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GENDER DISCRIMINATION, SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND FEMALE PROTEST: AN ANALYSIS  
OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S *JASMINE*

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ABSTRACT

The present paper is an attempt to analysis Bharati Mukherjee's seminal novel *Jasmine* with reference to gender discrimination, sexual violence and female protests. Gender discrimination seems to be the root cause of sexual violence which ultimately leads to female protest. Due to gender discrimination men began to nurture the idea that women are nothing but their slaves whom they can utilize as they want. The blindfolded followers of patriarchy assume women merely an object of consumption, shoes of their feet which can be replaced whenever they want. They neglect women's social and psychological needs by crushing their identity and bounding their freedom. In the name of culture, religion and gender men justify women's subjugation, exploitation and beating. Issues related to women's discrimination and sufferings have been exquisitely narrated by Bharati Mukherjee in the afore-mentioned text. In it the novelist explores the life and psyche of an immigrant Indian woman Jasmine who leaves India the country of her birth to settle in America to free herself from the clutches from the male oriented society and to establish herself as modern woman. Jasmine's journey from East to West was filled with several hurdles and difficulties. The main cause of all her problems seems to lie in gender discrimination and sexual violence. Her husband Prakash was assassinated as a result of gender inequality. After the death of her husband her struggle for existence more increases. But her constant protest to the gender inequality and determination to create her own identity as a woman helps her to achieve the set goal by surpassing all challenges coming on her way.

**KEYWORDS:** Gender Discrimination, Sexual Violence, Female Protest, Identity Crisis, Fate, Adapter.

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Sex and gender are regarded as two distinct categories of human beings. Gender is “the set of behavioural, cultural, psychological, and social characteristics and practices associated with masculinity and femininity” (Ian Buchanan 198) whereas sex marks the distinction between man and woman as a result of their biological, physical and genetic differences. Thus sex is considered as fixed and based on nature while gender is fluid and the construction of some sort of roles and duties framed by society and assigned to man and woman on the basis of their physiological differences. However, these two very distinct categories of human being question the very existence of those who do not fit into the two, such as intersex, transgender, transsexual and *hijras*. This leads many critics to claim that sex categories as male and female are neither fixed nor universal but changes with time and across culture. Judith Butler also opines the same through her book *Gender Trouble* by saying that sex like gender should be seen as social and cultural construct.

Sex categorizes human on physical terms as male and female, and gender on social terms as man and woman. In the social difference between men and women there are certain set of assumptions which are always friendly to men but hostile to women and which ultimately results in the denial, degradation and suffering of women in gender biased society. The sociocultural differences between men and women result in the generation and perpetuation of patriarchal system. Walby defines patriarchy as “a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (20). The patriarchal relations of sexuality try to restrict and control the equal representation of women in social, cultural, political and economic domains of life for men’s benefit. The patriarchy seeks to subordinate women on the basis of gender discrimination.

Gender discrimination refers to the social, political and economic inequalities and injustices done to women on account of their belonging to female sex. It leads to the sexual violence and secondary treatment of women in sociocultural and political scenario. Gender inequality coexists with the creation of universe and is not the product of any particular space and time. As Simone de Beauvoir says: “as far as history can be traced, they have always been subordinated to men; their dependency is not the consequence of an event or becoming, it did not *happen*”. (10) Literature is replete with the instances of gender discrimination and can be explored through the feminist readings of literary texts. Aristotle says ‘The female is female by virtue of certain lack of qualities [and] we should regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness’ (ibid, 7). St Thomas defines woman ‘an imperfect man’ and an ‘incidental being’. St. Thomas justifies it by the creation of Eve through supernumerary bone of Adam. Milton’s line “He for God only, she for God in him” (4.299) points out his spiritual prejudice against woman where ‘she’ is not considered to serve and worship God but to man. Tennyson in his poem *The Princess* equally celebrates the gender discrimination by saying: “Man for the field and woman for the hearth/ Man for the sword and for the needle she./ Man with the head and woman, with the heart/ Man to command and woman to obey”. (261)

Gender discrimination serves to define women in terms of binary opposition. On the basis of binary opposition all the negative attributes are conferred on women to diffuse the hegemonic ideology of women’s subordination. Men are considered to be bold, strong, assertive, independent, aspiring, rational and logical. On the contrary women are defined as timid, weak, submissive, dependent, emotional and illogical. They are declared as second sex, the other, the marginalized and subaltern, who take birth just to serve the first sex (men) and satisfy their physical, psychological and social needs. They are deprived of those rights and resources which men can easily avail in male oriented society. Due to gender discrimination woman becomes the victim of male violence, oppression, domination and exploitation. Discussing the issues related to gender discrimination and its socio-cultural construction, Simone de Beauvoir in her world famous book *The Second Sex* that one is not born but rather becomes a woman.

Gender discrimination has been pervaded in Indian social structures through the ages. The traditional Indian patriarchal society manifested gender inequality to a large extent. To quote Dr. E.Raju: “Women became the scape goats of many traditions and customs. She was brutally killed in the name of Sati. The practice of child marriage, Kanyasulkam, Prostitution, was taken it granted by society and women have no voice what so ever for a centuries together” (55). Gender inequality has been variously exposed and protested

by number of Indian English feminist critics and novelists. Kamala Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy and Bharati Mukherjee may be mentioned among them. Bharati Mukherjee, a leading American novelist of Indian origin usually explores the lives and psyche of immigrant Indian women across the world. Her works like *Wife*, *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Leave it To Me*, *Desirable Daughter*, *Three Brides* focus on the marginalization and secondary treatment of women not only in India but in foreign countries also. But her seminal work *Jasmine* (1989) draws our attention at most to the gender discrimination prevalent in Indian patriarchy.

*Jasmine* is a narrative about a girl from her birth till the age of twenty fourth. Her story involves her movement from India to Florida, Manhattan and Iowa and then to California. During this span of time she becomes the victim of three rapes, exile and widowhood. Sex, power, gender inequality, sexual violence and cross cultural encounter play decisive role in forming her identity and notion of selfhood. She was born as Jyoti but changes herself as Jasmine with her marriage to Prakash. For Half-Face she was Kali the goddess of death and destruction. Lillian Gordon prefers to call her Jazzy, for Taylor she was Jase, an adventurous lady. Bud used to call her Jane, a fighter and an adapter. Her each new identity is personification of her protest to the society and its surroundings. Her each metaphorical rebirth gives her strength to survive in this male dominated society and establish herself as free woman and modern woman. Ravichandran points out in this regard that:

“Throughout, the novel *Jasmine* experiences numerous situations that bring violence with them. She is not always the subject of these situation but they are always connected with her. It is not only the physical violence experiences, but also mental violence that influences *Jasmine* further way of life and forces her to reborn as a different person” (2).

Mukherjee describes *Jasmine's* struggle for existence from her birth in Hasnapur, Jullundhar District, Punjab, India. By locating her narrative to Jullundhar District of Punjab Mukherjee tries to unveil the sexual violence and injustices prevalent in Punjab and its surrounding districts. The availability of facts and data on sex ratio shows that the female sex ratio in Haryana and Punjab are lowest. It is the state where female foeticide is increasing day by day. There are several villages in Punjab like the village Hasnapur where we perceive gender inequality at its zenith. The villagers of Hasnapur superstitiously believe that birth of a female child is the punishment of sin committed by the parents in their previous incarnations. *Jasmine*, being a girl child has to face gender discrimination and orthodox practices of the villagers and her family at the very start of her life. At her very birth she struggles for existence when her mother tried to strangle her to get rid of the pressure of collecting the dowry for her fifth daughter. *Jasmine* recalls:

“When the midwife carried me out, my sisters tell me, I had a ruby-red choker of bruise around my throat and sapphire fingerprints on my collarbone” (Mukherjee 40).

But *Jasmine* like her name Jane was a fighter, an adapter and survived against all attacks including her mother's shooting. She was born in a year which produced good harvest and led her farmer father hoard enough corn for draught and future expenditure but in spite of that her birth was not celebrated and assumed as an evil omen on account of her being a girl child. Her family called her curse, an unwanted and an unlucky child. At the age of seven she is predicted of widowhood and exile by the local astrologer. She protests the priest by saying that “You are a crazy old man. You don't know what my future holds!” (ibid 3). The priest being a man can't endure his insult and shows violence by hitting her. She falls down on the ground and receives a cut in the middle of her forehead. But she regards this wound as her third eye to look into the invisible world like the sages. She never feels herself as a “spec in the solar system” (ibid 3-4) as the priest declared but rather protected by ‘the she-ghosts’ (ibid 4).

In the village like Hasnapur girls are not allowed to go to school for more than three years. But *Jasmine's* excellence and protest increases her number of school years and she receives more education in comparison to her sisters and other village girls. During the course of her learning she exhibited her intelligence and brilliancy in English, Punjabi and Urdu languages. She used to translate her brothers' instruction manuals and write their job application in English. She was equally good in mathematics and helps the innocent village ladies in summing up the prizes of vegetables and other edibles and thus save them from

market cheaters. She prefers men's conversation as they talk about the outside world and its politics. Despite all these equalities she becomes the victim of gender injustice on educational level.

Her two brothers Arvind-prar and Hari-prar were sent to the town of Jullundhar to complete their diploma program in some technical school in spite of being average in their study while Jasmine is prohibited to receive higher education on account of being a girl child. This sort of discrimination is perpetuated by the Indian patriarchal society where boys are considered as assets whereas girls are assumed as liability. They are not permitted to study as they are to be married off with lots of dowry and ultimately go away to their husbands whereas boys are supposed to help them financially by earning money and doing jobs. She faces a major bolt in her education at the age of thirteen when her grandmother (Dida) instigates her parents to get her marry to a rich widower having three children. She says city men prefer village girls as they are uneducated, innocent and can easily be manipulated without any complaint. Mukherjee comments: "Village girls are like cattle, whichever way you lead them, that is the way they will go" (ibid 46). This shows the hypocrisy and trivial mentality of educated youths who pretend to be progressive in their thoughts and ideas but reluctant to marry city girls who demand their freedom and individuality.

Jasmine's Masterji, a supporter of girl education shows his disagreement against this marriage and tries to plead her father to let her continue her study and to be a steno/typist and a teller. For the first time we see Jasmine's protested against her patriarchic father "I don't want to be a steno, I don't want to be a teller either.... I want to be a doctor and set up my own clinic in a big town" (ibid51). Her revolt to marriage and her affection to the electric switch in Vimla's house which made her feel "totally in control" (ibid 44) shows her confidence to realize her potential. She learnt identifying "permissible rebellion" (Mukherjee 47) against the patriarchic standard of the society. To quote Erten: "the first conflict Jyoti experiences is the one between the dominant patriarchal system and the modern life that she desires. She loses her sense of belonging to the life and traditions of rural India and dreams of life which is impossible even to dream for many Indian girls" (34). But her dream of becoming a doctor is shattered at her father's death and results in receiving the burden of responsibility over her shoulder. Showing her protest against the cruelty of blind Fate she says: "I made a bonfire of my books under the jasmine tree. Even the bookworms and red ants didn't escape" (Mukherjee63) but still a spark of getting further education was in her and finds its re-kindling with her marriage to Prakash.

In India the condition of women becomes more miserable after the death of their husbands. The widows lose their life and vitality along with their husbands as if they don't have the right to live after their husbands. They end their life either by burning themselves on the funeral pyre of their dead husbands and thus performing the *Satir* ritual or alienate themselves from all the auspicious and ceremonial activities of life. Sati ritual prevalent in India in 19<sup>th</sup> century is a means of dehumanizing, marginalizing and conferring violence against women in the disguise of religion while no religion justifies it. Despite its abolition in 1829 by Raja Rammohan Roy and William Bentinck it was prevalent in some parts of India in the last two decades of twentieth century. Commenting on *Sati* Spivak says "In the case of widow self-immolation, ritual is not being redefined as superstition but as crime. The gravity of *sati* was that it was ideologically cathected as 'reward', just as the gravity of imperialism was that it was ideologically cathected as 'social mission' "(302).

Jasmine's friend Vimla, the daughter of Potatoes-babu (a rich trader) becomes the victim of Sati. She burns herself with kerosene, at the age of twenty two after her husband's death. She cried O god of death "Yama, bring me to you" (Mukherjee15). Her invocation to death reveals her mental and physical torture which she cannot endure anymore and accepts death. Jasmine's mother unable to throw herself on her husband's funeral pyre "shaved her head with razor, wrapped her body in coarse cloth, and sat all day in corner (ibid 61)". After Prakash's death Jasmine herself experiences the alienation and loneliness of a widow. Her sisters stopped visiting her and she along with her mother is confined in the widow's dark hut. Her condition becomes more worse than Mazbis and Untouchables.

The root cause for Prakash's murder seems to lie in Jasmine's departure from set patriarchic norms and her determination to find her identity as an independence woman in male governed society. Sukhwinder, the member of Khalsa Lions Groups, here symbolizes patriarchy. He is a baptized Sikh and ardent

follower of Sant Brindranwale, the leader of all fanatics. He regards women nothing but whores and was against their empowerment and self-dependence. He warned Jasmine's brothers "Keep your whorish women off the streets" (ibid 65). Against his warning Jasmine accompanies Ladies' Group to sell the detergent from door to door. Sukhwinder could not bear women stepping outside the four walls and earn money to fulfill her husband's desire to go to abroad. He planned to kill Jasmine through a bomb blast but fortunately she is saved while her husband Prakash becomes the victim of this attack. His violent action against women reveals his prejudiced and gender biased notion towards women. To him women are only suitable to domestic chores, bearing and rearing up the child and any departure from it is bound to be suppressed and punished. His intention seems similar to the analysis of Simone de Beauvoir when she says men want women "be women, stay women, become women" (4).

Prakash's attitude towards women may be contrasted with that of Sukhwinder. Unlike Sukhi he was a modern man and nurtures respect for Jasmine and help her to escape from the patriarchal society. He marries Jyoti without any dowry and gives her a new name Jasmine in order to break down her previous identity and feudalism. He wants Jasmine to "quicken the whole world with [her] perfume" (Mukherjee 77). He exhorts Jasmine to call him by his first name 'Prakash' not by using the pronoun. He tries to dismantle the notion of male superiority prevalent in the feudalism of Hasnapur. He says: "Only in feudal societies is the woman a vassal" (ibid). In contrast to his Uncle, for Prakash love and respect cannot be substituted for control and obedience. But to him love means "letting go" and 'independence' refers to 'self-reliance' (ibid 76).

But the deep understanding of Prakash's relation to Jasmine reveals that he is also guided by the instinct that he is male and that's why his future prospect is more important to her. He needs Jasmine just to "help [him] be a better person" (ibid 79) and go abroad to do diploma course in engineering. His too much obsession to study makes him forget that Jasmine could also continue her education, get work and fulfill her dreams. But on the contrary her role is just restricted to support him as a wife and take care of his daily necessities like the other women. In fact his very act of nominalizing Jyoti as Jasmine was just an excuse to confer his own expectations on her without any consideration what she herself thinks and wants to be. This reminds me again Simone de Beauvoir's remark:

"The humanity is male and man defines women not in herself but as relative to HIM. SHE is not regarded as autonomous being...she is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not HE with reference to HER; she is the incidental; the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, HE is the absolute- SHE is the other" (7).

Prakash's over indulgence in his study and his too much intellectuality destroys their conjugal relationship. He does not pay any attention to Jasmine's physical and psychological needs and when she demands to get pregnant he mocks at her and says "is [there] nothing more inevitable than a fourteen-year-old married woman becoming a mother" (Mukherjee 78). He has his own logic and statistics for everything. He claims to be engineer of all the machinery but fails to understand human machine which demands love and affection to move it on properly. His excessive involvement in his work and commitment to pass out the diploma exams and settle abroad makes Jasmine feel lonely, alienated and abundant.

Jasmine's experiences as third world immigrant to America are equally replete with gender discrimination and sexual violence. She accompanies to America with the captain of the ship Half-Face who brutally drags and rapes her in the motel. Half-Face's heinous action shows that he considers woman's just an object of sex and nothing else. "For him she is sex-absolute sex, no less" (Beauvoir 7). He rapes Jasmine at a time when she is entirely helpless, remote from her own country and is in the shock of her husband's murder. He wants Jasmine to pay him for the help he rendered to her. He says "I got one use for you, and you got no use for me and you know what? That don't bother me at all. In fact, it's a sort of turn on" (Mukherjee 113). His demand of Jasmine's body for the sake of small help surely reveals his animal instinct. He is not only satisfied to rape her but also humiliates her pretending his superiority over Prakash and Jasmine. He scoffs at Jasmine's devotion and loyalty for her dead husband and her mission to bring Prakash's suit to perform Sati with it at

the place they intended to live together. His action and behaviour suggests that does not belong to some modern country like America but to some primitive age.

Jasmine revolts against her sexual exploitation and violence by punishing Half-Face. Like other traditional women she does not commit suicide over the violation of her chastity but rather prefers to kill the person responsible for her disgrace. She says "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" (ibid 117-18). She personifies herself as Kali, the goddess of death and destruction to take her revenge. She stabs Half-Face to save herself from being further raped and to complete her mission. Like the goddess Kali she stood over his dead body and splits blood over him by cutting her tongue.

Her revenge signifies that a woman can endure everything but not the violation of her chastity and if such happens she is quite capable to destroy the person responsible for it. She burns all her dishonoured clothes and Prakash's suit in a metal trash bin imitating a Sati ritual before leaving the motel. It was the death of her old self and birth of a new self. Mukherjee compares death of the old self by bringing the image of broken pitcher "the pitcher is broken...My body was merely the shell, soon to be discarded. Then I could be reborn, debts and sins all paid for" (ibid 120-121). Thus she is reborn not by killing herself but killing Half-Face. Her act of killing depicts a shift of power from man to woman. Erten's remark on *Jasmine* seems appropriate:

"During her journey, she is the object of male domination starting within her family and going on with men in her life. She is exposed to violence, rape, desire and lust all by men. Every time she runs away, she comes across with another man to control her life. Thus she is unable to break the circle that prevents her finding her own identity totally. (37)

Jasmine's stay at Flushing in the house of Professor Vadhera, the teacher of Prakash with whose assistance he wants to pursue his career as an engineer in America, also reflects over her marginalization and secondary treatment. Here Professor's family and their neighbor demand her to behave nothing but like a widow. She has to cast off her jeans and shirt and wrap herself into a white sari a symbol of widowhood. She had accustomed herself to American clothes in the accompaniment of Lillian Gordon, her saviour and is now reluctant to change her American identity. But her dependence over Professor and his family leads her to do so. She expresses her anguish as

"In this apartment of artificially maintained Indianness, I wanted to distance myself from everything Indian, everything Jyoti-like. To them, I was a widow who should show proper modesty of appearance and attitude" (Mukherjee 145).

Her desire to be a modern woman is crushed in the company of the other widow and the environment which she left in India. She feels that her English, a symbol of modernity is deserting her. The revelation of Vadhera's profession that he was not a professor but "an importer and sorter of human hair" (ibid 151) increases her disgust with Flushing. She protests against this life of servitude Half-Face where she is rendered to the position of a servant providing food and tea to Professors' old aged parents and wife. She begs Professor Vadhera to arrange a green card to release her from this oppressive condition as one more day stay might be fatal for her. In this context Devi comments "This move indicated that self-actualization was developing in her life and it might be due to the actualization to the American way of thinking and dressing" (249).

Her further struggle for gender equality and search for identity leads her to work as an *au pair* (a caregiver) for a young professional couple's daughter Duff. The couple Taylor and Wylie treats her humanly and support her to establish herself as modern working woman with her own freedom, individuality, identity and self-dependency. Their recommendation provides her a part-time job for answering phone calls and a reader of Punjabi language in the Departments of Indian Languages at Columbia University. Her economic independency leads her to adopt a new name Jase. Jase was an adventurous lady ready to accept American culture without any complaint. At this point S. Indira's remark is worth-quoting "With the healing touch of people like Lillian Gordon, Kate and Taylor, who treated her as an intelligent, refined, sincere and affectionate

person, Jasmine blooms from being a different alien with forged documents into adventurous Jase, living only for the present". (70)

Her happy world is disturbed by Wylie's sudden leaving Taylor for Stuart, with whom she fell in love. Wylie's departure brings Taylor and Jase more closer and they began to love each other. Taylor's relation to Jase was unlike to Prakash's who demands Jasmine to be infallible. Taylor's love for Jase does not demand any change in her character. He loves her as she is. Jasmine loves Taylor due to his kind and sympathetic nature and equal treatment of higher and lower class. Jasmine says "The love that I have felt for Taylor that first day had nothing to do with sex. I fell in love with his world, its ease, its careless confidence and graceful self-absorption" (Mukherjee 171).

Jasmine's relation with Taylor and Bud is characterized with the subversion of power where it is not Jasmine who depends on them but rather it is they who depend on her. Although Taylor provides her salary, food and shelter, Taylor depends on her for his love and emotional support and begs her not leave Claremont Avenue. Jasmine's superiority over him is revealed on the night when they consume their relationship. Jasmine says "I am leading Taylor to a bed as wide as subcontinent. I am laying my cheek on his cheek, I am closing his eyes with my care giving fingerprints, I am tucking the mosquito netting tight under his and Wylie's king sized mattress" (ibid 198). Here Jasmine wrestles the power away from her male counterpart. She is actually doing things, not having them done to her. Even Wylie begs Jasmine not to leave Taylor and Duff as Taylor can't imagine her life without her.

Bud Ripplemeyer, the banker of Baden, Iowa and the father of Jasmine's would-be child is a crippled man so his dependency on Jasmine becomes more essential. His wife Karin takes divorce from him. Jasmine considers herself a catalyst not a cause for their separation as she makes him "feel what he never felt and do what he's never done" (200). In such situation it is Jasmine who helps him to come out of his distress. She has taken over the role of a mistress in the house and controls almost all activities of Bud's life. Like in the case of Taylor here again we find Jasmine to take initiative when it comes to the sex, she is entirely in the charge. She says "It shames Bud that now, for sex, I must do all the work, all the moving, that I will always be on top" (ibid 35). Bud accepts that she has brought him back to life "Baden was death until you came...you brought me back from the dead". (ibid 200)

Jasmine is caught between two men and it is very difficult for her to choose as both have helped her to find her identity as an independent woman. At the end she prefers to go with Taylor as if she is tired of changing one place, one man, one identity for another and now wants rest. She says "I am not choosing between men" but between "the promise of America and old world dutifulness. A care-giver's life is a good life, a worthy life".(ibid 240) Here she acts a modern woman to take her own decision in favour of her own economic independency which can only be realized in her role as a caregiver and receiver of the phone calls. In this context Aneja comments: "the juxtaposition of "the promise of America" and "old-world dutifulness" immediately places the west on the side of excitement and change, and betrays India's reality to be "older" culture, duty and honour are valued but there are no promises held out to the individual, while America privileges individual desires over domestic and communal obligations" (77-78).

To conclude I can say that Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* exquisitely posits the gender inequality and sexual violence in India and abroad. It reflects how women are marginalized on the basis of sex, gender, race and culture. But this marginalization and violence can be threatened through women who are liable to change herself and her society by protest. Their determination to fight against the adverse circumstances of life ultimately helps them create their own identity as can be exemplified through Jasmine. Jasmine's resolution to create her as an independent working woman leads her to break all the hurdles coming on her way. Her subjectivity undergoes a drastic change in consequent of her experiences as an immigrant woman. She has realized that self-independence has little to do with being an Indian or an America but to be peace with oneself.

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