

## Quest for identity in Bharati Mukherjee's 'Jasmine'

**Manish Deorari**

H.N.B Garhwal University  
Srinagar Garhwal

### Abstract

Diaspora writer Bharati Mukherjee is eminent in the field of fiction, tried to explore the consistent efforts and struggle of women to attain identification in a patriarchal conventional society. 'Jasmine' is one of her prominent novels, explores the journey of a girl named jyoti. The novel is about self discovery, woman consciousness, and immigrant experience. The identity of the protagonist jyoti changes several times as she is trying to adapt the American way of life in order to be able to survive. The present paper is an attempt to portray jyoti's quest for self identity in a male dominant society. The paper also explores various aspects of jyoti's identity; her transformation from a simple village girl into a modern empowered woman.

**Keywords:** transformation, marriage, conventional, modernization, patriarchal.

Bharati Mukherjee tries to bring out the obstacles and suffering of the women who have settled in an alien land. Moreover, the quest for self identity plays a vital role in most of her novels. Her novels truly reflect the issues of her own cultural conflucts in West Bengal, India.

Jasmine is all about the constant struggle and transformation of a young Indian woman named 'jyoti', who is trying to adapt a modern life. The novel is based on a short story in Bharati Mukherjee's collection 'The Middleman and other stories' (1988). Jasmine is one of the most remarkable and laudable novels of Bharati Mukherjee. It tells us about a woman's power of changing the social norms and feudal traditions by refusing to live by others. Jasmine is born as Jyoti in a small Indian village named Hasnapur of Punjab state. The fifth daughter in the family has to encounter a lot of problems as it is considered a sin to have a girl child in the family. She herself describes her birth:

In a makeshift birthing hut in Hasnapur, Jullundhar District, Punjab, India, I was born the year the harvest was so good that even my father, the reluctant tiller of thirty acres, had grain to hoard for draught. 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 fulfill. But daughters were curse. (Jasmine, 39).

In chapter 5<sup>th</sup> of the novel, Jasmine describes a face to face moment at the hospital in the Gyno Ward. She tries to console a bitterly crying woman who is utterly unprepared to have a baby. Jane offers her coffee and describes the process of lovemaking after Bud becomes paralyzed. Furthermore, she describes how she takes control on her desire of sexual pleasure and Bud feels shame in his vulnerability. She calls her night a dark night similar to the hot dry soil:

It is still spring, hot days, cool nights, Iowa's gentlest month. Bud is already in the first fluttering of sleep. The house is dark, full of unacted drama. Lying awake, trying to regulate my breathing with my heart, with Bud's light snore, trying to put my head back on the pillow, I watch the patterns on the ceiling, framed photos on the dresser, my lover falling through layers of private pain. I get up, briefly, and move his wheelchair back to the corner, and fold it. On nights like this, with a full moon beating down like an auxiliary sun, the farmers say you can practically hear the corn and beans ripping their way through the ground. This night I feel torn open like the hot dry soil, parched.

It shows that she has all the guts to fit herself in any grievous condition. She tenaciously moves according to the condition of her family; fits herself in all hazardous conditions.

At the age of seven, an astrologer prophesied that she would certainly become a widow at seventeen and also prophesied about her migration to foreign country. With a strong reply to the astrologer, she proves that she is not a woman of superstitious society. "I don't believe you" she whispered. (Jasmine, 4). At the end of the argumentation, the astrologer hits her on her forehead. When her sisters pretend a concern about her scars, she unhesitatingly replies them. "It's not a scar", I shouted "It's my third eye"..... "Now I am a sage". (Jasmine, 5)

A woman beyond superstitious world never allowed having primary education on account of the aggrieved condition of woman in the society. She is forced to marry an old man. Meanwhile, she falls in love with a Christian guy named Prakash and marries him. As a Hindu girl marries to a Christian man, receives ill treatment from her parents and society. She is a girl of rebellious nature. She does not want to spend her life with an oaf:

I stopped sipping. The tea had cooled enough for a patch of brownish skin to form in the middle of the cup. I did not want to spend my life with an oaf who had to fake an accident in order to touch me. (Jasmine, 73).

As it is said, that marriage transforms a woman in a way that there is certainly no room for self identity, self care and concern. Jyoti's name is changed as Jasmine after marriage. Her

husband Prakash is a man of modern India with modern concepts towards life. He always encourages his wife to read, write and to make herself a confident woman. Jasmine as a liberal woman tries her hand at sales door to door. She wants children but Prakash denies her request and encourages her to study and suggests her that she is too young to become a mother. Prakash persuades her:

It says you are still very young and foolish. It says you are confusing social and religious duty with instinct. I honor the instinct, and there is nothing more inevitable than a fourteen-year-old married woman becoming a mother. (Jasmine, 78)

Later, he also shares his dream of going America to pursue a technical course and the couple works hard to go to America to start a new life with a new prospect. However, the dream shatters as Prakash is killed in a riot. Actually, a group of enraged people was trying to kill Jasmine because she was not following the traditions and customs of a so called Hindu Society. Accidentally, Prakash died as he was trying to protect his wife. Ultimately, Jyoti's transformation into Jasmine (a modern one) kills her husband.

Now, Jasmine decides that she will herself go to America to fulfill her husband's long awaited desire. Although, the journey is not too easy for a woman like Jasmine, but with the help of her brothers she arranges all documents to the foreign country. During her journey, she is brutally raped by the captain of the ship. Later, in rage she killed him and proves that she is not a traditional village girl now; she has the strength to protect herself. Thus, she becomes a rebel to survive in a male dominated society. The following lines elaborate the agony of her soul :

No one to call to, no one to disturb us. Just me and the man who had raped me, the man I had murdered. The room looked like a slaughterhouse. Blood had congealed on my hands, my chin, my breasts. What a monstrous thing, what an infinitesimal thing, is the taking of a human life, for the second time in three months, I was in a room with a slain man, my body bloodied. I was walking death. Death incarnate. (Jasmine, 119).

After this outrageous incident Jasmine decides to fly like a free bird in the alien land, not as a widow, but as a woman full of zeal and confidence. She says, "I wanted to distance myself from everything Indian, Everything Jyoti-like". ( Jasmine, 145). Guided by Lillian Gordon, who calls her 'Jazzy', she gets company of Dr. Vadhera, her husband's teacher. Soon, she leaves him as he is a man of customs and traditions.

A few months later, she starts working at the house of Mr. Taylor as a caretaker to Duff, an adopted daughter of Taylor. She is now 'Jase' (from Jasmine), a more confident woman.

There she is interrupted by Sukhwinder, her husband's killer. Irritably she decides to move to Mr. Bud Ripple's house. Jyoti, Jazzy, Jasmine, Jase- different names, different identities, however, each one has to encounter a brutal face of life.

Jyoti of Hasnapur was not Jasmine, Duff's day mummy and Taylor and Wylie's au pair in Manhattan; that Jasmine is not 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? (Jasmine, 127).

The credit goes to Bharati Mukherjee for transforming a village girl into the goddess of strength and showing that women are not meek and submissive but they are strong willed and assertive by nature. Her silence preserves the biggest storm in her and when it comes to personal honor, she, like the goddess, can punish the wrong doer and also kill and finish the biggest demons. She also brings out the agonizing evil side of the society where the other sex becomes demon when it comes to physical gratification. At one place, Jasmine says:

For the first time in my life I understood what evil was about. It was about not being human....It was a very simple, very clear perception, a moment of truth, the kind of understanding that I have heard comes at the moment of death (Dayal, 1993: 116).

## References

1. Mukherjee, Bharati. *Jasmine*. New Delhi;Penguin Books, 1990.
2. Tandon, Sushma. *Bharati Mukherjee's fiction: A Perspective*. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2004.
3. Dhawan, R.K. *The Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee*. New Delhi:Prestige Books, 1996.