

GENDER AND DIASPORA: A COMPARISON BETWEEN THE WOMEN CHARACTERS OF KAMALA MARKANDAYA, ANITA DESAI AND BHARATI MUKHERJEE

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ABSTRACT

One of the crucial aspects of diasporic writing is its gender factor. The development of an approach that aims to project "and interpret experience, from the point of feminine consciousness and sensibility" is quite noticeable in modern Indian fiction. Authors like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai and Bharati Mukherjee have been articulate enough in narrating the complexities of the life of immigrants, especially the vicissitudes arising with the gender factor. They depict the unconscious and subconscious psyche of both male and female expatriates and reveal their feelings towards their native land. Their depiction of characters and situation does not remain merely one-sided because apart from a detailed picture of factual, external life they give the inside of the characters exposing their emotional complexity. However, there are perceptible differences in their approaches and their treatment of gender. These differences become apparent when we compare the women characters of these three novelists.

The proposed paper seeks to find out such differences through a comparison of some women characters in the novels of Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai and Bharati Mukherjee.

KEYWORDS: *Diaspora, Gender, Modern Indian Fiction, Expatriates, Dilemma, Emotional Complexity*

INTRODUCTION

The Diaspora writings have always focused on the issues of alienation, isolation, identity crisis and the complexities of the life of immigrants. Migration or exile and the consequent haunting memories of an imaginary homeland coupled with cultural conflicts have been an established factor of the diasporic dilemma. However during the last century "gender issue" has emerged as a significant factor responsible for the vicissitudes of the immigrants. There has been a phenomenal rise in modern women during the last century. With their perceptible metamorphosis from suffering and sacrificing lot into iconoclasts and deifiers of set traditions, 'Emancipation of Women' has become the watchword of the last century.

The "gender issue" is stated more explicitly in the writings of women than that of men. Authors like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai and Bharati Mukherjee have been articulate enough in narrating the complexities of the life of immigrants, especially the vicissitudes arising with the gender factor. Though they appear unanimous on the ill effects of gender yet their treatment of gender differs significantly.

Markandaya's women, in general, are conformists coming from various strata of society and in most of her novels, the inner consciousness is that of a woman who seems to accept the prevalent social norms and moral codes to a great extent. Women in Markandaya's novels come in various shades. The Indian women and the white women cannot be grouped as there is so much of difference in their culture, habits, and outlook which may be due to the different social environment in which they grew up. We do find some common traits in all these women whether they be English or Indian. In both, there are women possessing feminine qualities of endurance, kindness, and compassion for their fellow men as well as women who are possessive, selfish, gossipy and proud.

Generally speaking, Indian women are depicted as docile, submissive, sacrificing, enduring, forgiving and accepting their fate without any complaint though there are some references to wicked, adulterous and dominating ones as well. Most of the Non-Indian women appear to be possessing an air of superiority complex over the Indians. They are cruel, haughty, proud and possessive but kind and compassionate women with an abundance of love find their appearance too.

Vasantha in Markandaya's *The Nowhere Man* had been a victim of British imperialism even in her homeland. Her soul was crushed beyond repairs when a young British officer lifted her skirt while she was only thirteen. She stoutly refuses to adapt to alien customs and habits and refuses to be a cultural transplant. There is no conflict in Vasantha as she chooses to cling to her identity until the end.

Mrs. Pickering exhibits the subtler elements of western civilization. She acts as a guide and support to Srinivas and helps him to the right the balance in his mind and also to rehabilitate him. Though an English lady, Mrs. Pickering easily compensates for Srinivas's loss of wife, sons and the native country. She lives with him, in spite of public criticism, "as a caretaker of his household, a sympathizer, a counselor, and a kind-hearted benefactor." She made all-out effort to make the house as spick and span as the neighbors. She tells Srinivas, "If one lives in a foreign country, it is best to fall in with the ways of the natives, as far as possible". Mrs. Pickering in her sympathetic and persuasive manner won the heart of Mr. Srinivas and lived compatibly.

Another woman, Mrs. Radcliffe is all that a worldly woman is a lover of social status and material comforts. She wants her husband's profession to be a means of attaining social status, with all its attendant privileges, perks, and pleasures. She offers a contrast to Vasantha, Srinivas' wife in that she is unsympathetic and cantankerous towards her husband. She is impatient and rude towards her husband's patients.

While the Indian woman, Vasantha shows a spirit of adjustment and accommodation in giving up all her people in order to share her husband's fate thousands of miles away from her home, Marjorie Radcliffe hated her husband. "She hated his patients who got in the way of vital social engagements."

Markandaya presents her women realistically with their virtues as well as vices. Her women fight against darkness, throw off their traditional legacies and reach out for an equitable share of man's worldly and spiritual goods. The women portrayed by Markandaya: Rukmani, Premala, Sarojini, Nalini, Vasantha, and Saroja represent the concept of ideal Indian womanhood in terms of their willing submission to the traditional roles in the family. They conform to the existing traditions and seem to have been modeled on the mythical characters of Sita and Savitri - symbols of sacrifice, suffering and true love for the spouse. Like their models, they retain their individuality despite being tradition-bound.

Anita Desai's women characters, on the other hand, are ready to fight against the patriarchal community for their rights. They do not hesitate to challenge and criticize the cultural ideologies that hinder their freedom and self – fulfillment. Hence Desai's women characters are epitomes of an emancipated woman. Many of Desai's protagonists are portrayed as single women, yet it cannot be said that Desai neglects the institution of marriage. Hence her characters exemplify Simon De Beauvoir's description of an independent woman in her seminal work *The Second Sex*, where she asserts that "Ceases to be a parasite, the system based on her dependence crumble; between her and the universe there is no longer any need for a masculine mediator."

In her novel *Bye Bye Black Bird*, Sarah, the English wife of Adit, has been portrayed as a lifeless doll lacking spiritual depth and insight, and more attention is given to her English origin than as an individual. The typical Indian male chauvinist in Adit finds pleasure in ill-treating Sarah: "These English wives are quite manageable really, you know. Not as fierce as they look very quiet and hard working as long as you treat them right and roar at them regularly once or twice a week".

Her marriage to an Indian immigrant makes her very confused because she has to adopt the mixed cultures of the east and the west. However, she makes efforts to come to terms with both. By marrying an Indian, she has "lowered" her position among her fellow countrymen and remains an outsider for the Indian community because she is English. Sarah feels like the "other" she has sacrificed a lot, and even then she is treated like the "other" by Adit.

Sarah suffers an identity dilemma owing to her relationship with Adit. She is an alien in her own country; she becomes nameless and silently suffers anguish and fails to hide the turmoil within. Her marriage to "wog" compels her to "keep to the loneliest path" and walk, drawing across her face, "a mask of secrecy."

Desai herself admits "I don't think anybody's exile from society can solve any problem. I think the problem is how to exist in society and yet maintain one's individuality rather than suffering from a lack of society and a lack of belonging."

Bharati Mukherjee occupies a significant position among their Indian Women Writing. She focuses on the inner world of women. She depicts the transformation of women when they pass through the process of immigration. True to life, her women protagonists deal with the problems of solitude, misery, and estrangement.

Dimple Dasgupta, the protagonist of *Wife*, symbolizes basic mentality of Indian culture which is imbibed in every girl's mind that she has to model her life on the legend of Sita. Dimple Dasgupta, twenty years old Bengali woman "wanted a different kind of life" and, "she thought of premarital life as a dress rehearsal for actual living". Dimple behaves abnormally from the beginning. Her life revolves around the marriage because she thinks "it would bring her freedom, cocktail parties on carpeted lawns, fund-raising dinners for noble charities. Finding a suitable bridegroom is a very arduous task for the girl's father. Mr. Dasgupta everyday circles ads for the ideal boy and talks on the phone with a boy's family, "with the forced conspiratorial gaiety of desperate man trying to bargain".

She models her life on Sita legend, and she is ready to do anything to please her future husband. She supposes to study for University exams, but she stops reading for the exam.

She has created an imaginary world for herself, and after her marriage when she confronts the hard realities of life, all her imagination are shattered.

Dimple is full of enthusiasm and happiness for her new life in the United States. However, once she lands in the dreamland, the condition worsens.

Dimple suffers from insomnia. In waking nightmares, she sees men with baby faces and hooded eyes. She suffers from psychosis and loses touch with reality. "She felt like a star, collapsing inwardly" (Mukherjee, *Wife* 109).

Dimple straddles between the expatriate and immigrant. She does not comprehend the cultural codes of America and loses her sanity. Even she loses her self-confidence which she has in Calcutta. She thinks of the ways of killing her husband. She turns neurotic and loses touch with reality. She becomes lonely and isolated. "She was so much worse off than ever, more lonely, more cut off from Amit, from the Indians, left only with borrowed disguises. She felt like a shadow without feelings. Whatever she did, no matter how coolly she planned it, would be wrong" (Mukherjee, *Wife* 200).

Dimple if she had remained in Calcutta, would have gone into depression and she would have found a very convenient way out for unhappy Bengali wives- suicide. Her violent nature is multiplied with her immigration to America. She kills her husband to show her rejection of the role of a wife.

On the other hand Jasmine, the protagonist of the novel *Jasmine* is not escapist, she fights and rebels against gender-biased society. "The fifth daughter, the seventh of nine children," she lives in a mud hut without any facility of water and electricity. In the traditional society birth of girl child has been seen as a curse and punishment of a god.

"I was born the year the harvest was done good that even my father, the reluctant tiller of thirty acres, had grain to hoard for drought. If I had been a boy, my birth in a bountiful year would have marked me as lucky a child with a special destiny to fulfill. But daughters were curses. A daughter had to be married off before she could enter heaven, and dowries beggared families for generations. Gods with infinite memories visited girl children on women who needed to be punished for sins committed in other incarnations. (Mukherjee, *Jasmine* 39)

Her mother tries to kill her. Actually, her mother tries to save her from the pain of a dowryless bride. She knows the reason behind her mother's cruel action, so she never criticizes her mother for the incident. After a brief stint of pleasant conjugal life, Jasmine is widowed, which in her native Punjab meant a life of grief and solitude. She discards this destiny and leaves for America, where she undergoes a series of transformations. She is raped, she murders, and she is comforted by strangers. Her movements finally direct her to a new identity as Jane with a common-law husband and child in the farm country of Iowa.

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