



THE SHAPING OF WOMANHOOD – A STUDY OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S JASMINE

Dr. Bhuvaneshwari P

Assistant Professor of English, Vellalar College for Women, Erode, Tamilnadu, India.

ABSTRACT

The objective of the article is to intricate the mission of Bharati Mukherjee's female character in finding a space for her own without protesting but escaping the patriarchal dominance. Mukherjee focuses on the feminine issues from an existentialistic view to discover women's aspiration for freedom. The existentialist visualization of Bharati Mukherjee elucidates the transcending realities of women which is the most important contribution to the empowerment of modern women. Her protagonist in her novel *Jasmine* moves away from all socially defined roles and determines to exist as independent soul in a new land to celebrate her unique self. Mukherjee's concept of self-emergence by walking away from patriarchy is highlighted and the better existence of woman as powerful and exclusive being in a faraway land is also scrutinized in this research work. Mukherjee's unique treatment of women places her as a prominent writer in the field of Indian English Literature.

KEYWORDS : famine, existence, patriarchy, freedom.

In the last two decades, Indian writing in English acclaims considerable critical recognition. Many Indian Writers have succeeded in drawing the world attention through their encounter of the cultures and an existential rediscovery. Especially, Indian women writers exert literature as a gateway to reveal women's inner world in surprising ways. They establish their new dynasty in modern English fiction and create a vivid picture of women's life exclusively to demonstrate the needs and aspirations of women. For centuries, women are being ascribed to domestic restrictions and subjugated to male domination. To overcome these age-old traditions of female servitude, women writers venture to explore the conditions of women from different perspectives. Among these, the National Book Critics Award winner Mukherjee's thoughtful and elegant study is unique in redefining the identity of women characters.

Feminism and problems that relate to women have become the unresolved queries of the contemporary world. The writings of Indian Women Writers facilitate to visualize women's condition and explore deep into their problems and raise questions why women are unable to be completely free from restrictions in spite of numerous reformers on 'women's freedom' from time immemorial. Feminine beliefs evidently manifest in the works of women writers. Feminism in literature is a presentation of restraining forces and an attempt to break away in relation to various women characters. Geeta Padmanaban expresses this opinion as follows: "Is the goal quality with men? Total freedom from them? Is this march for freedom and equality an unmixed blessing? Was Brigitte Bardot right when she said, 'women get more unhappy the more they try to liberate themselves?' (3)

In *Jasmine*, Mukherjee has illustrated the expedition of Indian woman since her childhood to adulthood in particular, the wifehood where her protagonist succeeds in finding the meaning for her existence. Born and brought up in rural, Mukherjee's *Jasmine* is dominated by the conventional ideas and at times becomes the victim of typical Indian patriarchy. Confronted with the strained experiences, *Jasmine* disperses her notion of life beyond her understanding.

Through her character, Mukherjee attempts to divulge on how society keeps women within the traditional pattern and how they are caught up between the society and self in accordance with their self-exploration. The protagonist, at every phase of her life faces a total female subjugation when she is forced to adopt social norms ultimately. Later, she realises that emerging from the social constraints is the only way of finding her womanhood, as an individual and she strives to attain it.

Being aware of the condition of the birth of girl child in India, Mukherjee expresses the female sensibilities through her young protagonist *Jasmine*. At this juncture, it is important to accept that women in the novels of Bharati Mukherjee are unique Indians who are not simply sufferers but the great survivors. *Jasmine* stands aloof from the other women to challenge her fate. *Jasmine* faces many misfortunes since her childhood. Her birth itself is a milestone of her life as she is an unwanted daughter to the family. Mukherjee projects complex situation of Indian women through *Jasmine* as, "If I had been a boy, my birth in a bountiful year would have marked me as lucky, a child with a special destiny to fulfil. But daughters were curses" (*Jasmine* 39). She has evidently proved that the girl children are subdued and subjugated from their birth onwards. In *Jasmine*, *Jasmine* becomes the victim of this economic deprivation. As a poor village girl, *Jasmine* faces all sorts of embarrassment which complicates her happy childhood. Identifying *Jasmine* as a poor young girl, Mukherjee registers the agonizing experience of the rural women.

Jasmine's father is an embodiment of every Indian father who views his daughter to be fit to work on cattle alone but *Jasmine* personifies modern woman who hardly hesitates to express her desire to become a doctor. *Jasmine's* determination and passion for education stuns her father. Mukherjee recounts the pathetic condition of women in the traditional India in this scenario. After Masterji's departure, *Jasmine's* mother has bitterly been blamed by her mother-in-law to bring up a girl in a different way who speaks strongly about the need of her education.

Bharati Mukherjee is very particular in revealing this evilness through *Jasmine's* revelation about her future plans of her education and her great desire to become a good English speaker. Soon, she comprehends the reality of life and remains passive at home. Mukherjee's declaration about *Jasmine's* unfulfilled desire of getting education is very much pitiable like Virginia Woolf's *Judith Shakespeare in A Room of One's Own* (1929), who had been denied to desire and to literate that finally had led her to suicide and was buried without dignity.

As Mukherjee's focus is on encounters of women's existence, her protagonist shows an evolution from stage of submissive to angelic in her course of life. *Jasmine*, the freedom longing woman feels blessed with Prakash through their wedlock. *Jasmine* is not contended to marry a man of her parents' wish. Being defiant, *Jasmine* marries Prakash without the concern of her family members and feels delighted to marry him without dowry. *Jasmine* feels proud of her marriage and thinks it as her

achievement even though her friend bitterly accuses her of spoiling the culture. Mukherjee's notion of modern day marriages and its proportions impact in a woman's life is explicitly depicted through Jasmine.

Jasmine's marriage with Prakash is a turning point in her life. Prakash, an aspiring engineering student, plans to move to America treats her equal and different from other men. Prakash's view of life and his modern thoughts surprises Jasmine. She reciprocates when Prakash tries to inculcate his modern way of life within Jasmine. The author uses Prakash as her mouth piece to articulate the transformations in the male society which she needs to establish for women's upliftment. Mukherjee portrays Prakash as a typical prototype modern man, even a profeminist. Jasmine is dazed when he asks her to call him by name. Jasmine who has been drowned into patriarchal system reveals her hesitation, "In Hasnapur wives used only pronouns to address their husbands. The first months, eager and obedient as I was, I still had hard time calling him Prakash" (*Jasmine* 77). Jasmine's evolution from good old stereotypes is well documented by her reactions. Mukherjee tends to bring out the difference between modern free will marriage and the traditional dowry marriage through Jasmine.

Unfortunately the gloriousness of her marriage life never tended to be a long one. However Jasmine is bold and intelligent and questions the prophecies of the astrologer, she is incapable of escaping her ill-luck. She remembers the thought of Prakash in her dark lonely room. The feeling of widowhood terrorizes her entire days when the society corners her and her mother in the widow's dark hut and she senses they are little better than Mazbis and untouchables. Evidently, span of marital life of women is determined by the life span of their husbands. Mukherjee intellectually mentions that women lose all their identity after the death of their husbands. A widow is not a woman with equal rights but a servant like member of the family. Mukherjee, with the notion of helping and changing the identity of widows for a better survival, has created 'Jasmine' in an explicit way. Jasmine is determined that she cannot tolerate her pain of widowhood in the village like others. She expresses her grief as, "Later, I thought, we had created life. Prakash had taken Jyoti and created Jasmine, and Jasmine would complete the mission of Prakash. Vijn & Wife. A vision had formed" (*Jasmine* 97). The barriers of her existence are like a stream and it has long flow and many dimensions, yet like a soldier she is bravely ready to battle the barriers in her existential quest.

Being a born fighter, Jasmine declines this heart-rending tragedy to diminish her strength. She has broadened her vision and never wants to be caught by the patriarchal systems of her village. Her urge to escape from the utter chaos and confusion of the existential void and to set her journey towards a semblance of clarity determines her to complete the mission with Prakash. She madly plans to move to America and visit the same Florida Institute where her husband has to get admitted. She wants to burn herself on the campus like that 'Sati' in ancient India than to suffer as a widow. Through the psychological trauma of Jasmine, Mukherjee has well assessed the Indian contemporary patriarchal society which alienates women.

Through the decision of Jasmine to fly away from restricted social norms, Mukherjee shows the urge of modern women and their rigorous demand for individual existence. They are not further more tolerant to be the scapegoats to the passive and fatalistic attitudes of the Indian society. Jasmine's family members wonder how it is possible for "a village girl, going alone to America, without job, husband, or papers?" (*Jasmine* 97). Jasmine thinks India is a house of sorrows and house of ill fortunes for women. Since Prakash plants the seed of

modernity within Jasmine, she has learnt to redefine her identity. She decides to move to America as a tribute to him, although, her entry to the new world is illegal. Jasmine's intensity is a fine reflection of Mukherjee's mind. In an interview Mukherjee reveals her thought of freedom, "It's making life important, making a single life important, rather than having a prescription for the global ills which afflict us" (*Jasmine* 17). It is hardly a simple task to survive in United-States for an Indian peasant girl who never had a change of completing her elementary school; still she sets up her courage to face the challenges of the new land than to be a cursed soul in patriarchal society. As an outcome of inmost soreness, Jasmine could no longer live in her village as a widow like other women. She emphatically asserts, "I grieved. I read slokas with swamis in mountainside ashrams. For every fish, there is a fisherman; for every mission, said a swami, is to create new life" (*Jasmine* 97). Her confidence to survive in the new land emerges during these days.

Jasmine's entry to new land is not without thorns. As soon as she has reached the foreign land she has realised that life of women is arduous even in foreign land. She is entirely collapsed while she is attacked and brutally raped by a white man, Half Face whom she has paid to smuggle her into the country. However she is begged for her life, she is unheard. Jasmine never encounters such a cruel act of a white man Half Face and decides to end her life. Her sensational experience suddenly changes her mind and gives her the strength to kill the rapist instead of killing herself. The deadly act of rape shakes her subconscious mind and she attempts to comprehend the world and she decides to construct a new American identity for herself. In spite of such a danger, she feels lighted and sets her journey with an accomplished mission, "I buttoned up the jacket and sat by the fire. 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" (*Jasmine* 121). Born as Jyoti, she initiates her journey that leads her to take multiple roles as Jasmine, Jase and Jane in attempting to resolve her identity.

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