieth century. In literature, the term 'Diaspora studies' is allied with works produced by globally dispersed community of writers inexorably writing on their experiences abroad.

Nostalgia, loss, betrayal and duty are the foundations of new homes as diasporic Indian protagonists adjust to new countries. In adjusting to new homes abroad issues of acculturation and /or assimilation become the focal point as immigrants and first or second generation Indians negotiate the un-balance of their hyphenated identities. Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* opens in rural Punjab of the 1980s against the larger backdrop of the threatening rumblings of an emerging fundamentalist violence of the Lions of Punjab or Babbar Khalsa movement. A sinister astrologer's dramatic prophesy of widowhood and exile for seven year old protagonist

JyotiVijh haunts her. A couple of year later, it seems that there is no escaping destiny, when her engineer husband, preparing to leave for higher education in America is killed by a terrorist bomb. Jyoti has two choices, either she can quietly submit to her fate or she can find another way. She packs her bags, acquires a false passport and leaves for America. Her perilous passage and journey through America transform her from a shy, village girl into an intrepid woman “greedy with wants and reckless from hope”. She arrives in New York, settles in, initially as a home-help, with Taylor and his daughter Wylie. One day she spots the terrorist who killed her husband and flees to Iowa. In Iowa she marries a banker, Bud and they adopt a Vietnamese boy. Bud is semi paralysed by a shooting incident. In the end, a heavily pregnant Jasmine leaves Bud to head west with Taylor: she acknowledges, “I am not choosing between men. I am caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness”.(240) The promise of America is self-evident in the literary pioneering trope invoked of heading West.

The “old-world dutifulness” Jyoti flees is an exoticised India embodied in the astrologer and Jyoti escapes him, her destiny and India itself. This fleeing is but the first of her many attempts to run away from her past. The astrologer’s prediction marks her with all the overtones of the mark of Cain and the scarlet letter but it is re-configured in another exotic trope of the third eye of the god Shiva. This third eye gives Jyoti insight, wisdom and the courage to escape her destiny. In her construction of India, it is a site of violence and terrorism, of both fundamentalists and the state. Escape and rejection can be read as both inevitable and almost necessary. There are no redeeming features to India, Jyoti leaves behind and her desperate desire to assimilate and buy into the American advertisement slogans of ‘be what you want to be’ and ‘just do it’ are not merely condescending but dismissive and judgmental of other immigrant realities such as those of the Wadehra family that initially give her refuge in New York. But Jyoti, and to an extent Mukherjee herself, does not see this. Mukherjee’s New York Times essay “Two Ways to Belong in America” portrays her own assimilation as a choice but does not see her sister’s desire not to assimilate, in fact her insistence to retain her “resident alien” status as an equally valid choice.

Changing appearances or names are suggested as a possible path of escape from Indianness. Jasmine’s name changes area problematic as both an Indian and as a woman. Jyoti’s name changes, however, cannot be read as conscious acts of agency. She avers, “My grandmother may have named me Jyoti, Light but in surviving I was already Jane, a fighter and adapter”(40). Each of Jyoti’s name changes are instigated by the various men in her life. She is the first to acknowledge, “I have had a husband for each of the women I have been. Prakash for Jasmine, Taylor for Jase, Bud for Jane, Half-Face for Kali” (97). Each new name signals a particular man’s vision of what he wants her to be. Jyoti’s marriage to Prakash is not arranged nor does he have a family who force their will upon her, yet she lovingly recounts her transformation from Jyoti to Jasmine:

He [Prakash] wanted to break down the Jyoti I’d been in Hasanpur 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 perfume” (77).

For Mukherjee, despite the violence inherent in a word like “break down”, the name change is seen as transformation. In Prakash’s desire to remould Jyoti from a rural to an urban woman, there is an unquestioned rejection and dismissal of rural values as backward and superstitious that holds women down. The educated, urban, English-speak-America will rescue and transform the Indian village girl and make her a worthy companion for him. The myth of the urban Indian male rescuer seamlessly replaces the myth of the white knight in shining armour of colonial times.

In Iowa, as banker Bud’s ‘Jane’, Jasmine defiantly asserts that “plain Jane” is all she wants to be because “plain Jane is a role, like any other”. But she recognizes that the real reason for playing this particular role is that her foreignness frightens him. The foreignness is a double edged sword that can frighten and intrigue. She acknowledges that, Bud courts me because I am alien. I am darkness, mystery, inscrutability. The East plugs me into instant vitality and wisdom”. (200) Jasmine/Jane manipulates the Orientalist mystique to work for her in a way. Yet, what does “foreign” mean here? The reader is left wondering if Jasmine has become foreign not only to Bud but also to herself. Is the foreignness a threat even to her because she does not recognize her new self or is it because of her location in a context that marks her as so other?

In diaspora novels, both women and men see duty and Indianness as synonymous but, for women especially, Indianness is inseparably intertwined with notions of sexuality and independence. New homes and countries seem to promise freedom. But unmoored from old homes and ideas of duty however, often seems to cast them adrift on a sea of empty loneliness. The contradictory impulses of flight and anchor complicate diaspora homes.

Jasmine understands that, “There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself. We murder who we are so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams”(29). Violence is inherent both in Jasmine’s departure from India and her arrival in America and so she cannot conceive of a remaking of the self without the murder of the old Jyoti/Jasmine. In Mukherjee’s vision, even the liberal and entrepreneurial post-colonial Indian male, Prakash, does not measure up. He cannot save himself from the dark forces of destiny let alone rescue or

change Jasmine's fate. For that she has to escape to far-off America and be saved by a real, white American male.

Faced with a loss of identity at each stage, Jasmine manages to evolve a new identity at each stage. Whenever necessary, she frames her own code of conduct to suit the particular situation in life. From the unenviable position of being the dowry less fifth daughter of a post-partition-riots-affected farmer in an inconsequential village of Punjab, she blossoms into the ambitious wife of an even more ambitious budding engineer who has dreams of migrating to the U.S. As a child, she had to constantly face the discrimination which is an accepted part of a young girl's life in rural India. In Hasnapur, "daughters were curses," and "the ruby-red choker of bruise around my (her) throat and sapphire finger-prints on my (her) collar-bone" indicate that her mother had tried hard to spare her the life of a dowry less bride. When she was a child, Jasmine shows courage and an indomitable spirit and even she kills a mad dog. Though brains are considered to be wasted on girls, Jasmine fared well at school and became the favourite of her Masterji. She shows the capacity to be a fighter and a survivor.

Jasmine's transitions are fraught with dangers and challenges. In spite of fighting against all odds and trying to stand against them, she is strongly conditioned by the society into which she is born. This conditioning expects her to disguise her true self most of the time and live according to images fashioned by others. In this regard Jasmine says, "I wanted to become the person they thought they saw". Thus immigrants are many times born and the assimilation is a spiritual rebirth. Jasmine takes many rebirths namely – Jyothi, Jasmine, Jase and Jane. Through her character the novelist underlines the propensity of spiritual metamorphosis as a pre-condition to cultural assimilation. The novel *Jasmine* reveals that the true individuality of a person does not lie in being an Indian or an American but it lies in the inner strength of the person to attain greater height.

Bharati Mukherjee's another novel *Wife*, published in 1975, is the story of an Indian wife, Dimple Mukherjee, torn between the need to play the role society expects of her and her own need for self expression. The author delves deep into the psyche of Dimple as she evolves from being single to a wife, from her existence in the household backdrop of Calcutta to the cosmopolitan world of America. The focus is on an Indian wife who is keen to take a plunge in the thrilling life of America but who is also being pulled back by her Indian ethics and values.

Dimple Dasgupta, married off to an engineer, soon finds herself in America. She had thought extraordinarily about America while in Calcutta. On her very first day in New York, "she felt like a star collapsing inwardly" (*Wife* 109). On her visit to a party, she expected to see apartments in America resembling the sets of Raj Kapoor's movies. On the contrary, the apartments are barely the size of her house in Calcutta. She goes out shopping but it turns out to be a sad experience. Dimple does not know what to buy and how to ask for it at the store. Dimple feels, "She was caught in the crossfire of an American communalism she couldn't understand" (*Wife* 60). The rebuff she gets is enough to discourage her from trying similar forays in future. She decides not to venture again all by herself. Dimple discovers in her first shopping experience that it is difficult to do even the smallest chores in an alien culture. This setback and rejection leads to holdups in course of assimilation.

Life in America allows Dimple to seek ways out of the role reserved for a wife in her community and to explore methods of breaking out of the traditional moulds. She comes to America ready to be transformed and willing to seek out an identity that would take her away from the wifely ideals exemplified by 'Sita', yet she fails to break away from her Indian Bengali community and connect with the conventional American society. Dimple believed that she would be free to experience a life distanced from that which she left behind in India. On the contrary, she finds her existence in a nebulous, undefined social space that reinforces her indigenous cultural moorings. Marginalised by the patriarchy of Indian culture, Dimple is equally perturbed in her adopted culture.

Migration towards America also disintegrates the marital bond between Amit and Dimple. Dimple feels temporary joblessness has made her husband frail and flimsy, losing his erstwhile infallible position in family. Back home in India she held him in high esteem. The commendable comments of her friends and relatives drew Dimple's attention to her husband's persona. No longer confined to the social and cultural patterns of her past while in America, Dimple gradually loses faith in her husband.

Dimple suffers from alienation in a culture the codes of which she is unable to decipher. Even before Dimple landed in New York, she had heard friends talking of America as a place where one can have fun but one would have to be a foreigner for all his life. As a farewell party in India, Dimple was told by a woman that America may be thought of as an imagination, but a person from another land is a resident alien. In New York, Meena, Dimple's friend, confesses how inadequate she feels outside her community because she has such a hard time understanding American humour and the English language. At times, Dimple thinks of talking to one of the American women she keeps meeting on the streets but decides that there are things she just could not ask them. Such thoughts inevitably lead to frustration and make her wonder how she could keep on living in a country where every other woman is a stranger, where she felt different, ignorant, and exposed to ridicule even in the

elevator. Dimple is helplessly caught in gripping quest for a new female American identity. For Dimple a happy guiltless amalgamation seems impossible. What goes inside her is a simultaneous fracturing and evolving of identity. If she had remained a housewife living with her extended family in India, she probably would not have asked herself questions regarding her happiness, freedom, identity and liberation. In India she experienced a comfortable but restricted existence. For Dimple the loss of old culture is not an exhilarating experience. Freedom from the bonds of caste, gender and family instead of turning her free, leave her utterly lonely and desolate.

An attempt to immerse herself in a strange but exciting world gives rise to a host of questions in Dimple's mind. This causes misunderstanding and confusion. She confronts a different set of conditions that pose a challenge and adventure. She becomes a prisoner of the ghetto in Flushing Queens. Unable to accept the contradictions of this existence, Dimple descends into depression, madness and murder. She also finds that it is not easy for a young woman like her, born and bred up in a very different environment, to adjust to the American ways. The cultural and social gulf dividing the two worlds is too vast and deep for her to bridge over. The frustrations of her lonely and dull existence in the apartment make her depressed and neurotic. Thinking she is ready to venture forth in America, she finds that she is not really prepared for it and in no time gets depressed and dejected. In spite of all her attempts, she experiences total estrangement from herself and her surroundings. The multicultural reality leads to a variety of new exposures in new world but does not deny the past affiliations. She tries to reconcile the Bengali ideal of perfect, passive wife with the demand of her new American life. She takes a drastic step at the end to get away from the cultural maladjustment that enmeshes her. She is driven to aggressive behaviour after becoming conscious that she is a misfit in both the cultures, the adopted Western culture and the Bengali cultures, the desperate to leave behind. The Indian woman, when facing an unfamiliar cultural environment, has problems that take unpredictable turns. Having nothing and nobody to fall back upon, she has to tackle her problems by herself. Dimple caught up in a cross-cultural dilemma, has to be her saviour. In trying to adapt to American society she is portrayed as rootless. She belongs to nowhere at the end of the story.

Through *Jasmine and Wife*, Mukherjee comments on the lives of the female immigrants from Third World countries and their attempt to adjust to a fast-paced American society. A close experience of the Western and Eastern worlds gives her an authentic and unbiased perspective of these cultural codes. An attempt to immerse in a strange but exciting world gives rise to a tumult of questions in the human mind. This causes misunderstanding, confusion and incomprehension in the mind of the female protagonists. Diaspora is confronted with different sets of conditions that pose a kind of challenge and adventure. The colliding worlds of their exile and immigrants spawn a number of psychological glitch that merge into one another to form a curious blend of cross-cultural consciousness.

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