

THE FICTIONS OF BHARTI MUKHERJEE: A FEMINISTIC PERSPECTIVE

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Feminism is the premise in the foremost novels of Bharti Mukherjee. In most of her novels, it appears that the incidents are justly correlated to the novelist herself. Mukherjee, the diasporic novelist, has also thrown light on culture, tradition, assimilation, alienation etc. She has very minutely presented the pragmatism of women.

Bharti Mukherjee needs no foreword in postcolonial literary scenario. She belongs to Indian Diaspora which has emerged today with the multiplicity of histories, variety of cultures, tradition and a profound intuition of survival. Indian Diaspora having more than twenty million members worldwide survives in between home of origin and world of adoption. The Indian born Canadian novelist has a deep impact on the literary canvass. Since she was born and brought up in Calcutta, she recalls ‘the city will remain a habit with me, but as a writer, I have developed entirely in the United States’ (11-12). She felt fascinated by English writers like Jane Austen and E M Forster. Mukherjee had a natural penchant and curiosity in writing. She felt a great urge to write since she was a child. The world of fiction seemed more factual to her than the world around her. Soon after she turned eight, her father took her mother, sisters and her to Europe for a period of three years. They spent most of their time in London, Liverpool and Basel, sites of large pharmaceutical companies where the father advanced laboratory research and negotiated collaborative projects for the future manufacturing of drugs at their Calcutta plant. Mukherjee made her aim crystal clear in her writings in an interview:

We immigrants have fascinating tales to relate. Many of us have lived in newly independent or emerging countries... when we uproot over selves from those countries and come here, either by choice or out of necessity, we suddenly must absorb 200 years of American history and learn to adopt American society.... I attempt to illustrate this in my novels and short stories. My aim is to expose Americans to the energetic voices of new settlers in this country. [11]

An invariable expansion took place in the art of Mukherjee as a novelist. The thorough appraisal reflects the transformation of the novelist from an immigrant author to an American writer. America is at the core of her heart as a writer.

Mukherjee holds that there are two kinds of writers- those who confirm what the public wants to know, and the other who disturb, interrogate the existing systems and patterns. She identifies herself with the second group. Viewed thus, she is more like Shashi Deshpande than R K Narayan. A creative writer to the core, she is highly critical of post-colonial theory and criticism. Critics like Gyatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, she declares, are the assassins of imagination. A close examination of Mukherjee’s fiction reveals that it follows a logic of

direction, growth and evolution. Looking back on her writing, she says that she appropriately moved away from particular autobiographical concerns and that now ‘my themes are larger, my strategies more complex. I have put together my aesthetic manifesto: Multiculturalism/diversity is the key words.’[16, Dhawan]

Most of her novels are replete with the contents of feminism. She has movingly sketched the excruciating and down-to-earth image of a woman’s character. Simone de Beauvoir opines:

This humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him, she is not regarded as an autonomous being.... She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute- she is the Other. [153, Dhawan]

In Komarovsky’s words:

... to be born a woman means to inhabit, from early infancy to the last day of life, a psychological world which differs from the world of men.[153]

Millett, a fighter for gender equality, elaborates the same point:

Because of our social circumstances, male and female are really two cultures and their life experiences are utterly different. [153]

Alice Jardine terms feminism ‘a movement from the point of view of, by and for women.’[153]

Chaman Nahal utters:

I define feminism as a mode of existence in which the woman is free of the dependence syndrome. There is a dependence syndrome: whether it is husband or the father or the community or whether it is a religious group, ethnic group. When women free themselves of the dependence syndrome and lead a normal life, my idea of feminism materialises. [153]

Ultimately it can be assessed that ‘feminism emerges as a concept that can encompass both an ideology and movement for socio-political change based on a critical analysis of male privilege and women’s subordination within any given society.’[154]

Thus as ‘a philosophy of life, ‘feminism’ opposes women’s subordination to men in the family and society, along with men’s claims to define what is best for women without consulting them; thereby offering a frontal challenge to patriarchal thought, social organization and control mechanisms.’ [153]

Now the amplification of the novels of Mukherjee from feministic perception of the strength of women and her weakness would be done. In a language of sensation and meticulous metaphor using images provided by the woman protagonist, the novelist has articulated the many-sided pathos and rebellion of contemporary Indian woman, not only in India but also in the New world.

Her early two novels *The Tiger’s Daughter* (1972) and *Wife* (1975) written during the period of alienation in Canada, are controlled by one faith, one ethnic, racial and cultural proclivity. The women portraits are the spokesperson of her experiences.

The Tiger’s Daughter is a personification of the diasporic community. It reflects the altercation between misapprehension and actuality. It had adopted the technique of documentation to extract the contrast between two worlds and two attitudes. An immigrant like Tara away from home idealizes his home country and cherishes nostalgic memories of it. Tara Banerjee, the protagonist, is a Brahmin girl who travels to America at the early age of fifteen for advance studies. Later she struggles to hook-on to the nationalized community by entering into

the wedlock with an American, David Cartwright. He is utterly Western, the more Tara becomes cognizant of this point of divergence between the Indian wife and the American husband, the more she is hesitant of variety that she is detachable entity from the nationalized community. Tara Banerjee evaluates her life and ethics with that of her husband's. Contrary to the cultural belief, her ethnicity comes to direct blows when her conjugal life which was supposed to be based on the standard code of union identified by her right from her childhood, was actually based on the principle of contract as identified by her husband. The contemplative, passionate sensitivity of an immigrant for her mother country is dashed to pieces when it comes into direct blows with reality. The Americanization of her finer sensibilities; her unruffled and frosty rejoinder to her nickname Tultul; her reply to her relatives' house which seemed elegant and chic to her previously looked shabbier afterwards, startle her. The character of Tara is astounded and horror-struck at this swing in response. Tara is an immigrant sandwiched between personalities of women and suffers the duality and conflict very divergent to her American life. The moral fibre of Tara's character, like the novelist, suffers from the cultural dichotomy surrendering those thousands of years of pure culture. The epidemics, collision, fatal accidents, and starvation of Calcutta, the omnipresence of her husband David in the midst of rioting rabble and her own Westernisation over the period of seven years add to her anguish and misery. The husband and wife have different estimations and assessments of Indian encounter. Mukherjee, like Tara, felt self-estrangement at a loss of identity. The vacuity, dreariness and desperation are evoked by her American life:

New York... had been exotic... there were policemen with dogs prowling the underground tunnels. Because girls like her... were being knifed in elevators in their own apartment buildings.... The only pollution she had been warned against in Calcutta had been caste pollution. New York was certainly extraordinary, and it had driven her to despair. (34)

On the contrary she recalls her life at Calcutta helplessly:

How much easier she thought it was to live in Calcutta. How much simpler to trust the city's police inspector and play tennis with him on Saturdays. How humane to accompany a friendly editor to watch the riots in town. New York, she confided, was a gruesome nightmare. It wasn't mugging she feared so much as rude little invasions. The thought of stranger... looking into her pocket book, laughing at the notes she had made to herself transforming shoddy innocuous side streets into giants fangs crouching. (69)

So *The Tiger's Daughter* is visionless because it is voiceless. It is a half-truth. Tara's diverse questions about different modes of life are an endeavour to converse. So the novelist's view of life is one of rootlessness.

In *Wife Dimple*, the vital character is an escapist and lost in her private world of fancy. She has been depicted as a woman who has been suppressed by men and is desirous to be idyllic Bengali wife. She wants to break through the traditional taboos of wife. She longs for freedom and love in marriage. This ambition results in her indignation, grief, resentment, peevishness, spite and sterile anger. Her psychic defect is implied in her name. Out of foreboding fear and delicate volatility, she assassinates her husband and ultimately commits suicide. The characterisation of Dimple lends a divergent and intricate perspective. She is a middle class married woman who migrates from Calcutta to New York with a hope that:

Marriage would bring her freedom, cocktail parties on carpeted lawns, and fund-raising dinners for noble charities. Marriage would bring her love. (18)

Dimple is the telepathic study of an abnormal woman. She angers her husband by making fun of his dress, spilling curry on his shirt front. She goes to the extent of condemning the gifts he brings for her. The extent of her abnormality reaches high when she skips her way to abortion:

She had skipped rope until her legs grew numb and her stomach burned; then she had poured water from the heavy bucket over her head, shoulders, over the tight little curve of her stomach. She had poured until the last of the blood washed off her legs; then she had collapsed. (42)

She appears too much ambitious and always wants to fulfil her own dream. She thinks that the migration to New York with her husband after marriage would gratify, enchant and liberate her from the expected unhappiness and afflictions. The novelist shows the readers that immigration for some is an exodus from reality. Her failure to grasp the pleasures of existence in New York with its bigness which she had never seen before is symbolic of failure of her marriage to Amit. Two incidents from the novel; one, her enforced self-abortion and the other, her atrocious assassination of her husband are emblematic expression of her turmoil flanked by the other and the self. Ultimately she accomplishes her wish by killing:

She sneaked up on him and chose a spot, her favourite spot just under the hairline, where the mole was getting larger and browner... she brought her right hand up and with the knife stabbed the magical circle once, twice, seven times.(213)

She murders in a fit of phobic fury. She feels herself possessed by some demonic power. The world of illusion fuses with the world of reality generating mystification in her mind. A lacerated and anguished Dimple, like, Tara, is the nowhere woman. She is neither of India nor of America but a stunned wanderer between these two worlds, yet to accomplish a distinct uniqueness. Whatever she did was done to execute her reverie.

In *Jasmine*, the story builds up the proposal of the amalgamation, combination and absorption of the East in the West with a story telling of a young Hindu woman who leaves India for the US following her husband's assassination, just to be raped and in the long run to return to the understanding of a caregiver through a succession of jobs. Jasmine voluntarily undergoes transformation of the self from Jyoti to Jane to Jasmine. At every conversion of the personality, she stands unyielding in resistance to her destiny and providence. It is not the uncertainties of the new continent that challenge her but the uncertainties of her life in an unknown terra firma. Her journey to the new world is a sort of regeneration through violence.

Jasmine's attempt to restructure destiny and make it the foundation of the development of her inner potential is sheer naivety. This is brought compellingly to her mind after Prakash's murder. But her unconquerable will surfaces even in such adversity and helps her restructure her mission with a single-minded zeal which implies her later success.

Jasmine's decision of going alone to America without job, husband or papers, leaves her family aghast. She proved herself a born fighter by not allowing the heart-rending tragedy to deter her courage. She leaves for America on forged papers to take revenge on her husband's enemy. She introspects being aware of her fate:

We are the outcastes and deportees, strange pilgrims visiting outlandish shrines, landing at the end of tarmacs, ferried in old army trucks where we are roughly handled and taken to roped-off corners of waiting rooms

where surely, barely wakened customs guards await their bribe. We are dressed in shreds of national costumes, out of season, the witted plumage of intercontinental vagabondage. We ask only thing: to be allowed to land; to pass through; to continue. (101)

She was sexually exploited by Half-Face. She decides to balance her defilement by her death, but soon she realized that she could not let her personal dishonour disrupt her mission. She extends her tongue and slices it, blood oozing – a perfect vengeful image of goddess *Kali* (a Hindu goddess), out to defy and obliterate the devil who has violated her chastity. She kills Half-Face and turns perplexed for sometime:

No one to call to, no one to disturb us. Just me and the man who had raped me, the man I had murdered. The room looked like a slaughter house. Blood had congealed on my hands, my chin, my breasts.... I was in a room with a slain man, my body blooded. I was walking death, Death incarnate. (119)

She has the bitterest lesson in America she reacts:

In America, nothing lasts. I can say that now and it doesn't shock me but I think it was the hardest lesson of all for me to learn. We arrive so eager to learn, to adjust, to participate, only to find the monuments are plastic, agreements are annulled. Nothing is forever, nothing is so terrible or so wonderful, that it won't disintegrate. (181)

The incidents give her a great lesson and she courageously encounters the obstacles to fulfil her dream. She never lets her own desire come in the way of fulfilling her primary dream.

The synthesis between tradition and modernity has given her a true perspective where she can see traditional Indian and contemporary American life style unblinkered:

When I was a child, born in a mud hut without water or electricity, the Green Revolution had just struck Punjab.... I was the last one to be born to that kind of submission [but she is no longer], that expectation of ignorance. When the old astrologer swatted me under a banyan tree, we were both acting out a final phase of a social order that had gone untouched for thousands of years. (203)

Bharti Mukherjee indicates that social order needs change. Jasmine, the eternal caregiver, walks away with Taylor and Duff, leaving Bud, whose child she is carrying but for whom she feels only pity and not love, that's given to Taylor:

It isn't guilt that I feel it's relief. I realize I have already stooped thinking of myself as Jane. Adventure, risk, transformation: the frontier is pushing indoors through uncaulked windows. Watch me reposition the stars, I whisper to the astrologer who floats cross-legged above my kitchen stove. (240)

So the characters like Tara Banerjee, Dimple and Jasmine have been depicted to sketch out the life of a woman engaged in a grim pursuit for values. The issue of being widespread contemporary interest, this suggests an important link in the chain of new literature that is written at present by women and about women. In its popularity lies the validity of the struggle it depicts or the convictions that such a literature generates. Dimple has been portrayed free and rebelling throughout the novel. She has no inhibition in expressing whatever she feels. Jasmine has broken away the shackles of caste, gender and family. She has learnt to live not for her husband or for

her children but for herself. She brings death to Half-Face as goddess *Kali*, she brings happiness to Duff and Taylor as a traditional, self-sacrificing Indian woman and she is offering love to Du as a loving Indian mother who exults in her motherhood. Tara finds herself a misfit everywhere she goes. With her floppy personality she tries to look Indian and adjust with her friends but there is an imperceptible fissure between them and she feels breakdown.

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