



Indian Women in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*: A Study in Intersectionality

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Abstract: The term, 'Intersectionality' was coined in 1989 by social theorist and law professor, Kimberle Crenshaw which relates to the compounded and accumulative channels in which the consequences of multitudinous forms of discriminations such as sexism, classism and racism, combine, overlap or intersect particularly in the experiences of individuals or groups who are marginalized. Bharati Mukherjee's novel, *Jasmine* (1989) can be studied for understanding intersectionality. In *Jasmine*, we see the bitter experiences of a female Indian immigrant living in the USA. Jasmine, the eponymous character of the novel, faces discrimination not only due to her gender identity but also for her race, nationality, migration, class, religion, marriage and, above all, patriarchal power structures. All the above mentioned markers of intersectionality, play an equal role in the exploitation, suppression and deprivation of Jasmine whose plight is equally experienced by women in the Indian subcontinent. In this Study, theories like 'Intersectionality' and 'Eurocentrism' and term like 'American Dream' will be explained and contextualized. The whole study will be done through the content analysis method while relevant remarks and thoughts of other researchers and scholars will be utilized and correlated to prove the negative role of intersectionality on the focus group.

Keywords: Intersectionality; Gender; Woman; Suppression; Identity Crisis.

Introduction: According to the *Oxford English Living Dictionary*, the definition of 'Intersectionality' is "the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage" [1]. Social theorist, Kimberle Crenshaw first coined the term 'Intersectionality' in 1989 in her paper, "Demarginalizing The Intersection Of Race And Sex: A Black Feminist Critique Of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory And Antiracist Politics". To illustrate the term, "Intersectionality", it is a framework for conceptualizing a person, group of people, or social problem as affected by a number of discriminations and disadvantages. It takes into account people's overlapping identities and experiences in order to understand the complexity of prejudices they face. In other words, intersectionality theory asserts that people are often disadvantaged by multiple sources of oppression: race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion and other identity markers. Intersectionality considers that identity markers, for instance, 'female' and 'black' do not exist independently of each other [2]. In fact, intersectionality is a tool of creating social class differences, create conflicting social strata and in this way manipulating the machinery of intersectionality to exploit or deprive a person of his or her rights.

As we turn to 'Eurocentrism', it suggests a world-view which, implicitly or explicitly, posits European history and values as "normal" and superior to others, thereby helping to produce and justify Europe's dominant position within the global capitalist world system [3]. Eurocentrism is also referred to as Western-centrism, a biased world view that favors western civilization over the non-western civilization. However, narrowly this term also refers to the continent of Europe's and more narrowly Western Europe's position, role, thoughts, values and culture in world order [3]. For the oriental people, Europe usually stands for the western part of the globe and the value and vision of life in Europe are regarded as something to follow to be rich and happy. Hence, Jasmine was also motivated by this Eurocentric value and consequently migrated to the USA for a life that most of the oriental people dream of.

American Dream is the concept that originated from America's declaration of independence. According to this idea of American Dream, a person is to endeavor and search for his or her own fortune and happiness and there is the state to guard this right of a person. This concept further encourages a person stating that every person can be well off and happy by dint of hard work and freedom of thought and again every person is responsible for his

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or her fortune and happiness. James Truslow Adams coined the term 'American Dream' in his book *The Epic of America*. Adam says, "The American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement" [4]. Therefore, considering the miserable backward state of her own and her country, Jasmine migrated to the USA to get a new life full of wealth and freedom.

The novel, *Jasmine* is told in first person point of view by a 24 year old woman now Jane who lives in Iowa in the USA. We get the story unfolding as flashbacks about an Indian woman immigrant to the USA who ran after American Dream partly because of the honor she had for her deceased husband and her want to fulfill the dream of her killed husband and partly because she herself was influenced by eurocentrism. As she got married at the age of 14 as Jyoti to Prakash, her first husband in India, her odyssey and real transformation started as Prakash gave her a new name, Jasmine to shatter off all typical traditional beliefs and traits of backward India from her. Prakash was a modern educated man from the middle class social strata of India who wanted his newly married wife Jasmine to be like him free from prejudiced Indian society. From the very early stage of her life in her own country, India to her later life in the USA, she went through many changes and simultaneously was exploited by the elements of intersectionality.

Discussion: Jasmine's speech convincingly indicates her transformation into different individuals and the crisis of her identity with the change of place and time. She puts it in the way, "I shuttled between identities" [5]. In the patriarchal society, the change of her name with the association of different men shows the vulnerability of her gender she has been attributed to by the society. As seen in the words of Mohanty "... third world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender" [6]. The stereotypical condition of Indian women is clearly evident in the imagery and themes of the novel, that is to say, how these women are victimized and their lives are further problematized by the concerted force of different variables of intersectionality. In the course of this study, this will be explored and visualized why Jasmine's life is so suffocating and troublesome as regards her assimilation and integration with the mainstream of society and its culture in her own country and abroad.

The novel, *Jasmine* contains so many key elements for the readers to comprehend the mechanism of intersectionality, and it also focuses on the deplorable and dehumanized condition of women in India and how this relegated position of them in the society has been internalized by themselves and what motivate the victims of intersectionality to run after Euro-centrism finding the values of their own society as harmful for them. The term 'Eurocentrism' denotes a world-view which, implicitly or explicitly, posits European history and values as "normal" and superior to others, thereby helping to produce and justify Europe's dominant position within the global capitalist world system [3], and India is not any exception. In the outset of the novel, it is found that in the village of Hasnpur, India, Jasmine had been examined and advised by an astrologer who foretold her future. An astrologer is an influential character and an element of village culture not only of India. The astrologer was actually obstructing and narrowing the thoughts, dreams and future of Jasmine when she was only seven years old. He is a representative of male dominated society who is giving the girl fear about her life. He also puts it that "A girl should not be wandering here by her" [5]. It is, here, evident that her nationality, geographical location that is dwelling in a rural area, her gender, religion and above all her culture, all these together attempt to limit her in a particular place in a particular way that is common in the Indian subcontinent. Thus, culture plays a pivotal role to build a society of its own as Aleksandra Alund is quoted: "the cultural has colonized the social" and the author, Yuval-Davis writes, "gender relations are at the heart of cultural constructions of social identities and collectivities" [7].

In the contemporary society of Jasmine, women are considered as an instrument of service for men. They do not enjoy equal rights with men. They only give birth to children to keep the nation going ahead though sadly "all nations depend on the powerful constructions of gender" [8]. The preceding quotation suggests, women's only role in expanding population is not enough for their true role in nation building. This situation of women does not take place suddenly rather it begins from their birth. They are regarded as some beings with no reasoning and who are

considered to be incomplete without their counterparts. They are for emotional support of men and just being taped to be enjoyed sexually by their counterparts without love in return. The statement of Jasmine in this connection can be quoted: "We are brought up to be caring and have no minds of our own. Village girls are like cattle; whichever way you lead them, that is the way they will go" [5]. While describing the relation between parents, Jasmine remarks, "some women think they own the world because their husbands are too lazy to beat them" [5]. This quote shows how the dominant role is played by men in the society. Beating commodity-like-wife becomes a common scenario in the patriarchal society of India.

Moreover, along with gender, the class is also responsible for the exploitation of the women. Class is one of the powerful features of hegemonic condition of women and an essential part of problematization of intersectionality [9]. The women's plight of the then contemporary society is doubly felt if the women are illiterate, from lower class or working class. This situation becomes worst when someone is married and for her skin colour hatred and oppression even goes up. The following remark justifies that all these painful identity-carrying terms are actually invented by male to have the women abused and enjoyed as per the wish of the members of male dominated society, "...we consciously eschew this paradigm as we build upon our understanding that 'women' is as much as socially constructed as race, ethnicity or class" [10].

In the Indian subcontinent, women have well internalized that they are by themselves incomplete. They are not even allowed to have a second marriage because in the subcontinent, patriarchal ideology does discourage it. Sadly enough, when a husband dies prematurely, his wife is considered cursed. She hardly finds a second husband for her sex life though often she is seduced by man to have his animalistic gratification. None dares to come forward Accepting her socially through yoke of marriage. As a result, family becomes an illusion to a woman: the physical death of husband gives birth to sexual and mental death of the wife. Women have nothing except their abused sexual entity. This statement is reflected in Jasmine's speech, "Family life and family emotions are all illusions. The Lord lends us a body, gives us an assignment, and sends us down" [5]. Even religions of this region attempt to have the wings of the women clipped. Their body is for work *i.e.* sex or household chores. Payment is highly unexpected and insulting. In this connection what Purvis says is worth to consider, he says, "Women were identified with the private domain of the home and the family as wives and mothers or unmarried dependents; men, on the other hand, were associated with public sphere of paid work, politics and business and with economic and jural responsibility for their wives and the expected brood of children" [11].

In the constitution of Bangladesh it is mentioned that "women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the state and of public life" (Articles 28/2). It seems, in the article mentioned, that in public life both genders are equal but in private life a man can do whatever he wants to do to a woman because she is all alone in private [12]. It is to be also mentioned that 'private' is associated with somebody who are not associated with 'public'. And individuals who are regarded as private are further classified which the following quotation better illustrates "...only private individuals were those who, as slaves, lacked public status as citizens altogether" [13]. Now if we examine the system of marriage which prevails in India, we will find it as a destructive system that spoils the dream and normative growth of a girl in an early age. It as an exclusionary systematization of patriarchy: "Marriage is a destiny traditionally offered to women by society" [14]. In the novel *Jasmine*, Jasmine gets married at the age of fourteen. This marriage is bait for women often resulting in the abuse and exploitation of the female sex in an intersectional society. Here, relevantly, the statement of Macey is worth to mention whereas married women are described as bird 'confined to their cage' with 'nothing to do but plume themselves. Macey also paraphrases the statement of Wollstonecraft who is first to describe marriage as a form of legal prostitution [15].

As previously said, class is an important aspect of exploitation of women as seen in the case of Jasmine, class is also often gender biased and depends on race. Women do lower jobs because of their gender and background or past especially if they are from any colonized country. From the beginning of industrialization, capitalism emerges and with that comes classification. This classification aggravates the intensity of the oppression of women . Thus, gender

and race are always found integral part of capitalism and fundamental aspects of class system and needless to say that in capitalism male domination has always been there and will be. A very relevant quote from Acker can be stated here where he says, “Masculinities are essential components of the ongoing male project, capitalism” [16]. It alludes to the fact that capitalism is, was and shall be for the men by the men of the men.

Class is the primary standpoint of the mode of production as per Marxism and division of labor is another key aspect in the process of production. needs revision. Even when Capitalism is discussed, it is axiomatic that capitalism does not start with interaction between nature and human or women. It always says interaction ‘between men and nature’ and “men begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence” [13]. Here the word ‘men’ is important. This ‘men’ does not necessarily mean both man and woman or mankind. Since contemporary society was male dominated, it started using ‘men’ instead of any other word that incorporates female sex. Society as seen in the case of Jasmine, uses women as ‘others’ who do not fit in any place in the society. The powerful lines of *The Second Sex* in this connection can be mentioned:

She is a womb, an ovary; she is a female- this word is sufficient to define her. In the mouth of a man the epithet *female* has the sound of an insult yet he is not ashamed of his animal nature; on the contrary, he is proud if someone says of him: ‘He is male!’ The term ‘female’ is derogatory not because it emphasizes woman’s animality, but because it imprisons her in her sex [14].

In Mukherjee’s novel, we see that while Jasmine and her newly married husband Prakash were going to market to buy sari before moving to Florida, they had been attacked by a typical and traditional man of male domination who did not like the outfit and modern style of outing in Jasmine. He shouted at Jasmine: “All Hindu women whores” [5] and hurled a bomb to kill her but she was saved miraculously and her husband was killed. The emancipation of women is considered a threat to the male dominated world. To the supporters of this world, it seems, women are going ahead to keep pace with the world and adapt themselves with the places where only men should exist. So, any kind of frankness, freedom, liberal thoughts by women and finally an attempt to be equal with men are totally unacceptable to the man-controlled world. Many men even do not hesitate to bring defamation and stigma against women to subdue them and to prevent them from feeling on their own. Men curtail women’s potentials because they are women, a gender that is unlike men that they invented to subjugate. From the shouting of the attacker on Jasmine, it is clear that not her gender but also her religion is in force to push women like Jasmine in relegated position.

However, such exclusion and marginalization is also historically connected to colonization. The Asian and African countries, especially those that were under the colonial domination, show more hatred to the female gender because in those countries colonial power did not care for women, they were not considered suitable for physical labor. Men have internalized that hatred and still showing that hatred towards their counterparts. In colonial period as pointed out by Oyeronke Oyewumi in her essay *Colonizing Bodies and Minds*, men of the colonized territories were at least shown in the lower levels of the government but didn’t acknowledge the existence of female and they made a “process by which female were categorized and reduced to ‘women’ made them ineligible for leadership” [17]. In then colonized territory, women are increasingly victimized which results in intersectional discrimination of the women. The marginalization of Jasmine is only a continuation.

Migration, race, gender, nationality all works very powerfully to have the women sexually harassed at home and abroad. Jasmine, being a migrated woman, from colonized country and lower social stratification with dark color, of ‘other’ sex, was harassed sexually and raped in the land of America by the native white Half-Face. It is important to note that women are also more deprived and discriminated against if they are of dark color. That is why “Blacks women’s literature is full of frequent assaults, not only by a racist patriarchy but also by the Blacks men” [18]. So, women even are not safe with the men of their own race because they are thought to be something disposable when need is fulfilled.

Migration made Jasmine more vulnerable at the hands of the male centered society like Qin, the main character of a movie who was sexually harassed by her supervisor [19]. Again, it is no matter where a woman is born or which country she belongs to, in most cases, as per social structure, she shall be “emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive...to justify inequality such as excluding women from equal access to leadership and decision-making position” [20].

The most intriguing theme of the novel to consider is Jasmine’s transformation into different identities in the male centered world that occurred in her own country and abroad--in different places with different people as clearly stated by the protagonist, “I have had a husband for each of the women I have been with. Prakash for Jasmine, Taylor for Jase, Bud for Jane, Half face for Kali” [5]. Jasmine faced this cruel reality because “no nation has granted women and men the same privileged access to the rights and resources of the nation states” [8]. As Momsen puts it, women are thought to have been persons only for “biological reproduction” while their role of “social reproduction” is hardly acknowledged [21]. Furthermore, this socially constructed gender brings this kind of difference that prevents women from enjoying the things enjoyed by the men [22].

Conclusion: Jasmine, it is clear, turned into different persons at different times when she got close to different male counterparts. The culture, race, migration, gender, class and nationality, all these variables of intersectionality equally impacted the process of Jasmine’s being marginalized and exploited by the machinery of intersectionality. Jasmine’s life can be compared with a long tenacious journey or odyssey whereas we see, she had to live in five distinct settings, experienced one rape, saw two murders, witnessed one incident of suicide and she herself had three affairs of love which are arguably enough for a single person to endure, assimilate and withstand. It is all the intersectional variables that obstruct Jasmine and anyone like her to be integrated, assimilated in different cultures, in different nations being different persons with different identities. As seen in the case of Jasmine, the machinery of intersectionality also works in other countries of the subcontinent and the women are victimized. Further studies may be carried out based on the works of literature of this region to see how intersectionality is suppressing and depriving women especially in this part of the world. The deprived, backward and relegated position of women of India and this whole region can be reversed by empowering women, giving them their due rights and addressing the problems they are facing in the society.

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