

FEMALE PHASE IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S FICTION

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Received: 27 Mar 2019

Accepted: 02 Apr 2019

Published: 08 Apr 2019

ABSTRACT

From the inception, the major premise of the feminist movement was to protest against the patriarchal hegemonic paradigm and to emancipate woman by demanding equal rights of woman in the society. This movement gained impetus through three waves of feminism with the aim of not only gaining the equal status of a woman but also to prepare the ground for female subjectivity and self-assertion. Bharati Mukherjee, one of the most prominent novelists of the 21st century with her diasporic experience, delineated women characters who were victims of immigration and patriarchy. Her female protagonists rebelled against tradition, social customs and culture, embarked perilous journey in search of independence and self-identity. Thus Bharati Mukherjee's female protagonists were bold, assertive, ambitious, adventurous and modern but each protagonist was sharply different from the other through the merit of her individual traits.

KEYWORDS: *Feminism, Immigration, Patriarchy, Protest, Self-Identity*

INTRODUCTION

Feminist social theory upholds the fundamental inequalities between men and women and the subordination of women in the hegemonic patriarchal paradigm. Its basic premise is that male dominance gains its power and authority from the social, economic and political spheres of the society. This theorizing derives its concepts and methods from social science and focuses on the material conditions of women's lives and the ideological processes which legitimate and help to perpetuate women's subordination and exploitation. From the 1970s onwards feminist analysis is concocted with literary and cultural theories. According to Michele Barrett, this 'cultural turn' in feminist theory emphasizes a change from 'things' (such as housework, inequalities in the labor market or male violence) to 'words' (such as issues of representation and subjectivity).

The beginning of the feminist movement can be traced back to the late 18th century and associated with the writings in social theory, polemics and non-fictional works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Margaret Fuller and others. The movement gained its impetus through the demand of female suffrage. The second wave feminism was initiated by writers like Kate Millett, Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Freidan, Germaine Greer, Juliet Mitchell, prompted by an awareness that formal political equality had not brought social and cultural equality. So these writers started a critique of patriarchy and sexist ideologies in institutions, literary and cultural texts and personal behavior of men. The third wave engaged itself with various theories like Marxism, psychoanalysis, post-structuralism, class, sexuality, the Body and Sexual Difference. Famous American feminist Elaine Showalter in her celebrated work *A Literature of their Own* has developed three phases of women writings –

- Feminine Phase (1840-80) – In this phase women writers to ingratiate and rise equal to the male intellectuals and critics, created female images that conformed to male standards and culture. So these women writers strictly buried their ‘feminine’ substance.
- Feminist Phase (1880-1920) – In this phase, women’s literature felt empowered to protest against the iniquitous treatment of women in a male-oriented society and system but still it remained dependent in some ways on predominant male culture.
- Female Phase (1920 onwards) – It was only when very self-conscious women writers appeared on the literary scene that a deliberate ‘female’ aesthetic appeared and we find authentic female literature representing women’s experience, their views of life and female subjectivity breaking all the formerly male restricted taboos in the society.

Many Indian women writers like Anita Desai, Kamala Markandya, Shashi Deshpande, Shobha De, Arundhati Roy, tried to dismantle in their writings man’s hierarchical superiority over the woman and created a new image of Woman. The Indian- born American writer Bharati Mukherjee is also a part of this gamut, who asserts that gender is a multifaceted category open to change and variation. A quest for the definition of self and search for identity are the main features of her women characters who are seen caught in the flux of tradition and modernity. The main focus of discussion is the way Mukherjee advocates many faces of feminism encompassing agitation for equal opportunity, sexual autonomy and right of self-determination in her fiction. As an immigrant writer she also delineates the issues of her own cultural location at West Bengal in India, her displacement (alienation) from her land of origin to Canada where she was “simultaneously invisible” as a writer and “overexposed” as a racial minority and her final re-location (assimilation) to the U.S.A. as a naturalized citizen. These novels discuss the development of personal identity of Indian migrant women in the U.S. and their confusion and the dilemma of adjusting between two different cultures. So Mukherjee shows that the process of survival of the diasporic individual in between the “home of origin” and the “world of adaptation” is the voyage undertaken in the whole process from “alienation” to final “assimilation”. Mukherjee’s women characters are the victims of immigration and patriarchy but still, they have the potential to fight for their rights as a woman and then as an individual. They suffer cultural shock and oppression but are anxious to establish their identity by undertaking their heroic odyssey.

The female protagonist of Mukherjee’s first novel *The Tiger’s Daughter*, Tara Banerjee traveled to America at the age of fifteen for higher studies. It was fate that she fell in love with an American, David Cartwright and eventually married him, adopting the new culture. In Indian tradition, one should marry in his or her own caste or would be treated as an outcast or a sinner. Tara violates this conventional rule and makes her own choice. But her husband is wholly Western and asked naive questions about Indian culture and tradition. So she could not communicate the finer nuances of her family background and life in Calcutta with him. After a period of seven years, she revisits Calcutta and feels completely insecure and alien even in the presence of her mother.

It is basically a story of the confrontation between reality and illusion when Tara returns to her Calcutta cannot connect with her long cherished idealized homeland which proves quite different from the real socio-political homeland. Her inability to adjust with her friends, relatives at Bombay airport, the very environment at the railway station, her travel

with a Marwari and Nepali, make her feel more estranged and uncomfortable and now America becomes the new homeland. Her sense of alienation began when she was disillusioned with a completely unfamiliar homeland where she noticed leprosy afflicted beggar girl, bestial existence of beggar children, the artificial lifestyle of her friends, the riots, the disease, misery, and privation of people. Thus she became alien to her native land but it was her acquaintance with an American, Antonia Whitehead who settled in India that rendered Tara a renewed and austere perspective of India. Her visit to Mata Kanabala Devi awakens her love for her mother. But the violent demonstration of brutal beating down to the death of Joyob Roy finally shattered her Indian dream at the end of the novel. It is ironical that Tara in North America considered herself an outsider but when she returns to India with her Western education and nostalgic dreams of the motherland, she realizes her psychological alienation from the people as well as from the land. At the cross-road of two different cultures and worlds, Tara feels her sense of isolation in India more strong and so she returns to her husband in America. Thus Tara's journey to India proves a quest for self-discovery of an immigrant psyche.

Her next novel *Wife* is a story of Dimple Dasgupta, a normal girl full of dreams about married life. For Dimple marriage brings freedom, fortune, and happiness and she visualizes a new life in America with Amit Basu after marriage. But Amit and his family want her to be docile and submissive and they even change her modern name Dimple to traditional Nandini. Dimple gradually develops a claustrophobic feeling in her married life and even terminates her pregnancy symbolizing her rejection of conformed role of women in society. The name Dimple is scintillating but lexico-graphically it means any slight surface depression. This depression is symbolic of the depression within her psyche, which is borne out of her irritable responses to the things around her.

Through the strain and struggle for the articulation of Dimple's repressed voice, the novelist wants to present the protagonist's vision of life. Her immigration to the U.S. with her husband eventually lead her to experience a conflict of culture which worsened the situation for Dimple and accumulated frustration. Dimple continuously struggles for her identity. In the alien land, the conflicts and traumas in Dimple's life become too apparent and she becomes sick to obey her husband's every order obediently. Gradually she started developing anger and violence to a point where her own body seemed alien to her and she desired to hurt herself. Dimple's murdering of her husband can be viewed as an act of asserting freedom from the structures of patriarchy. The sense of alienation from her husband and new environment drive her to fits of psychic depression and ultimate insanity which results in her committing suicide. But it is through her death that she finds her true identity and freedom.

Mukherjee's *Jasmine* is a feminist novel where the protagonist, Jyoti, a simple Punjabi girl of Hasanpur, rebels not only against age-old superstitions and traditions but also maintains a proper balance between tradition and culture. She rebels against blind beliefs and superstitions. Her endless odyssey to explore, seek and find the brighter aspects of life are very different from the conventional ways. The protagonist's feminist trait is that of Kali, Goddess of Destruction, an incarnation of Durga, the Goddess of Strength, that enables her to embark a perilous journey to the U.S. to fulfill her late husband's dream. Jyoti after marriage to Prakash Vihh became Jasmine and then in America changed to Jane when she became a wife of a divorced man. So the protagonist Jyoti evolves from a village girl to 'Jasmine' after marriage, next to 'Jose', an illegal immigrant in America and then to 'Jane' as the Iowan woman. So the very letter 'J' symbolizes the transformation,

continuity and female assertion. Elizabeth Brofen has rightly observed that the letter 'J' serves as a signifier for the dialect of a progressive engendering of identities as these bars already existing identities, putting them under erasure without consuming them. Jasmine's dislocated other speaks out the self-conscious and self-induced effacement in the voice of resilient and incessantly self-refashioning hybridity. Thus Jasmine is an embodiment of power who dares to break away from the shackles of caste, gender, and family in search of a new identity.

The Holder of the World is the story of Hannah Easton who came to India from America in the 17th century and imbibed herself in its culture. It is a feminist novel about the trauma of dislocation and joy of transformation arising out of the union of two cultures. Hannah's journey to India fraught with images of adventure, action, and passion, projects a sort of escape from the rigid claustrophobic world. She is represented as an embodiment of courage, imagination, and assertiveness in the novel.

Leave It to Me is another feminine novel where Debby or Devi DiMartino, a Eurasian orphan and the protagonist of the novel, is a young sociopath seeking revenge on her parents who abandoned her. Mukherjee presents in Debby a tough and vulnerable woman. The Desirable Daughters follows the story of divergent paths taken by three Calcutta-born Brahmin sisters, Tara, Padma and Parvati who end up in three different corners of the world, breaking away from the strictures of the traditional society.

The Tree Bride narrates the story of Tara Lata Ganguly who was a victim of the archaic custom of child marriage and after the tragic death of her bridegroom was married to a legendary tree to escape a life of degradation, widowhood, and shame. The young girl then dedicates her life in helping poor sick refugees gradually become involved with the Indian freedom movement. Her life threat leads her to search her root and she finds that the mystery has a link to some complication of her family history.

CONCLUSIONS

Thus we observe that Bharati Mukherjee's female characters are real, modern and lifelike figures. Her depiction of women and their different relationships portray the dominance of patriarchal practices in traditional society, as well as the forms of liberation and empowerment which are available to women in their diasporic situation. Although her female protagonists in diasporic situation experience discrimination on the bases of color, race, caste through their struggle they gain independence, freedom of movement and self-identity.

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