

Gender, Caste, and the Widows' Body in Bharti Mukherji's *Jasmine*

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ABSTRACT: This study examines the intersection of gender, caste, and the politics of the widow's body in *Jasmine* by Bharati Mukherjee. The novel portrays the life of Jasmine, a young Indian woman whose identity is shaped and reshaped through migration, violence, and cultural transformation. Within the traditional Indian patriarchal framework, widowhood functions as a social institution that disciplines and controls female bodies through religious, cultural, and caste-based norms. After the death of her husband Prakash, Jasmine confronts the restrictive expectations imposed upon widows, including self-denial, social exclusion, and the erasure of personal agency. Mukherjee challenges these conventions by presenting a protagonist who refuses to remain confined within the prescribed role of a widow. Instead, Jasmine reconstructs her identity through mobility, resistance, and self-determination. The novel further reveals how caste and patriarchal ideologies operate together to regulate women's lives and bodies. Jasmine's transformation from a submissive village girl into an independent transnational subject symbolizes a rejection of traditional structures that define women primarily through marriage and widowhood. Through feminist and postcolonial perspectives, the study argues that the widow's body becomes a contested site where issues of gender oppression, caste hierarchy, cultural identity, and personal freedom intersect. Mukherjee's narrative ultimately reimagines widowhood not as a state of social death but as an opportunity for self-renewal and empowerment. The novel thus critiques oppressive social traditions while highlighting the possibility of agency and identity reconstruction for women in both Indian and diasporic contexts.

Introduction

The term *gyno centrism* clearly focuses on two terms: *gyno*, which means female, feminine, or related to females, and *center*, which means around. Here, *gyno centrism* clarifies its own meaning, i.e., it is about the female, the feminine, and feminism. As Toril Moi explains, the first is 'a political position', the second 'a matter of biology' and the third 'a set of culturally defined characteristics'. Feminism is a movement that advocates and propagates the equal political, social, and economic status of women enjoyed by men. Throughout the world, women are subject to being the other and are deprived of their rights and freedom. In the domain of patriarchal culture, women are a social construct, a site on which masculine desires are enacted.

The two axiom son which feminism is built are;

Gender difference is the foundation for structuraline quality between men and women, by which women suffer sympathetic social injustice and the inequality between the sexes is not

the result of biological necessity, but is produced by the cultural construction of gender difference. (Nagarajan 206) The fact or that changes a girl into a woman with finality is not simply her an to my, but the process of social conditioning, which influences and molds her psyche to desire and pursue traditionally accepted and encouraged feminine roles only.

The agenda of feminism, therefore, is to understand the social and psychic mechanisms that construct and perpetuate gender inequality and change it as much as possible. Feminist literary criticism aims to study how cultural representatives like literature undermine and reinforce the economic, social, political and psychological suppression and oppression of women in society. (Nagarajan 206)

Feminism-Literary and Critical Aspects

Feminism, we can say, is a 'women's movement' which started in the 1960s and developed with leaps and jumps in the course till reaching the end of the twentieth century. Its roots lie deep with books such as Mary Wollstone craft's *AV indication of the Rights of Women* (1792), Olive Schreiner's *Women and Labour* (1911), and Virginia Woolf's *ARoom of One's Own*. The earliest feminist approach was limited to marriage, motherhood, and education. In the 1970s, it went through a major change, it went into.

Bharti Mukherjee' Jasmine

Bharati Mukherjee is an Indian-born American writer of Bengali origins. She was born in Kolkata, in a Brahmin family. She got her BA from the University of Kolkata, her MA from the University of Baroda, and then moved on to study in the USA, at the University of Iowa, from where she obtained another MA and a Doctorate. After living for a while with her husband in Canada, they returned to the USA, where she is currently Professor of Comparative Literature at the University, California. Mukherjee's works cover several genres: novels such as *The Tiger's Daughter*-1971, *Wife*-1975, *Jasmine*-1981, *The Holder of the World*-1993, *Leave It To Me*-1997, *Desirable Daughters*-2002, *The Tree Bride*-2004, short stories collections such as *Darkness*-1985, *The Middleman and Other Stories*-1988, *A Father*, non-fiction such as *The Sorrow and the Terror: The Haunting Legacy or Air India Tragedy*-1987, *Political Culture and Leadership in India*-1991, *Regionalism in Indian perspective*-1992).

The protagonist of the novel *Jasmine* has her origins in a short story of the same name included in the *Middleman* collection of short stories. However, although there are similarities between the novel and the short story characters, Mukherjee's replacement of the omniscient narrator of the short story with the first-person narrative of the heroine in the novel signify an important shift in the authorial attitude. The short story *Jasmine*, Mukherjee advises us, should be read as the story of a "smart" and "desirable"(27) girl who knows "exactly what she wants and what she is willing to trade off to get what she wants."(27)

Judie Newman, in her chapter on the novel *Jasmine* in *The Ballistic Bard: Postcolonial Fictions*, argues that the shift in the narrative voice from the third person to the first in the novel “restores her own voice to Jasmine”, “avoids reduplicating the male gaze” and, she infers, the Western imperial gaze, which in either narrative would construct the “Third World Woman as Other” in the very process of “looking” itself. (Newman, 1995:146).

The third and most accomplished novel, “*Jasmine*,” is an account of adaptation and not a defeat. It is the story of a Punjabi rural girl, Jyoti. Prakash, an energetic and enthusiastic young man, enters Jyoti’s life as her husband. When Prakash prepares to go to America, she says, “I’ll go with you, and if you leave me, I’ll jump into a well”. A woman has to accept the path of her husband, renamed as Jasmine, joyously sharing the ambition of her husband. She looks forward to going to America, a land of opportunities, but even this dream gets shattered by the murder of Prakash on the eve of his departure. She decides to go to America and fulfill Prakash’s mission and perform “Sati”. Having learned to “Walk and Talk” like an American, she grabs every opportunity to become American. Jasmine becomes Jase. At the end, she kills Sukhawinder, the Khalsa lion who killed Prakash. After that, she goes to Iowa, assuming a new name, “Jase”. The manifold facets or roles played by Jasmine as Jase and Jase assault the power in woman. This power can be equal to Sakti, which is command over the quality that destroys and fights against all evils. Jasmine has broken away from the shackles of caste, gender, and family. She has learnt to live not for her husband or for her children but for herself. Jasmine is a survivor, a fighter, and an adaptor. She figures against Unfavorable circumstances, comes out a winner, and carves out a new life in an alien country.

Birth and early life in a little town in India, the emigration to the USA, and finally, to herself and what it means to become an American. The eponymous narrator in *Jasmine*, also known as Jyoti, Jase or Jane, passes through one situation and country to another, and so is her inner self reborn several times towards a higher level, until she finally seems to have found a place to rest. Throughout the novel, Jasmine experiences numerous situations that bring violence with them. She is not always the subject of these situations, but they are always connected with her. It is not only physical violence experienced, but also mental violence that influences Jasmine's further way of life and force she reborn as a different person. The rough pictures that Mukherjee draws of violent moments reflect the psychological pain that comes with the changes of culture and life that Jasmine experiences. The paper will deal with these moments and analyze them according to their meaning for Jasmine.

Born as Jyoti in Hasnapur, a little town in India, Jasmine is told by an astrologer that she will be a widow at the age of 17. She doesn’t believe it, but the man hits her, and she falls on the ground, bites her tongue, and gets a scar on her forehead. “It’s my third eye [...] now I’ ma sage” (Jasmine 5) is what she tells her sisters. The pain she feels and the scar will always remind her of that moment in her life when she tried to run away from her fate.

When Jasmine runs to her sisters at the river, she swims while in it and suddenly sees a rot ten dog's body. The stench she smells and the pictures follow her for the rest of her life. Later in her life she still remembers the stench whenever she drinks a glass of water: "I know what I don't want to become" (Jasmine 5).

Jasmine's father dies when she is a teenager. He gets killed by a bull after stepping out of a bus. Her mother shaves her head afterwards as a sign that she has given up her own life. Jasmine knows a story of a woman who burned herself on her husband's grave after his death, so what her mother has done is not the worst case. But having experienced this sort of mental violence, seeing the father dead and the mother resigned, Jasmine stays strong and takes over the role of the mother in the house. At that point in the novel, Jasmine already takes on a new role in her life and leaves the old behind. She is no longer only a daughter, but she has to take responsibility for the rest of the family. The child is gone, and she is reborn as a young woman.

As that young woman, Jasmine is getting ready to find a husband for herself. She meets a friend of her two brothers, and later on, they get married and move to a bigger city. Prakash is planning to move to America, because his former professor lives there and could help him. Jasmine's past comes back to her mind when her husband is killed in a bomb attack in a shop shortly before his departure to America. She was just seventeen at that moment. The bomb, the work of some radicals, was supposed to hit her and other women in that shop for being "whores" (Jasmine 93), meaning "too modern". That cruel act of violence changes something in Jasmine. First of all, she goes back to her mother's home, and they live isolated as two widows for awhile. But Jasmine wants to do more with her life. She gets her brothers' help to get documents for a journey to America. She takes her husband's clothes with her and intends to burn herself with the mat the university where he wanted to study. "Jasmine", given that name by her husband when she was still named Jyoti, has already changed into the more modern woman her name represents. She has already turned from Jyoti, the girl from Hasnapur, to Jasmine, the woman who immigrates to America.

Conclusion

As women have experienced displacement and dislocations in their personal lives, they are better suited for adaptability in an alien culture. A close reading of Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* reveals that her primary aim is to champion the cause of women. Her novels truly adhere to the temperament and mood of the society in which women dwell. A person's life and the choices they make are ultimately shaped by their continuously changing circumstances. In *Jasmine*, Mukherjee introduces us to the various changes that her novel's main protagonist – *Jasmine* – goes through, as she journeys from the world of rural Indian Punjab to that of America's Midwest, discovering her American dream in the process. The author does not shy away from exposing the inadequacies of both these worlds and masterfully explore their inhabitants' individual search for peace and happiness, giving the main character of her novel the liberty to make a more humane choice towards the end.

Mukherjee is equally unforgiving when looking at the hollowness of both the American Midwest and the many social cruelties of rural India, but she carefully uses them to show the changes that take place in Jasmine's personality as she moves from one end of the world to another. The author also does not shy away from showing how each such transformation is accompanied by its own share of pain and, sometimes, violence. The work clearly is focused on the journey of a female its struggle and growth, it is a gynocentric work of modern Indian English writing.

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