



Reading Indian Feminism in the Post-Colonial Context (Presentation by Resource Person)

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Reading Indian Feminism in the Post-Colonial Context' is my topic for today's Conference. Postcolonial literature, Commonwealth literature, Third world Literature –such derogatory terms were for Literature produced in colonized countries by the colonized. Salman Rushdie, an acclaimed writer, claimed in his essay "Commonwealth Literature does not exist", but only the term Literature exists. Chinua Achebe when he attended the First Commonwealth Writers' Conference, made the point that Western academics think that a writer from a colonized country writes to revolt against the society set by the colonizers. For Achebe, a writer is an organic part of the society. A writer is a Teacher, who knows the aspirations and requirements of the society. A creative postcolonial writer not only sees the society as it is but brings about changes in the society through his/her writing. So 'Reading Indian Feminism in the Postcolonial Context' will focus on how the Calcutta born Indian American writer Bharati Mukherjee through her creative works addresses and explores in depth, the social, political and historical contexts of colonialism, decolonization, feminism, race, hybridity, migration, neo-colonialism and globalization.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, best known as a postcolonial theorist, a leading postcolonial critic traces the predicament of the postcolonial intellectual in a neo-colonized world in her own case as well as in the texts of the Western or Indian traditions. In her book, *Can the Subaltern Speak* portrays a brown women is unable to escape the

expectations of her gender and untouchables unable to escape his caste acquired at birth and is unchangeable and it seems at first glance as if the white man save the subaltern but this is refuted. It is after India's independence, these beliefs die a very slow death.

The academic discourse on postcolonial literature is characterized by a continuous process of debates on a variety of issues, reassessments of theories and redefinitions of terms. The term postcolonial literature refers to writings produced after the political independence of various countries which were formerly subject to European colonial rule. Most of this literature written by authors in their home countries or in diaspora deals with issues of colonial experience or decolonization. Famous postcolonial writers like Jean Rhys, Anita Desai, and Bharti Mukherjee represented interrelations between the colonizer and the colonized.

Owing to varied class, caste, religion, ethnicity and language practices and the problematic interlocking of the historical conflicts between the colonizer and the colonised, the diversity in Indian culture and society contributed largely to the inclusive approach of feminism in India. Discrimination against women is a potent force of unevenness in the twenty-first century across the world. Moreover, the growing threat of divisiveness in the world is seeing the faces of colonial-imperialism and influencing gender politics symptomized by global dissatisfaction with intercultural ties.

Feminist writers struggled to give voice to the problems and issues of women in Indian society as well as the emergence of the treatment of women in Indian writing in English in the feminist and postcolonial era. With time, there were efforts made after the attainment of independence towards highlighting the plight of woman in Indian Fiction by the modern feminist novelists like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Bharti Mukherjee, Kamala Markandaya, Manju Kapur and many more, from equality to the search of identity. Conscious and sustained efforts have been made by innumerable writers in order to sectionalize the dilemma of women from numerous angels.

The modern women of letters herald a new morality – morality not confined to physical purity. It requires accommodation of individual desires for self-fulfillment. Their attempt is to bring about a change in social milieu where woman is accepted as equals, in all respects, to man in impartial sharing of rights, opportunities and also responsibilities in the procedure of evolution of human association. Feminism in the postcolonial context has brought about an insistent and searching exploration of the role and status of woman in society.

The Feminist Theory justifies the accounts of women by permitting them to represent their predicament and play a role by speaking from a situation which they have experienced. The protagonists in selected novels of Bharati Mukherjee speak for themselves. These protagonists highlight the gendered and ethnically underlined identities of women especially Indian women. The protagonists Tara Banerjee, Jasmine, Dimple and Hannah of selected novels *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Jasmine*, *Wife* and *The Holder of the World* face varied situations as women and immigrants to find a sense of self in the new world. They undergo strenuous engagement to get rid of the knot of the multifaceted beliefs and chains of conventions to be themselves. Mukherjee's selected women characters are strong, defy conservative norms, stay true to the spirits of exploration, learn the secret of survival and make a place for themselves in a world that seems to conspire against them by speaking out and demanding their "voices" to be heard. The young women characters are out of

postcolonial patriarchy and being educated are able to speak for themselves.

Mukherjee's protagonists to survive in a new culture struggle to find their identity and survive to make a change to the adopted country's culture. They are no more Indian-Americans but are accepted as only Americans. Hybridity, in its most basic sense, refers to mixture. Hybridity is used in discourses about race, post-colonialism, identity, multiculturalism, and globalization. This is noticeably explored in Mukherjee's selected novels. Her women characters to survive in a new culture assimilate the foreign culture, maintaining their identity and traditional practices to a great extent.

Now I will briefly explain the idea behind my selecting Bharati Mukherjee as a study for my PhD thesis. Postcolonial literary situation in Fiji was dominated by male writers, like Subramani Satendra Nandan, Vijay Mishra to name a few, in 1900s. When I first started planning this work in 2010 to investigate a woman writer of fiction, with a substantial oeuvre, I felt this would lead me to gain deeper insight into certain cultural issues pertaining to women which preoccupied me as a female academic living in Fiji. I wanted to gain a deeper understanding of my own society and myself. Through this study I planned to investigate social and cultural situations of women in Fiji. Subjugation, oppression, marginalization, violence against women and other gender-related issues were the issues I wanted to examine. I began a search for a woman author that would contribute to my doctoral thesis.

Naturally I turned to Fijian literature. Writings by Fiji and Pacific women writers achieved acclaim, however, after the initial publication of their short stories, poetry they did not go on to establish themselves as writers of fiction. I was disappointed that they had not produced any anthology of their writing. My interest came to focus on women prose writers of Indian descent in the diaspora. When I was researching in 2010, Jhumpa Lahiri had not appeared on the scene. Finally, in the middle of this search, I discovered a novel with a startling title: *Wife* (1975), which immediately pulled my attention.

The narrative is located in two immensely diverse settings: Calcutta, a vital but improvised community, and New York City, complex and urban. Dimple, the protagonist, lives with her in-laws. Her mother-in-law changes her name to Nandini. She is segregated in America by Indian patriarchy that minimizes her access to the wider world, and suffocates by the restrictions forced on her. Finally Dimple uses violence as a form of womanly vengeance. A brutal moment in the novel is when Dimple aborts the foetus growing inside her in an act of hostility directed at herself and her society that imprisons her, and she cold-bloodedly murders her husband. These were the shocking episodes that compelled me to think more deeply on the predicament of women, and relate that to Fiji. My search led me to Canada and the United States – to Bharati Mukherjee. She was my choice to explore the subject of women in their motherland and in a foreign country.

Mukherjee has created a fascinating literary world centred on women in the diaspora. I connected with this fictional world straightaway. She presented insignificantly her version of what it means to be an emigrant from India, lived herself as an Indian-Canadian and later an American. Mukherjee is a member of a distinguished group of expatriate Indian women writers. She is recognized as one of the most widely appreciated authors of Asian heritage in the United States. In teaching, she favoured the expansion of English syllabi by including the new literatures - especially texts in translation from postcolonial literatures. It is during this time she started writing novels. *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971), her first novel, received international recognition. A year after her book, *The Middleman and Other Stories* received National Book Critics Circle Award in 1989; she gained more prominence as a writer of fiction. During the year 1976-1977, she was honoured with "Prestigious Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute Grant"; she was a receiver of "Guggenheim Foundation Award" in 1978-79 and "Canadian Government Award in 1982." She also won the first prize from the "Periodical Distribution Association in 1980" for her short narrative "Isolated Incidents".

Amidst the range of English prose writing in post-independence India, the fiction of expatriate writers is increasingly gaining recognition, reflecting the diverse, current trend of emigration and travel. Bharati Mukherjee draws on the darker side of life and the stark realities of life. She writes tragedy into her novels by placing her female protagonists in hostile situations. She writes about upper middle-class women, the class to which she herself belonged. Her concerns are centered on women being deprived of their right to self-determination. Their interests are not recognized. They are unable to voice their feelings and opinions in fear of men and their unfair expectations; they face cross-cultural adjustments, and the psychological disturbances caused by these. Mukherjee portrays in her novels the suffering of women preoccupied with their inner worlds and their frustrations in a male dominated society. Thus Mukherjee's novels appear to make a plea to these migrants to form ties with their new culture, to assimilate and transform. Her novels call for the acceptance of women as individuals deserving of respect. Mukherjee's novels convey this itinerant desire of Indians, frequently in search of a significantly enhanced existence with the resulting anxieties of adaptation and assimilation, migrants in search of more fulfilling life; independent and economically better .

Mukherjee has given particular thought to the situation of Indian women immigrants in North America. Several of her narratives are about psychological transformation, especially among women migrants from Asia. According to Mukherjee, Asian males are too preoccupied with economic life and are not as strongly affected, mentally by expatriation; for this reason, she asserts, that it is their wives who are emotionally and mentally affected in trying to adjust and immerse themselves in a new world. Thus, she has chosen to write about women quietly living desperate lives. A few of her protagonists are able to overcome their problems in their own way. When this happens, these characters achieve control over their lives by crossing cultural lines.

In Mukherjee's later fiction, the prevalent theme is that of women who modify their lives, usually

through an encounter with an “other.” By looking at the way her novels end, it is apparent that Mukherjee’s women protagonists evolve to achieve self-realization. Dimple, in *Wife*, for example, attains liberation by having a sexual relationship with a white American but ends up becoming mentally unstable and murdering her husband. In *Jasmine*, the protagonist, Jasmine, deserts the father of her unborn baby and chooses freedom and an “open” relationship with another white American. In *The Holder of the World*, Beige Masters, the narrator, and the central character, Hannah Easton, live with Indian men for a more meaningful life and one that is constructed as permitting them to be fully themselves.

Mukherjee’s major theme, then, has been the circumstance of Asian immigrants in North America, particularly the transformations occurring in the adopted world. She explains that she has made a conscious effort through her fiction, to bring to the awareness of mainstream America the complicated and unfamiliar world of Asian-American women. She addresses the social and other changes taking place due to the flow of Asians toward America since the 1960s, and comprising individuals from many cultures who are now their fellow citizens. Mukherjee is concerned not only with demonstrating the impact America has on Asian migrants but also, through her most recent work in particular, the ways in which Americans respond to these new Americans.

The relevance of issues central to feminists is strikingly clear in Mukherjee’s writings. Issues relating to women and women’s rights are prevalent in her novels. This specifically female world is explored comprehensively in Mukherjee’s novels. She upholds many aspects of feminism including protest for identical chance, sexual independence and the right to personal assurance. She can be compared in this respect to her contemporary women writers like Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya and Shashi Deshpande, among others.

In *The Tiger’s Daughter*, Mukherjee highlights the issue of name change - Tara retains her given and family names but adopts her husband’s surname,

suggesting that Tara’s transformative experience involves the complications and competing demands of two identities—Tara’s Indian-maiden identity and her identity as an American wife. The differences between these two cultures and Tara’s identities become a problem for Tara, on her return to India. In India, she is faced with issues of race, nostalgia (diaspora), political violence, and the differently configured constraints and scope for agency in India.

In *Wife*, Dimple utilizes violence as a form of female agency, which we might presume affords her little benefit. The television programmes she watches in America—programmes that depict their characters getting away with murder—and by advertising, suggesting that Dimple’s actions are less a matter of personal agency and more the consequence of the deeply problematic conditions of her personal experience, which have made her vulnerable to the unsupportable narratives of success that she encounters in American media.

Name changes are also deeply significant in *Jasmine* as the main character eventually succeeds in her violent acts of self-defense; men change her name, but she reinvents her identity and would appear to experience positive personal transformation, as depicted in the representation of her subjectivity. Jasmine exhibits greater female agency.

On this point, Mukherjee’s more recent novel, *The Holder of the World*, the protagonist experiences name changes, but this time name change is made by the protagonist herself. The violence that developed in *Jasmine* as a form of self-defense is wielded differently in *The Holder of the World* to represent Hannah’s transformative experiences in moving between America and India where she acts like a warrior to defend her lover Raja Jaidev Singh during a battle.

The Tiger’s Daughter is embraced by critics in Postcolonial Literature canon. Mukherjee’s text, however, is not an illustration of resistance literature produced in the imperialist and neo-imperialist sites of struggles. It is a text that deals with peoples, classes, races, civilizations and continents. Mukherjee’s discussion on migrants in the United States situates them not on the periphery

of modern-day culture but as examples of a hegemonic patriotism, that is, the double consciousness of migrants' patriotism in the modern era, identifying optional perceptions, and rebuilding the local identity. Indeed, Mukherjee differentiates her writing claiming that these migrants do not stand in opposition to ordinary America but they represent the new America.

In India, the importance of marriage is emphasized for girls, who are also counselled to be submissive. From childhood, girls start a life of duality and conflict. After marriage, they experience loss of community, family, and identity as they enter into an entirely new familial arrangement. If they migrate overseas, the internal conflicts and their married life worsens. Mukherjee's protagonists are shown from this perspective. Her characters are raised in a culture which presents them with similar experiences and paradoxes. Their identities and language change early in their lives with the influences of their traditional culture and religion on one side and the imposed "new learning" introduced by the British colonialists in India for the native population. These diverse pressures create problems of self-identification and self-integration from the start. These problems are compounded in America.

Tara's situation in the novel *The Tiger's Daughter* should be looked at along the lines of conflicts of dual personality but this is not limited to immigrant life in America. Children in India are exposed to British English through their formal education, bringing about a clash between two cultures. Her protagonists are moving for the first time into a culture different from their own and are not mentally prepared for what is to come. They migrate with the perception that everything is much better in America than they are in their homeland.

Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter* can be regarded as an original and valuable fiction about the immigrant experience in North America. Mukherjee is first and foremost an ethnic woman writer of contemporary America. She has created a narrative with a lively imagination to produce memorable

accounts of the excitement as well as the trauma of adjusting to a new world

Turning to Mukherjee's novel, *Wife*, it is noted that it was a finalist for Governor General's Award. It discusses a more complex dimension of the theme of immigrant experience. Mukherjee's *Wife* explores the inner dimensions of the protagonists. It is worth mentioning that Mukherjee presents the morbid psyche of Dimple's insanity only through the grotesque. Dimple is a neurotic individual who brings an end to the marital conflicts in their lives by doing away with her husband. Mukherjee explores the theme of mental disintegration. The central episode the novel presents the extreme step of killing of husband by the protagonist, Dimple. However, the actual act of murder is achieved in a startling way which presents the theme of disintegration.

The psychological consequences of migration on women migrants who become deranged and narcissistic in their outlook are highlighted. Mukherjee seems to be saying that women would be more successful in merging into a new culture if they were more broad-minded, less egocentric and more empathetic with others and their problems.

In these two novels, *Wife* and *Jasmine*, the protagonists, Dimple Dasgupta and Jasmine migrate to America for different reasons. They deal with the dilemma of culture loss and their attempt to assume a new individuality in America. Both of them experience physical, mental and emotional pain that forces them into violence. Dimple ends her stay in America by murdering her husband, Amit, whereas Jasmine starts her life there by murdering Half-Face. It may be concluded that it may take many years for the likes of Dimple and Jasmine to completely sever their links with their past however exhilarating or exciting the foreign experience may appear to them.

Mukherjee makes clear the difference in her women characters: one learns to successfully adjust to a new environment and the other fails due to self-pity and isolation. They both progress in differently without breaking away from their past completely. This suggests that Mukherjee wants her protagonists not

to abandon their culture but take the best of all cultures to be successful immigrants.

Both Tara in *The Tiger's Daughter* or Dimple in *Wife*, represent the predicament of a voice without expression. They are visionless, voiceless and rootless. They are uniquely Indian, outwardly westernized and are basically human. They give vent to their feminine feeling in their anxious wish for a genuine communication with the self as well as the society.

It can be interpreted that Dimple portrays an example of the pitiful personality of an Indian wife who finds herself out of place and out of her depth in a foreign country with an alien environment, and a foreign way of life. This state of culture jolt is too commonplace but fundamentally it is the anguish of that suppressed voice fighting for individuality and not being heard.

From the feminist and Indian points of view, Dimple is too abnormal and involved in a dream world to be portrayed as either a victim of patriarchal society or of expatriation. Dimple is unable to find herself in the value system which has never been fully defined for her.

Many readers fail to see that the text investigates class division, sexual category, and cultural and racial setting that influence Indian women's acculturation. *Wife* can be regarded as a story of moral degradation. The degradation happens when a character moves away from the core of human values, and lives a rootless life.

Jasmine is a novel which maps out the growth of a female central character through diverse events and catastrophes, to a state of maturity with a strong self-identity and sense of place in the world. Jasmine reflects Mukherjee's concern with the lives of Indian women, whether abused by their husbands or leading a quietly miserable existence. The novel reveals Mukherjee's use of violence as a theme. Jasmine faces violence at different points of her life, but she is also a cause of violence in some instances. In Punjab, she learns about political and domestic violence.

It is rewarding to read Mukherjee's *Jasmine* as a sketch of a female with a bruised past who searches for values. Jasmine realizes the social and spiritual dimensions of existence, for Jasmine life is a movement towards this realization. The contrast between America and the old world of Indian is meaningful. This contrast is between victory and fulfilment on one hand and total destruction of personality on the other.

Mukherjee goes on to explore further the implications of cultural conflict in *The Holder of the World*. Here she is most expressive and gifted as she investigates the intricacies of cultural conflict and politics of 'othering'. She presents the differences between the Old and the New Worlds, America and India. She exposes a clash of value systems, a confrontation between an austere, stark society and a culture in which nothing is more important than the celebration of life.

In *The Holder of the World*, Mukherjee makes a bold attempt to rewrite the beginnings of America's history. The making of America and Americans has always been a preoccupation with Mukherjee. She tries to forge links between seventeenth century Massachusetts and pre-colonial Mughal India. The novel combines the influence of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, the *Ramayana* and day-to-day reality.

The protagonist in *The Holder of the World* is transported from Salem, New England to Coromandel, a coastal town in South India. In Mukherjee's earlier work, the protagonists travel from India to America. *The Holder of the World* depicts the process through which the uprooted come to terms with their new socio-cultural and psychic surroundings. The two major themes, in the novel are transformation and migration. The novel moves in two time spans, three centuries apart, and has a greater complexity and depth than her previous novels. Hannah's movement to the physically conscious, self-indulgent and passionate world of the east is no accident nor is her role of an expatriate that of chance. She returns to her native land, not as a reformed American but as a rebel living on the fringes of society.

It can be argued that Hannah questions and discovers innovative means of identifying a country that is fundamentally conventional. Transformation is vital for a migrant to be able to live independently and as an emotionally secure person.

Mukherjee's novel is an attempt to turn the tables on the familiar situation of an Indian in America to one of an American in India so that we may discover an experience of cross-cultural consciousness beyond the barriers of time and geography. The novel effectively introduces new elements in Mukherjee's cross-cultural vision. Through this novel, Mukherjee writes about a fresh type of international awareness which provides a sense of connectedness that goes beyond where one lives and the point in time in which one is living.

In *The Holder of the World* she seems to be determined to portray a luminous picture of the India that once was to fascinate the West. She has recaptured history and tried to relate it to present times. As she has inscribed in the beginning, she had tried to unravel the yet unravished beauty. *The Holder of the World* is a picturesque depiction of history. The insight with which she has etched the characters, situations and events, has lent an extra dimension to dull historical recording. *The Holder of the World* is a historical novel in the true sense of the genre. While Mukherjee asserts her Americanization, she also through this novel reaffirms her Indian inheritance. She appears to have found through this novel a way to reconcile her Indianness with her Americanness.

My survey of feminist scholarship and criticism pointed ways in which women's writing has been excluded from or marginalized in the literary canon. Women's texts were dismissed as second-rate, that is, as bad literature. They were claimed as not literature but unsophisticated religious studies. Writing by women, gradually, has found a prominent position in the literary canon because of the achievement of writers like Bharati Mukherjee. My reading of Indian Feminism explores the concept of Post-colonialism in Literature.

I conclude my paper by informing all that I wrote a book on BM from a Fijian Perspective, titled *A Fijian*

reading of Bharati Mukherjee and this book is now included in US Library Congress Catalogue.

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