

Construction of Female Identity in *Jasmine and Wife* : A Comparative Study

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Abstract : *The female protagonists of Bharati Mukherjee are passing through different stages and phases of their life while searching for their identity in a callous and confined environment. Mukherjee's characterization and her wider thematic spectrum and design envisage multi-culturalism of American democracy and the neo-nationalism of the immigrants like her. This can be fully analysed and understood only when we make a detailed chronological and close scrutiny of the novels of Bharati Mukherjee. The central vision of her novels depicts the protagonist's gradual confrontation with cultural disparities and the quest for female-identity that in turn make her a heroic woman. There is a constant endeavor on the part of critics and scholars to analyse the vision and works of Bharati Mukherjee as migrant in the United States, which they study and understand in terms of her quest for cultural hybridity, a feminist outlook, a post-colonial vision and a diasporic strife.*

Keywords : *Immigration, Identity crisis, hybridity, Cultural conflict and assimilation.*

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Out of the many aspects of social, cultural, economic and personal life explored and expressed in the novels of Bharati Mukherjee, one concern that conspicuously occupies the central place in the main thematic design of her fiction is her constructing a meaningful spectrum of emerging female identity that not only challenges and questions the traditional twin values of 'Suffering' and 'Sacrifice' associated with female existence the world over, but also probes and proves this long nourished and nurtured 'Discrimination' and 'Dependence' by the centuries old patriarchy and male chauvinism. Most of the contemporary South Asian writers like Bapsi Sidhwa from Pakistan, Taslima Nasreen from Bangladesh, Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai from India have succeeded in focusing attention on the plight of women with the result that now the woman is no more tethered to the process of bearing and rearing children. As has rightly been suggested by Irene Castillejo in *Knowing Women: A Feminine Psychology*:

She has both soared and elbowed her way through thick and thin, filling her lungs with her new found freedom till Adam, and sometimes Eve herself must have wondered if he had been wise to let her taste that second apple (Castillejo 92-3).

Today after a long struggle of more than 350 years women are not only capable of negotiation but have succeeded in putting forth their choices, which has changed her role from a source of inspiration to creation. That is why, now the woman writers are poets, novelist and the seller of dreams and ideas. Whether it is British literature or it is American literature or it is African literature or it is Oriental literature, what is significant is that women writers have succeeded in making their presence noticeable by transcending the traditional boundaries of suffocation, subjugation, suppression, suffering and struggle.

According to Margaret Egnor in her essay "On the Meaning of Sakti to women in Tamil Nadu" published in *The Power of Tamil Women*:

A special positive power comes from suffering and self-sacrifice which can be defined as the ability to act, to make other act, to make things happen and as action itself....(Egnor 22).

The emergence of female identity has been conspicuously dealt with by Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* followed by the breaking of the long female silence as shown in the works of Anita Desai, Anees Jung, Arundhati Roy,

Shashi Deshpande and Bharati Mukherjee.

So this quest for female identity has been depicted and dramatized in terms of human dreams, aspirations, frustrations, tribulations, satisfactions and humiliation. It is like breaking the society's forged manacles in order to achieve satisfaction and liberty. But the male counterparts do not allow woman to define and tread their own territory as it would pose a threat to their centuries old traditional hegemony, thereby, pulling down their male superiority and dominance. The statement of Nur's young wife in the novel *In Custody* by Anita Desai is highly pertinent when she retorts:

Are you not guilty of assuming that because you are a male you have a right to brains, talent, reputation and achievements, while I because I was born a female, am condemned to find what satisfaction I can, in being maligned, mocked, ignored and neglected (Desai 196).

So, the Indian women in general and the women protagonists of Bharati Mukherjee in particular are passing through different stages and phases of their life while searching for their female identity in a callous and confined environment. This is what we find in Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days* and Anees Jung's *Unveiling India: A Woman's Journey* followed by Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife* and *Jasmine* where these writers have placed complete faith in the capacity and prowess of woman that in turn is explored and expressed in terms of an educated woman's search for female identity. Bharati Mukherjee has beautifully incorporated her experiences to create a new and powerful image of woman with propensity to realize her full potential. Mukherjee's female protagonists have earned a name at the individual level and acquired an identity in a group. As aptly contended by Anees Jung in *Unveiling India: A Woman's Journey* that "their new strength stems from personalities defining their own terms, lending grace to living" (Jung 122).

Anees further explains the emergence of changing female identity in a typically Indian style with a tinge of irony when she writes:

Not long ago a woman who spoke about herself was considered a loose woman. To voice a pain, to divulge a secret, was considered sacrilege, a breach of family trust. Today voices are raised without fear, and are heard outside the walls of homes that once kept a woman protected, also isolated. Some of the women who speak have stepped out. Others who have not are beginning to be aware, eager to find expression, but let them speak for themselves (Jung 109).

Similarly Bharati Mukherjee has also depicted a multi-dimensional spectrum of the changing women that goes beyond the tradition of Sita-Savitri ideal of woman as a wife. But Jasmine and Dimple become the modern icons challenging and revolting women, who are born and brought up in the restrictive and repressive society of India, but either through marriage or after marriage they assert and acquire the kind of liberty, independence and identity they have been aspiring for. As Bharati Mukherjee writes in *Wife*:

She fantasised about young men with moustaches dressed in spotless white, peering into opened skulls, marriage would bring her freedom, cocktails parties on carpeted lawns and fund-raising dinners for noble charities. Marriage would bring her love (Mukherjee 3).

So both these novels are hard hitting commentary on the failure of institution of marriage in protecting the self and identity of the women particularly in a socio cultural and economic context in which women are completely dependent on male protector but as and when these women find opportunities to react and rebel their long cherished dreams and desires, aspirations and expectations come crumbling down.

Such is the theme of *Jasmine*, a novel written by Bharati Mukherjee in which the protagonist Jasmine undergoes drastic changes due to the geographical displacement and socio-cultural pulls and pressures. Being an innocent and honest village girl Jyoti/Jasmine is not only familiar with the customs and traditions of the Indian culture but at the same time deeply conscious of her dreams, desires and crises. Her long journey from a small village of Hasanpur, Punjab up to the city of Iowa, America is an evidence of her strength and prowess to maintain and sustain her original identity of being an Indian woman. In spite of the challenges and alien forces trying to pull her down, Jasmine displays inner strength and power of adaptability to make the best out of the worst. This is what Bharati Mukherjee means when she says in defence of Jasmine's character in her interview to Connell Michael published in *Iowa Review* in the spring edition of 1990:

The kind of women I write about ... are those who are adaptable we've, all be raised to please, been trained to be adaptable as wives and that adaptability, is working to woman's advantage when we came over as immigrant (Connell. et al. 19).

This long eventual journey is marked by changing spectrum of her identity from a wife, daughter, and caretaker, beloved to a professional where Jasmine endeavours to strike a balance between her own compulsions with her Indian psyche. In other words, through Jasmine, Bharati Mukherjee has successfully blended the feminist sensibility with cultural needs that eventually define the identity of the protagonist. Jasmine is neither a radical woman changing and challenging nor thereby assuming an entirely new identity nor is she an oppressed and repressed personality making a complete surrender before the circumstances. This is the main cause of her conflict with Parkash who wanted to mould and change Jyoti/ Jasmine according to his own image of woman. But Jasmine as an individual wanted to have and follow her independent vision in which the best of the native tradition and of the urbanised scientific West was meaningfully incorporated.

According to Pushpa Parekh in her essay "Telling Her Tale: Narrative Voice and Gender Rolls in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*" published in *Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspectives*:

Jasmine's liner monologues and silent reflections capture her deliberations on cultural differences and on immigrant women's emotional adherence to her traditional beliefs while intellectually exploring the new avenues opened to her by the modern value system (Parekh 113).

Jasmine was born and brought up in a tradition oriented repressive family of Punjab where women were forced to maintain a silence in almost every decision-making process of the house and were expected to accept the groom chosen by the parents and relatives. It means Jasmine suffers on two fronts – one her being a woman and second her being a village girl. With a similar vision and design, Bharati Mukherjee traces the story of a woman belonging to Punjab who through her sheer determination and confidence shapes her own life and career as an American, which is parallel to the story of Bharati Mukherjee herself "I think of Jasmine and many of my characters, as being people who are pulling themselves out of the very traditional world in which their fate is predetermined, their destiny resigned to the stars. But Jasmine says: I'm going to reposition the stars." According to the *Kansas City Star*, *Jasmine* is both a thriller and a love story which in the course of its development combines the Indian culture and the North American Culture. The Indian culture has been left behind and the novelist traces the different stages of Jasmine's transformation from a Punjabi village girl Jyoti to a devoted Hindu wife, followed by Jazzy and Jase and finally to Jane and Jasmine. By making deft use of flashbacks and record cuts the story both explores and explains the heroine's life from her days at Hasanpur to

Cultural conflicts in the United States, in which the reader moves from a village in Punjab to South Florida, to an Indian community in Queens to Manhattan and then to an Iowa Town. Jyoti being a Hindu girl goes to Florida after the death of her husband where she is raped by a Vietnami. Completely humiliated and unhinged, she takes up a job with a nice couple. At the same time she joins a course in Colombia University to learn the manners and behaviours of an American, from where she goes to Iowa where she falls in love with Bud, an invalid banker. This is not far from truth to say that the compact and fluid style of narration along with personal struggles of Jasmine are reflective of Bharati Mukherjee herself, who like the protagonist associated her destiny with America, as mentioned by Sybil Steinberg in “Bharati Mukherjee” published in *Publishers Weekly*:

I knew from the moment I got here that I wanted to stay...mine is a clear eyed but definite love of America. I am aware of brutalities, the violence here, but in the long run my characters are survivors, like Jasmine, I feel there are people born to the American. By American I mean an intensity of spirit and a quality of desire. I feel American in a fundamental way, whether Americans see me that way or not (Steinberg 46-7).

The central vision and essence of *Jasmine* lies in her gradual confrontation with cultural disparities and her quest for female-identity that in turn make her a heroic woman, which is translated by Bharati Mukherjee in terms of the death of her husband Parkash at the hands of the terrorist, the murder of her rapist, the physical deformity of Bud, the suicide of her neighbour Darrel, her adoption of a Vietnam immigrant DU and then leaving the deformed man for Taylor for her moving to west California. So, Jasmine’s different encounters and confrontations with the wide spectrum of cultural conflicts lead to her assimilation into the new environment, where all the identities of Jasmine are dissolved in to a comprehensive and strong metaphor for the all-inclusive and multi assimilative Indian-ness with a final assimilation of the conflicting cultures into a cosmic oneness, where the cultural conflicts and their resultant assimilation are both resolved and transcended. As has rightly been contended by SC Sengupta through his essay “The Broken Pitcher and the Third Eye: Indian Sensibility in Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*,” published in *Indianisation of Each Language and Literature*, “she has a universal vision bathed in the general sunshine of love and compassion which captures the essence of both Indian and American heritage.” (181-91)

So, while in Canada Mukherjee underwent an agonising feeling of apartheid and humiliation to the extent that at one point of time she decided to become a social activist instead of becoming a writer; but after some deliberations and consolidations she decided to leave Canada for the United States, a decision that Mukherjee never regretted afterwards. According to her Canada and the United State are not geographical locations but socio-culturally and psychologically two very different responses to the issue of cultural conflict and cultural assimilation. That is why Mukherjee's endeavour to realise her dream, achieve her goal and fulfil her aspiration got the requisite impetus and encouragement in America, albeit her Toronto experiences have made her wiser and mature.

That is why, when *Wife* was published in 1975, it was vehemently rejected by the critics and scholars like Rosanne Klass, who debunked it as a 'soap opera' where the only meaning is meaninglessness. Published in *Indian Wife Lives Soap-Opera Life*, the critic further said, "Some books can be allowed to die, but others have to be killed" (83). However Bharati Mukherjee was much pained by this harsh reception but still she justified the violence committed by Dimple in an interview given to *The IOWA Review* in the manner given below,

Am I happy? Am I unhappy? And that to me is progress. So instead of committing suicide, turning the society- mandated violence inward, she, in a misguided act kills the enemy. So, of course, I am not approving of murder. It's meant to be a positive act, self-assertive (20)

When this comment of Bharati was insufficient than she again explained some of the points in April 1978 where she writes in *Day and Nights* in Calcutta- my second novel is about a young Bengali wife,

Who was sensitive enough to feel the pain but not intelligent enough to make sense out of her situation and break out. The anger that young wives round me are trying to hide and become my anger. And that washed over the manuscript. I write what I hoped would be a wounding novel (237-9).

This novel is a beautiful artistic account of the cultural conflict between the Indian culture and western culture, between the modern outlook and traditional way of living, expressed by Bharati Mukherjee in the character, career and life of Dimple

Das Gupta along with the construction of female identity that pervades the book. When Dimple comes to America she gets trapped by the Ghetto culture because of which she remains incommunicable. In other words, the problem confronted by Dimple is that of identity and self-expression. This is exemplified in her decision to marry a

man of her choice instead of surrendering to the decision of her father. While her father wanted to marry Dimple to some engineer, she was interesting in marrying a neuro-surgeon, but the values of patriarchal society prevailed and she had to marry an engineer Amit Basu who is soon going to emigrate to Canada and USA. So, Dimple is at least happy with her future prospectus thinking that her migration to the West will bring her face to face with freedom and full expression in the form of, “cocktail parties, carpeted lawns, and lavished dinner” and even she thought of premarital life as a dress rehearsal for actual living. But more than everything she was thinking of her dreams about sex experiences and the liberation that she will get, as pointed out by Jasbir Jain in “Foreignness of Spirit: The World of Bharati Mukherjee’s Novels,” in *The Journal of Indian Writing in English*:

At no juncture does she posit a word which is more integrated or freer than the one in which she is placed. Her isolation is rooted not merely in loneliness, in isolation of cultural differences but in her estrangement from her own past and her own inner being (17).

Dimple’s problem is not merely that of cultural conflict and its gradual assimilation, rather she is confronted by deeper issues like her dream of wealth followed by lavish living and her desire for a different kind of life that would eventually define and determine her female identity in this society of strangers and strugglers. This problem is further compounded by her constant obsession with her body figure and complexion, because she is influenced by faces on hoardings and advertising. She also writes a letter to the beautician seeking advice for underdeveloped bust, even her husband Amit Basu who is handsome does not match the movie star as Bharati Mukherjee writes in *Wife*:

She borrowed a forehead from an aspirin ad, the lips, eyes and chin from a body builder and shoulders ad, the stomach and legs from a trousers ad and put the ideal man herself in a restaurant on Park Street or by the side of a pool at a five star hotel (23).

In spite of all these fantasies Dimple suffers from more psycho-psychic disturbances like hallucinations and psychological illusions, which she thought would be dispelled after the marriage, but instead of relief marriage accentuated these fears by creating a stifling atmosphere in her small flat to the extent that she fails to communicate with herself. “Happy people did not talk to themselves and happy people did not pretend that they had not been talking to themselves. ‘Dimple Basu’, she repeated, ‘Dimple Basu is a happy woman’” (21).

But the problem becomes all the more acute and unbearable when Dimple becomes pregnant and starts complaining to her husband even for slight issues. In her frustration and helplessness she kills a mouse and the entire scene has been captured by Bharati Mukherjee in the following manner:

She chased it to the bathroom... I’ll get you? She screamed. “There’s no way out of this, my friend? And in an outburst of hatred, her body shuddering, her wrist taut ... It had a strangely swollen body, a very small creature with a fat belly. To Dimple the dead mouse looked pregnant? (35)

There is a constant endeavour on the part of critics and scholars to analyse the vision and works of Bharati Mukherjee as migrant in the United States which they study and understand in terms of her quest for cultural hybridity, a feminist outlook, a post-colonial vision and a diasporic strife. All these critics believe that Mukherjee’s characterization and her wider thematic spectrum and design envisage multi-culturalism of American democracy and the neo-nationalism of the immigrants like her. In many of her interviews Mukherjee has emphasized the multi-culturalism of America as part of liberal and democratic outlook which is further strengthened when confronted with the contradictions of diasporic vision and post-colonial existence. This can be fully analysed and understood only when we make a detailed chronological and close scrutiny of the individual novels of Bharati Mukherjee. *The Tiger’s Daughter* is the first novel written about an Indian immigrant Tara who at the age of 22 gets married to rich Bengali Brahman and returns to India after spending 7 years in America. But to her utter dismay she discovers India full of poverty, hunger and political instability. Even after spending seven years in United States, Tara has not successfully acquired the American culture and values, and when she confronts the contemporary Indian reality she finds herself in a dilemma. The *Times Literary Supplement* in an article titled (“Oh, Calcutta!”) writes that though the book has been rated as Mukherjee’s “elegant first novel ... skilfully wrought with lively

dialogue and descriptive passages” (736).

So, keeping in view the depiction and description of female identity in both these novels, we come to a concerted conclusion that Bharati Mukherjee neither indulges in ‘a strategy for legitimizing the escape’, as suggested by Sneshasis Maiti nor does she reveal her ‘aloofness of expatriation’, rather she has summed up the ruthless anger of woman combined with her single minded passion for belongingness, as shown in Jasmine’s desire for a green card. On the other hand Dimple Das Gupta is shown as excessively burdened with the customs and traditional values of Indian society combined with her roaming in ‘lands of dolce for niente’, where she constructs her female identity in terms of these fantasies, TV ads and daily soaps. The conspicuous dissimilarity between *Jasmine* and *Wife* is that while Jasmine is quick in decision making, Dimple is comparatively slow and even indifferent in understanding the harsh and hard realities of life. The chaotic mess and stinking social fabric of *Wife* gets translated into the Naxal movement like in the *Tiger’s Daughter* and Khalistan movement in *Jasmine*, but the sociological import and the historical significance of these events get precipitated only in a form of violence that renders Jasmine helpless and even ruthless. As contended by Banerjee Debjani in her essay “In the Presence of History” published in *Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspective*: “Her refusal to contextualize the political events of India while emphasizing the violence can be constructed as a trivialization of the complexities of the post-colonial condition” (170).

But we must remember that Bharati Mukherjee is neither a sociologist nor a historicist rather she is a literary artist with aesthetic vision and human understanding which are deftly and distinctly employed by her to design and construct female identity in terms of the life, career, trials and tribulations, aspirations and fantasies of her central protagonists that in turn defines and determines the central thrust of the book.

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