



THE NOVELS OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE: A PANORAMIC VIEW

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to study the glimpse on Bharati Mukherjee's novels. Bharati Mukherjee is an American writer of Indian origin. She is known for her effortless contributions towards addressing the psychological sufferings of women. Her fiction reflects the image, the status, the struggle of Indian women of all classes and creeds in the modern and post-modern times. She is the renowned female writers in India who has earned her place by producing exceptional work in Indian diasporic literature. The novels of Bharati Mukherjee are basically female oriented. Her fictional masterpieces deal almost exclusively and obsessively with the problems faced by the South Asian immigrant Women, especially India women immigrants. In her novels and short stories, she realistically paints the contemporary American immigrant and expatriate social reality. She represents in her novels the Women's struggle to define herself and attain a selfhood especially in cross-cultural crisis which is of great significance in the present world of Globalization.

KEYWORDS: South Asian immigrant, social reality, cross-cultural conflicts, acculturation, assimilation, nostalgia, isolation, rootlessness

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I. INTRODUCTION

Bharati Mukherjee has gained critical literary recognition as a prominent writer in Asian American literature and Canadian multicultural literature and expatriate Indian Women Writers in English, Indian diasporic literature in a very short period. Today, she is considered to be one of the most popular contemporary immigrant or expatriate writers living in America. Using her inimitable style and intense first-hand experiences, she vividly describes the predicament of Indian women immigrants in the new world where cultures confluence in to a modern way of life filled with chaos and violence. For immigrant women, life in the new world means endless rebirths and redefinitions in thoughts, identities, personalities, cultures, attitudes and world view. Bharati

Mukherjee's novels brilliantly portray the trauma of immigrant women psyche in all its natural colours and minute details in the process of cultural transformation or transfiguration. When the immigrant protagonists are violently immersed into a mix of diverse and unrelated cultures, they experience a sense of awe, confusion, nostalgia, rootlessness and identity crisis. Because of her faithful portrayal of such an extremely complex experience of the process of immigration and the life of immigrant women, the works of Bharati Mukherjee are considered today as one of the authentic chroniclers of contemporary immigrant life in America.

Mukherjee's sensational works originate from her own intense autobiographical experiences and concern themselves with the genuine cause of

Indian women immigrants in America. That is why she is rightly considered as the "living voice of the contemporary American immigrant and expatriate social reality. A critical assessment of some of her compelling novels will bring out her immigrant sensibility and authentic concern for Asian/Indian women immigrants. Unlike other feminist writers, Bharati Mukherjee's feministic concerns primarily deals with the sphere of cross-cultural conflicts, acculturation, assimilation and other related issues of the new woman immigrants like nostalgia, isolation and rootlessness. Her women protagonists are exiles, immigrants or expatriates who come from India to live in America for various reasons. Their endless psycho-sociological struggles are captured by Bharati Mukherjee with feminine empathy and objectivity using a refined language and style.

BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S CREATIVE WORKS

Bharati Mukherjee's first novel *The Tiger's daughter* (1972) revolves around the life of Tara Banerjee, an immigrant protagonist from India. She receives her higher education at Vassar College, New York. Like Bharati Mukherjee, who visited India after her marriage with Clark Blaise in 1973, Tara gets back Calcutta after her ten year stay in America; she comes to India only to witness poverty and political chaos in India. This dispirits her culturally elevated, transfigured but homesick heart. The ill-treatment meted out to Indian women in the name of age old traditional practices shocks her. The old memories of her home land now starkly contrast with her stern present and create a perplexing inner distress. Unable to feel a sense of belonging in India and in America, Tara feels rootless. Consequently, her identity also suffers a serious crisis. The geographical dislocation creates a cultural duality and stratifies her subjective reality qualitatively. This is the reason why she is unable to feel herself at home in both of her worlds. The better of the two homes, America, makes cultural integration through acculturation difficult for her through its cultural plurality. Tara, the Indian born woman with her deeply embedded Indian culture and values finds Americanism to be an inevitable nightmare. Uprooted from her native culture and identity and have lost a sense of belonging, she lives the life of an exile. The tale of Tara and Tara herself are seen by

most critics as the mental projections of Bharati Mukherjee and her earlier experiences in Canada. Empowered by real life experiences and an admirable writing skill, the novelist expresses her experiences cross cultures, cultural shock, alienation and angst that she lived through in her earlier stages. The title of the novel seems to suggest a longing reminiscence of her status as a daughter to a good and caring father.

Bharati Mukherjee's second novel *Wife* (1975) is about a naive, intensely emotional and fragile woman protagonist, *Dimple Dasgupta*. Dimple is a simple and obedient Indian girl with an ingrained Indian culture and value system. She firmly believes marriage is a privilege and a blessing that will completely transform her life and bless her with unlimited freedom, great fortune and endless joy. So, she eagerly and restlessly waits for her arranged marriage with Amit Basu. In the case of Dimple, the change takes place simultaneously in multiple planes, the personal, familial and cultural. As the name of the novel clearly signifies, Dimple is now a wife and no longer a Tiger's daughter. As a responsible daughter-in-law, Dimple is expected to adapt to her second home. But Dimple finds her mother-in-law and the new home disagreeable. Her dreams of a happy marriage are shattered and her ugly reality drags her back from her colourful fancies. She soon feels Amit was not the man she dreamed to marry. However, she becomes pregnant and is now a would-be mother. Motherhood is seen as a divine state by Indian women but Dimple sees it as a fettering punishment. She skips ropes and kills her own child even before it comes out to see the world. Surprisingly, she never regrets a bit as her mind rejects even the slightest pain and only prefers endless pleasures of this illusory world. When her husband gets his visa and moves to the US to get a job there, Dimple is delighted beyond words. Yet the big New York scares her and makes her hide in her gloomy apartment. Depression begins to possess Dimple and she begins to break inside. All the alien social negativity thrills Dimple and even drives her to act negatively. She kills Amit in a fit and also kills herself. Thus, we see a dreamy and uprooted girl in Dimple, who suffers because of her limitations and dies pitifully.

Dimple is Bharati Mukherjee's Lady Macbeth. She is apparently stone hearted and dangerously delusional. Her problems are uniquely weaved within and across contrasting cultures and identity shifts. Her fancy becomes her enemy within. Her flaws are her inability to reconcile, adapt and accept her own reality. Dimple is evidence for Bharati Mukherjee's exceptional characterisation skills and will ever live in the pages of Diasporic Indian literature and speak the novelist's unspoken thoughts forever.

Bharati Mukherjee fictional masterpiece *Jasmine* was published in 1989. Unlike Tara and Dimple, Jasmine is a highly resourceful, strong and has the ability and will to perfect her social and personal reality even at the face of daunting challenges for a woman like her. Jasmine is just like any other Indian girl. Unfortunately, she becomes a widow at the age of young age of seventeen when her husband is murdered. She comes to America to start afresh but is raped by a cheat. She burns the painful memory of it using her fiery will and moves ahead relentlessly. She assumes various names and positions and finally becomes a health professional, a healing angel in spite of her aching inner wounds. Jasmine is an epitome of modern Indian woman, who suffer endless trials in their lives and yet come out successful at last with sheer will and determination. Through Jasmine, Bharati Mukherjee shows that all cultural problems can be successfully faced and solved if the woman immigrants are strong at heart. This change directly corresponds to her own mindset after her painful experiences in the racist and provincial Canada.

Jasmine glorifies womanhood and hints at the enduring and limitless feminine strength which can overcome all hurdles and shower kindness and divine love at all men. Jasmine, the young widow, comes to America as a refugee but becomes stronger through her trials of cultural assimilation. Her emotional journey contrasts East and the West in terms of its treatment of women. In the process of becoming she gains and sheds many names and identities. She traverses through many worlds but endures through her will to push forward and succeed in life.

Leave it to me (1997) is the touching narrative of a Californian love-child born of a hippie and abandoned in an orphanage by her biological parents. The poor child is adopted by the kind and caring Italian-American family and named as Debby DiMartino. Though she receives the warm love of her foster parents, Debbie feels like a fish out of water and is troubled. When her troubling reality overlays on her unknown inner identity, she becomes restless and deeply troubled. She decides to find her true roots and her real parents. In her way, Debbie meets many men. Her journey provides her the answers. Yet the sense of rootlessness and loss haunts her and blurs her subjective identity. Thus, we see through Debbie that Bharati Mukherjee own quest has now become less cross-cultural and more sociological and psychological.

Desirable Daughters (2003), tells the story of three Calcutta born daughters Tara, Padma and Parvathi who journey from one world to another with remarkably different cultures. The feminine trio is born rich and loving Brahmin father and conservative mother. The girls are clever and creative however, their society tries to lock them away. Their revolt makes to take untrodden paths to different places, trying circumstances that test them to their limits yet strengthens their feminine will to succeed. The trio in *Desirable Daughters* is immersed in to new cultures, take on new identities, and at the same time remain grateful to their loving family but still go against the conservative society. Bharati Mukherjee now turns her gaze from America to India and focuses on the taboos in the Indian society that work against women and push them into misery in the name of sacred tradition and custom.

Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tree Bride* (2004) presents the rich, sophisticated and cosmopolitan Tara Lata and her unforeseen calamity which pushes her to come back to her home land (India). Like Debby she searches for their historical Indian roots. It narrates how she becomes the tree bride when her would-be dies by a snake bite and her father marries her to the Forest God to save her. Tara, the widowed woman becomes a social worker. She embraces the poor and the homeless and participates in the India's freedom struggle. She is

sentenced to death by the British. Mukherjee again delves in to the past of her home town. Calcutta and digs out its cruelty to young unfortunate widows, snobbery and connects it with British history. Tara Lata yearns for home and tradition, finds ancestral roots and her place in pre-independent India. She discovers the shameful past whence taboos like child marriage and superstition devastated the dreams and joy of young and innocent girls like Tara Lata.

Miss New India (2011) is the most recent novels Bharati Mukherjee, which again has as its protagonist Anjali Bose, who finds herself in a dilemma of choices between a hapless marriage and a promising career. Encouraged by her teacher, Peter Champion, she takes her destiny in her hands and moves ahead from her gloomy backwater town to the Silicon Valley of the East and the great metropolitan city of Bangalore.

She finds herself in the company of young and highly ambitious youngsters, who speak the American slang to secure call centre jobs and earn a living. Anjali is now a high-tech city girl and has complete freedom. She overcomes her own past and recreates her present as she wishes. Once again, Bharati Mukherjee records the struggle of an Indian girl, this time migrating within India from a small town to a big metropolis. The change of place demands a change of identity which Anjali readily makes and transforms her life.

II. CONCLUSION

Bharati Mukherjee novels as we have seen show her genuine concern of women especially Indian women who are exiles, immigrants or simply migrants. It speaks volumes about their struggles and appeals for a social and cultural reform in the present world, where women are treated like dirt. Thus, we can clearly interpret that her writings explore the feminine subjectivity and apply the theme that ranges from childhood to complete womanhood.

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