

Redefining Feminism : A Study of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* and Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

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Abstract : Women are generally represented as silent victims dominated by patriarchal and global norms of subjugation and repression. However, contemporary Indian English writings by women attempt to engage and grapple with living realities of women of various strata of society and endeavour to project life in all its richness and complexities. They have moved from 're- representation' to 'self- presentation'. Bharati Mukherjee and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni express myriad voices of those who are considered the subaltern. The images of women in their writings have undergone a categorical makeover from interpretations of self-sacrificing women towards self-asserting and self-defining women within the broader structure of social sphere. Mukherjee's and Divakaruni's writings deal with the women in the new global world. Their accounts of the experience of the diaspora and its effects upon women not only provide the readers with insight into the lives of million South Asians who currently reside in the United States, but also present a model with which we can better understand the processes through which minority identities are constructed.

Keywords : Victim; subjugation; re-presentation; self- presentation; identity.

Women are generally represented as silent victims dominated by patriarchal and global norms of subjugation and repression. However contemporary Indian English writings by women attempt to engage and grapple with living realities of women of various strata of society and endeavour to project life in all its richness and complexities. It is basically a representation of contemporary women who decline to be beneficial objects in the society and prefer instead to declare their individuality by challenging the defined social and family norms and structures, be it marriage, wifehood, motherhood or the larger questions related to their liberty, freedom and recognition of her social and intellectual searches.

In recent times a large number of women writers have made an attempt to portray the realistic issues central to woman's status and identity, be it the journey for self-discovery or challenging the traditional and stereotypical characters and disparities or the urge to go above domestic limits. The women presented in the recent female writings seem to enquire all those limits or restrict their dreams, desires and aspirations, though their attempts do not always meet with success and

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sometimes even land them up in utter chaos and anarchy. "Many Indian women novelists have explored female subjectivity in order to establish an identity of their own as well as to raise the voice of women in Indian traditional society." (Bijalwan, 151). It is the image of an emerging and struggling woman with no clearly defined path or destiny and hence the usual share of pain, anguish, sorrow, conflicts and the humility to accept failures. But over and above everything, the most significant aspect in these contemporary novels is that rather than depicting any homogenous, confining or essential image of a new woman, they try to project her numerous roles, aspirations and images. She is conscious of her rights and responsibilities, sometimes falling victim to the gleam of modern life, at other times effectively breaking through the traditional barriers and yet other times marching ahead with all her limitations to an unknown path of realising her full potential as an independent human being.

Indeed, when the issue of migration, specifically women's migration arises, the problem is intense. Bharati Mukherjee and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni express myriad voices of those who are considered the subaltern. The images of women in their writings have undergone a categorical makeover from interpretations of self-sacrificing women towards self-asserting and self-defining women within the broader structure of social sphere. Mukherjee's and Divakaruni's writings deal with the role of woman in the new global world. They have distinguished themselves as among the ground-breaking novelists in the genre of South Asian diasporic literature.

Jasmine is the magnum opus of Bharati Mukherjee. *Jasmine* who was born as Jyoti in a small village of Punjab raised herself against the patriarchal tradition. She is a defiant and determined woman of free will and not like other village girls who are "like cattle, whichever way you lead them, they will go." (*Jasmine*, 46) She is bold and believes in herself, that's why she outrightly rejects the prophecy of the fortuneteller who foretold her widowhood and exile. She not only rejects his prophecy but challenges both his authority and the notion of fate whispering, "I don't believe you" (4) which irritates the fortune-teller and he chucks hard on her head and she falls on the ground getting a star shaped scar on her forehead. But she boldly converts her deformity into an asset and replies, "it is not a scar but a third eye... now I' am a sage." (5) Somdatta Mandal has rightly said :

She not only rejects the notion of fate, defying an authority figure in a deeply traditional society, but when she suffers violence for her disobedience, she converts the scar into an asset, claiming spiritual empowerment and the title "sage" usually reserved for men. (Mandal, 174)

Jyoti is renamed as Jasmine after her marriage with Prakash Vih. It is not only a change in name but also a transformation from a village to the city and from traditional acceptance to new adoption. But unluckily she could not continue her happy married life much longer as Prakash is murdered in a bomb blast on the eve of departure to the United States. The ultimate death of Prakash throws Jasmine into the widow's hut but instead of confining her to the four walls or the patriarchal rule and regulations she spends all her husband's saving to migrate to United States. She illegally migrates to the United States with "the mission to bring her husband's suit to America" to "Tampah" where she is going to burn her husband's suitcase and herself as a sati.

Jasmine's first encounter with America is a kind of what Malashri Lal says, "regeneration through violence." (Lal, 59) Half-Face, the captain of the ship on which she had entered the city sees her only as a sexual being and thus rapes her. To end her sorrow at being Half-Face victim, she prepares to kill herself in order "to balance her defilement" but she stops. As she realises that she has not completed her mission for which she had come all the way long, she could not let her personal dishonour disrupt her mission. Thus she turns to violence in order to express the conflict she was experiencing. She stabs Half-Face to death and in this act finds the strength to continue living instead of committing sati. Mukherjee has very well presented the full transformation of Jasmine from victim into the vengeful Goddess as the reincarnation of Kali. She transforms herself from a victim into a spiritually powerful being :

No one to call to, no one to disturb us. Just me and
the man who had raped me, the man I had
murdered. (*Jasmine*, 119)

Jasmine then meets Lillian Gordan and under her guidance she learns how to dress and walk like an American. She learns all the new ways of the Americans – of dressing and walking and becomes a new woman. Lillian Gordan renames her as 'Jazzy' and now she was ready to start upon her American journey with a new American identity and American clothes. Now she was no longer Jasmine, the city girl, but she was Jazzy, the American illegal migrant full of promises and possibilities:

I checked myself in the mirror, shocked at the transformation. Jazzy in a T-shirt, tight cords and running shoes. I couldn't tell if with the Hasnapuri sidle I'd also abandoned my Hasnapuri modesty. (133)

The apartment on Claremont Avenue, Manhattan becomes the next residence of Jasmine providing her with the standard dream of an American life. This place offers her with more western atmosphere which initiates her first 'real' integration into the 'American' life. In the new surrounding marked by personal

warmth, Jasmine becomes more Americanized, more confident. While leaving with the Hayes family, she begins to master the English language, thereby empowering herself to further appropriate American culture. She even acquires a new name 'Jase,' given by Taylor. In this New York apartment, Jasmine "bloomed from a diffident alien with forged documents into adventurous Jase." (186) She discovers the vast difference in her identities:

Jase was a woman who bought herself spangled heels and silk chartreuse pants... Jasmine lived for the future, for Vijk & Wife. Jase went to movies and lived for today. In my closet hung satin blouses with vampish necklines ... for every Jasmine the reliable caregiver there is a Jase, the prowling adventurer. I thrilled to the tug of opposing forces. (176)

Jasmine tries hard to get rid of her past but time and again past creeps up in her life. The past in the form of Sukhwinder, the murderer of her husband, Prakash appears before Jasmine as a hot dog vendor and thus forces her to find a safer place and to leave to New York was the only option left to her. Jasmine recreates her new identity when she moves to Baden, and meets Bud Ripplermeyer, an American banker who instantly falls in love with her and renames her "Jane" – a new individual in Iowa, who enjoys her new liberated self and her new role allows for ambition, curiosity, talent and sexuality. She wants to completely assimilate; thereby she tries to adopt a completely new identity with ease. The "Jase" of New York has now receded so that "Jane" may advance:

I whisper the name, Jase, Jase, Jase, as if I am calling someone I once knew. (215)

Jasmine considers each part of her life, each of her changed identities, as roles assigned to her, and fulfills the duties entrusted to each role. So when Taylor and Duff came back and ask her to be part of their family, she leaves with them. She decides to leave Bud for Taylor. In fact her departure from the life of Bud is not an act of an immature mind but it reflects as a type of American dream in which she dwindles - "I am not choosing between men. I am caught between the promise of America and old world dutifulness" (240) Finally she chooses a life of happiness and freedom with Taylor and Duff.

The Mistress of Spices by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a remarkable account of the lives of the Indian immigrant women living in America. Being written with the blend of prose and poetry, it contains some supernatural elements like magic and the ability to foresee the future. It is a marvelous combination of myth, mystery and romance. It contains some facts and suffering of the everyday life of the Indian immigrant women. Like Jasmine, Tilo, the protagonist of Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* represent the journey of a woman not only from innocence

to maturity but also a journey that crosses the realm of reality and magic. Like Jasmine she too, symbolises a woman's quest for identity that evolves and transforms with every milestone in her life. It represents the shifting nature of a woman's identity and her power of transformation.

Like Jasmine, Tilo, too undergoes various transformations. Born as Nayan Tara, she is the unwelcomed child of the family, "they named me Nayan Tara, Star of the Eye, but my parents' faces were heavy fallen hope at another girl child, and this one coloured lie mud." (*The Mistress of Spices*, 7) Being alienated and ignored, the emptiness inside her is gradually transformed into rage that gives her the power to foresee. She became "Nayan Tara, the name which also means Star-seer" (8) but even then she could not get the love rather it was the fear that made people bow down before she was filled with disdain.

The first transformation in Tilo's life came when she was abducted by the pirates who had murdered her entire family and had taken her with them as a prisoner. They had given her a new name 'Bhagyawati', meaning one who brings luck. Instead of mourning over the loss of her family and the ensuing pain within, she overcarries forth into her new life. Eventually, she overthrows the Pirate Captain to become the Pirate, "Queen leading her pirates to fame and glory, so that bards sang their fearless exploits". (20) But what she got was not what she desired. Though unwillingly, she started ruling the pirates and when, for the second time, she had sent a calling thought, it brought the typhoon, destruction to the people around her. This time she was saved by the sea-serpents who told her about the island. She says, "It was the sea serpents who told me of the Island. And doing so, saved me once again." (28)

Through the snakes she came to know about the magical island, where, along with other women like her, she could develop her supernatural abilities, in order to serve humanity. The isolated island is heaven for the women who call themselves 'The mistress of spices' where they were trained the delicate art of listening and controlling the spices, and were sent forth into the greater world to serve humanity. The snakes told her about the dangers on the island. They plead her to stay as their 'Sarpa- Kanya', and to take her to the 'Samudra-Puri', the perfect city. But all in vain, she was no longer a captive of her circumstances but aware of the destiny calling out to her. Thus she chose the island and rejected the snakes. She sets out for a secret world that is beyond the realm of this ordinary, geographical world of our reality - a world of women, a world of spices and magic.

On the island, Tilo meets the first mother who helps her to formulate her new identity leaving the past behind. Unlike other mistresses, Tilo selects her new name, "Tilottama, the essence of til, life- giver, restorer of health and hope." (42) Island nurtures Tilo, educating and preparing her for the next stage of her life. After she learns all that she can, she is sent to Oakland, California.

Tilo heals the people who come to her store. She always has a solution for their problems but when it comes to her own life, she is confused and afraid. She has chosen a life of isolation and loneliness, bound by the secret oath to her art and tied down to a body, not her own. She is apprehensive of the outcome if she stepped out of her oath. But fortunately or unfortunately she defies all codes of conduct and warnings of the spices and embraces the love of Raven. It was the first time she decides to break the code set out for the mistress of the spices. She muses:

Today I plan to stretch my wings, to crack perhaps these shells and emerge into the infinite spaces of the outside world. It frightens me a little. I must admit this. (125)

Nayan Tara's journey reaches its destination when she decides to fulfill her own desire and dreams. Raven gave her a new name Maya; Maya which means many things – illusion, spell, enchantment, and the power that will keep her going in this imperfect world. Tilo chooses a name that means many things. Tilo or finally Maya chooses a path for herself by listening to her heart. She leaves with her love in search for her dream but reality beckons her back. She breaks free of illusions and accepts her new identity, relation and responsibility.

Like Jasmine who goes through a series of transformation from Jyoti, to Jasmine, to Jazzy, to Jase and finally to Jane. Tilo too, goes through a bewildering succession of personae such as Nayantara, the dark skinned ugly girl, unwanted by her parents and who refuses to die, Bhagyawati, the pirate queen, the novice Tilo, the old-young mistress of spices, Tilotamma, and finally Maya, not particularly young or old.

The women that Mukherjee and Divakaruni create are capable of living in a world in which the individual exists not as a unified one, but rather as many, bound by no borders and infinite in the possibilities of creating consciousness and inventing identities. Jasmine's and Tilo's journey is a redefinition of the self and is an extension of the conflict that the Indian women face in establishing their identity as an individual. Jasmine and Tilo also have to struggle due to the contrast between their perception of self and that influenced by others, which is part and parcel of Indian woman's life. Both Jasmine's and Tilo's search and final realization of the self are result of the ongoing process of self- identification that characterizes the shifting nature of a woman's identity.

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