



Indian mythology in the Novel Jasmine by Bharati Mukherjee

*S. Ve. Vijayabaabu

* Ph.D Research Scholar – Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar, Chidambaram, Tamilnadu.

ABSTRACT

Bharati Mukherjee's Jasmine (1990) is primarily a novel of cultural transplantation. The novel deals with a young Indian widow's successful attempt to reshape her destiny and achieve happiness. Indian sensibility manifests itself in Indian myths and legends. The two significant archetypal images embedded in the collective unconscious of the race are the broken pitcher and the third eye. Later in the novel when Jasmine kills Half-Face, who has raped her, Bharati Mukherjee brilliantly fuses two archetypal images of Kali, the goddess of destruction and the broken pitcher. Though Jasmine undergoes many transformations for her recognition, the spiritual awareness inherited by her directs her to lead life with a lesser deviation from the codified and spiritualised way of life as postulated in Indian tradition and mythology.

Keywords : broken pitcher, the third eye, archetypal image of Kali.

Bharati Mukherjee has lived mostly in Canada or the United States since 1961, earning degrees, raising sons, lecturing at universities, and writing numerous articles, two nonfiction books, seven novels, and two short story collections. Bharati Mukherjee who describes herself as having been born "a Hindu Bengali Brahmin" in Calcutta in 1940, has interacted freely with American culture and has not only taken but has endowed a new perspective to the land she inhabited. Her adoption to the American culture does not mean she throws to the wind her race, her religion, and her beliefs. Her Indian sensibility is expressed in her third novel Jasmine.

Jasmine, the protagonist, career begins in a village in the Punjab, India. When Jasmine is seven, an astrologer prophesies widowhood and exile for her. Jasmine, who is named Jyoti by her parents, marries at the age of fourteen to an enlightened engineering student who educates her and renames her Jasmine. He wishes to emigrate to the United States, but before that can happen, he is blown up by a Sikh terrorist bomb. Jasmine then sets out for The United States to realize her husband's immigration dream by proxy and also, like a virtuous Hindu widow, to commit suttee by cremating his suit (in lieu of his mangled corpse) and immolating herself in the flames. To fulfill her dream she sells herself for food and passage. In one instance, when a Vietnam veteran turned smuggler rapes her and makes fun of her husband's suit, she strikes back and kills him. She is helped by a kind woman who illegally aids refugees and who renames her Jazzy, another reincarnation. Through her Jasmine becomes a care-giver to an academic couple at Columbia University: when the couple's marriage breaks up, the husband, Taylor, becomes Jasmine's lover. He nicknames her Jase, yet another reincarnation. A final reincarnation occurs when Jasmine relocates to the Midwest. She flees New York in terror and leaves Taylor when she recognizes a neighborhood hotdog vendor as her husband's assassin. By chance she ends up in Iowa as the common-law wife of Bud Ripplemeyer, a prominent small-town banker, and becomes known as Jane Ripplemeyer. Jasmine refuses to marry him for fear of her astrologer's prophecy of widowhood, and indeed Bud is shot by a distraught farmer facing foreclosure soon after he and Jasmine began living together. Bud is shot at and confined to a wheel-chair. Trying to make him comfortable and confident, she becomes pregnant but does not wish to marry him. She has fully assimilated herself to the American family life with adopted children and pregnancy, but is waiting for her love which she finds when Taylor comes to

her. From her duties towards others, she now thinks of her duty to herself. She changes because she wants to change and thinks of her happiness, her love, herself.

Indian sensibility manifests itself in Indian myths and legends which she so skillfully weaves into the fabric of the novel that they do not appear as "scattered images" but form an organic whole. The two significant archetypal images embedded in the collective unconscious of the race that Bharati Mukherjee uses are the broken pitcher and the third eye.

Let us take up the broken pitcher first. Just as when the pitcher breaks the part of the sky (or air, one of the gross elements of which the universe is composed) inside the pitcher becomes a total and inseparable part of the great void outside: similarly when a man loses his earthly existence (his name and appearance), in other words, when his body perishes, one who has had an understanding of Brahma (the Absolute) blends with Brahma to become one with him. The relevant sloka goes like this:

Ghate nashte Yata Vyom Vyomeib bhavati sphutam Tathaiva upadhivilaye brahmaiva Brahnavit swayam. (Vivek Chudamani, 566)

It is this archetypal pattern that Bharati Mukherjee spells out in Jasmine;

The villagers say when a clay pitcher breaks, you see that the air inside is the same as the outside. Vimla set herself on fire because she had broken her pitcher (her husband was dead); she saw that there were no insides and outsides. We are just shells of the same Absolute. (p.15)

Later in the novel when Jasmine kills Half-Face, who has raped her, Bharati Mukherjee brilliantly fuses two archetypal images of Kali, the goddess of destruction and the broken pitcher. After Half-Face has raped her she wants to kill herself but 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 dishonor disrupt my mission. There would be plenty of time to die... I extended my tongue and sliced it. (p.117-118)

And as she does it she becomes Kali personified, the deity of avenging fury – Death incarnate – and the killing becomes so easy. And she has been reborn by killing not herself but Half-Face and she begins her journey into America, travelling light. She considers herself a symbolic sati-goddess. "... she had burned herself in a trash-can-funeral pyre behind a boarded-up motel in Florida". (p.176). Thus her burning of Prakash's suit becomes highly symbolic in the context: it is as if she commits sati-the pitcher is broken, there is no difference between the inside and the outside and her soul, as it were, finds a new habitation, her quest for a new identity has begun.

Beside the broken pitcher, the second significant archetypal image (embedded in Indian mythology) that Bharati Mukherjee uses is that of Shiva's Third Eye – the eye through which Shiva peered out into invisible worlds; past present and future would coalesce giving him an ability to "swallow the cosmos whole". Later the sages developed this Third Eye: an extra eye right in the middle of their foreheads and with that eye they became "trikaldarshi", that is they could look back to the past and into the future.

While scavenging for firewood Jasmine (Jyoti of Hasnapur) gets a star-shaped wound which becomes her third eye giving her a wide and true perspective on life itself. With this third eye she learns to look into the future, as a catalyst between two cultures, with pain and hope and hope and pain and when she embarks on her final journey in America she is "greedy with wants and reckless with hope" (p.241). 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 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. (p.240)

Thus Bharati Mukherjee's unique ability lies in extending into her fiction the most significant motifs from Indian philosophy.

Bharati Mukherjee successfully transmits a message through Jasmine who is subjected to multiple codes of society and geographical locales. Jasmine assimilates herself to the mainstream culture of the adopted land. The past has to be wiped out. The novelist admits that the life of an immigrant involves a series of reincarnations. In one of her interviews given to *Lowa Review* she confided:

I have been murdered and reborn at least three times, the very correct woman I was trained to be and was very happy being, is very different from the politicized, shrill, civil rights activist I was in Canada, and from the urgent writer that I have become in the last few years in the United States. (Mukherjee 18)

Similarly, rebirth has occurred to Jasmine even immediately after her birth. She experienced rebirth right at birth when her own mother tried to kill her since she was the fifth daughter, the seventh of nine children. Daughters were curses those days. She expresses it in her words:

My mother was a sniper. She wanted to spare me the pain of a dowryless bride. My mother wanted a happy life for me. I survived the snipping. My grandmother may have named me Jyoti, Light, but in surviving I was already Jane, a fighter and adapter. (p.40)

Jasmine's father Pitaji was gored by a bull when he had gone to visit a Lahori, someone he liked to play chess with. The Lahori consoled her mother:

Why cry? Crying is selfish. We have no husbands, no wives, no fathers, no sons. Family life and family emotions are all illusions. The lord lends us a body, gives an assignment, and sends us down. When we get the job done, the Lord calls us home again for the next assignment. (p. 58-59)

Hurtling from the confines of an Indian widow's bleak imprisonment, she runs into the harsh brutality of illegal entry, rape, and murder in America. The ensuing silence of horror that cloaks Jasmine's world is literalized in her cutting of her tongue; Goddess Kali-like, she pours blood from her mouth on Half-Face, the modern avatar of evil. Jasmine's inarticulation is exemplified by her silent power to transform her self-image as Lakshmi, goddess of domestic bliss, to Kali, the war goddess.

Jasmine becomes a metaphor for that type of Indianness which has through the ages, welcomed and absorbed within itself, all that is fine and decent from every country, every religion every culture. It is typically Indian. Jasmine's transformation is superficially American but in her mind she is Indian. It is rightly pointed out by Shakuntala Bharvani as: "In spite of every new guise, all that changes of Jasmine is merely exterior, there is no corresponding growth in depth and maturity". (Bharvani 200)

Though the Jasmine undergoes many transformations for her recognition, the spiritual awareness inherited by her directs her to lead life with a lesser deviation from the codified and spiritualised way of life as postulated in Indian tradition and mythology. Summita Roy's assessment seems more to the point as: "her (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'". (Roy 203)

As such, the woman character in Jasmine is moored to her Indian origins the same way the author is, like her, she sheds her external connection with India, but carries a core of belief in the interior of the self against which all new experience is measured.

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