

The Picturization of the Female Voice as an Integral Part of the Fictional Forte of Bharati Mukherjee: An Appraisal

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ABSTRACT: *This is an attempt to project a woman's position in society and her place in it playing different roles as an obedient daughter, a devoted wife and a loving mother with a special focus on the female characters portrayed by Bharati Mukherjee in her fictional world with reference to **The Tiger's Daughter** and **Wife**. It shows how the various predicaments experienced by the females known as 'heroes' in feminine form, their culture shock and their struggle to cope with hostile circumstances stem out of the author's bitter experiences as an expatriate in Canada, making them appear to be fighters, adventurers, confident people occupying the central status in her fictional world.*

It is generally held that women play the role of an obedient daughter, a devoted wife and a loving mother. A woman did not have an identity of her own and a purpose for living her own life in her desirable way. To liberate women from male oppression and to promote women's rights and caution women against being as slaves based on biological functions of women, is the ultimate notion of various feminist groups. A woman's status is largely based on the simple biological fact that she is the bearer of children whose care is her responsibility, thus her sphere is usually restricted to her familial roles. Simone De Beauvoir in his **The Second Sex** states:

"One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as whole that products this creature, intermediate between male and much, which is described as feminine". (P 83)

In Indian society, a female child is brought up under the strict supervision of their patriarchal system and marriage seems to be the only ambition of a girl, she groomed as an object in her life, neither has an identity of her own and prepared to be sold in marriage market. No doubt, women are an integral part of human civilization but man is seen as the master of everything on earth including women and has always treated women like beasts of burden and objects for pleasure. He is glorified even in **The Bible** and his superiority is highly stressed here:

"Adam is portrayed as the master who gives names to all beasts and also to his wife whom he calls Eve" (P 148)

St. Paul also gives a secondary position to woman:

"A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God: but woman is the glory of man" (Bose, 12)

Women have raised their voices against inequality, oppression and female consciousness against male domination. Feminist literature has been a significant instrument in making the women's experience become the central concern for it seeks to demythologize human ill-treatment, feminine values, and other related issues. In the field of Literature, Women writers are needed to write about their experiences, for providing the central priority to women in all such respects as thematically, structurally, and stylistically. In India, a woman has necessarily to be virtuous, chaste, submissive, homely, graceful and devoted to her family as she is considered to be:

"an embodiment of sacrifices, silent sufferings humility, faith and knowledge" (Everett, 76)

Women writers like Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, Dorothy Richardson, George Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Margaret Drabble, Kamala Markandaya, and Anita Desai voiced some burning female issues in their respective works. Following the footsteps of those female writers, Bharati Mukherjee falls to project feminine issues and problems in her writings.

Bharati Mukherjee is universally recognized as an expatriate writer and she had the special quality as a writer, that she defies classification as Indian English writer, Indian woman writer, feminist writer, expatriate writer, and immigrant writer at once. She is an Indian writer, also a neo-feminist writer, her writings focus on women, their oppression and struggles to overcome them and endeavours to achieve individualism. The resonances of an Indian sensibility pervade her writings; even though she refers herself as an American and a main stream American writer. She herself made a statement in an interview with Carb:

“I was born into a Hindu, Bengali, Brahmin family which means that I have a different sense of self, of existence and of mentality... The perspective I have about a single character’s life is different from that of an American writer who believes that he only has one life”. (P 651)

Her speciality of handling of the theme of expatriation from the perspective of novel, that was different from other writers and treatment of expatriate women characters in a new mode by either expatriate or feminist writers. ‘Forgiveness’ is used by her as a device to liberate the inhabitations and mental blocks curtailing the liberty of the women characters. Woman, in Bharati Mukherjee’s fiction, not only comes out of the house but also shows enough courage to cross national and racial barriers.

Bharati Mukherjee is not engrossed in the theme of woman being victim of social forces but in the concept of expatriate, anyone not in a position to expect help through financial or moral support. In the context of expatriation, survival to another country implies both courage and self-sufficiency. The protagonists of her novels like *The Tiger’s Daughter*, *Wife* and *Jasmine* as the titles themselves suggest are women and all deserve to be called ‘heroes’ in feminine form. She offers glimpse of the capacity of women, for rising to the challenges of unfriendly treatment in an alien culture. Their various predicaments in alien lands, their cultural shock and their struggle to cope with new circumstances made her fight and help so as to occupy the central status in her novels out of their bitter experiences. Bharati Mukherjee’s women characters are true to their own inner prompting, emotional and focus attention not on “backwardness as an area of darkness but on her characters’ growing awareness of the dark spots in their lives and their courageous efforts to discover areas of light... a struggle for self-actualization” (Dhawan, 77)

The Tiger’s Daughter, portrays a well-to-do Bengali Brahmin girl, Tara who is sent to America for studies. Though Tara is suddenly uprooted from her cocooned world of affluence in India, she has adapted the new country. There she falls in love with an American David and takes the crucial decision of marrying him. ‘Nostalgia’ makes her visit to India after seven years. Although utterly disappointed, she realizes that she belonged to both the worlds and not exclusively to one, and returns to America. Bharati Mukherjee adopts the technique of depicting Tara’s dilemma between illusion and reality. The events are interlinked to bring out the trauma of Tara’s visit to India with the precision of a newspaper reporter as Sobha Shinde puts it:

“The author leads her heroine through a series of adventures and misadventures to a final realization and reconciliation”. (P 355)

The narration is omniscient and the protagonist also goes on one after the other without any intrusion. In India Tara’s world is small, restricted to her parents, her affluent circle of friends and the nuns at St. Blaise. The real India or Calcutta with its strife, poverty and unrest are unknown to her. Her father is her hero, capable of facing any situation like Bengali Tiger. He is like the immense banyan tree to guide her, to think for her and to decide for her. Ignoring his wife’s anxiety for Tara’s marriage, he decides to send her to Vassar for studies. The narrator’s comment which almost gives the gift of the novel is worth quoting here:

“Changes in the Anatomies of nations or continents are easy to perceive. But changes wrought by God or titans are too subtle for measurement. At first, the human mind suffers premonitions, then it learns to submit” (TTD, 7)

The adolescent Tara who has never left her parents alone at Shambazar, completely feels at bay. She survived, even though she was uprooted and thrown into an alien soil to survive suddenly. Bharati Mukherjee’s characters that unmistakably possess this quality of courage to face any situation appear meek and submissive, baffled but never feel desolate or accept defeat. Tara’s growth from an over dependent daughter to an independent woman can be traced from Tara’s confidence and decisions in her life. Her act of individuality may be cited as her falling in love with David and her decision to marry him, though she knows, how conservative her parents are also about modernized and westernized people.

She is prepared to step out and strive for her own happiness and coming out into the real world of New York after her marriage; she has to face a lot of cultural shock as an expatriate. The American society

which shows a great discrimination towards women that would depress her and made her think the real happiness would be in India. Life in Calcutta prevented her from understanding her own India and its traditions. This proved lackness in her life; she was unable to answer her writer husband's naive questions about India.

This is the reason for her depression and precipitated decision to visit India on the pretext of proposed research. By the end of the novel, she faces a lot of bafflement, bitter experiences and alienation. The transition of her growth can be traced in various elements that happen during her short stay in India and her visit made a disappointment, even from the moment she steps on the Indian soil. Tara's friend and relatives appear strange to her. Her disappointment is best illustrated in the following lines:

"She had expected admiration from these friends; she wanted them to consider her marriage an emancipated gesture. But the emancipation was suspicious. There was no heroism for her in New York. It appeared there would be no romance, no admiration in Calcutta either. It had been foolish to expect admiration". (TTD, 86)

David writes to her that he has bought books on India. She sees it as a veiled implication to suggest that he has not understood her country through her and Tara feels hurt that her husband no longer loves her. She instinctively feels that she should go away. As days passed, her husband begins to appear more like a shadow figure, "a foreigner with an accent on television" (P 63). The Calcutta of her dreams also disappears;

"New dreams occurred with each new ball dozer incision in the green and romantic hills. Slow learners like Tara were merely victims". (P 199)

India also begins to appear to her like a gruesome nightmare. Tara determines that she would not stay any longer in India: she would go back to her husband. Tara's sudden decision to return to America is criticized as her inability to grasp reality to be in India or America. But Tara is not a debacle though she gets suddenly uprooted from homeland; she does not collapse out of shock but struggles to re-root herself. This could be clearly traced in her growing from homesickness or nostalgia, from bafflement at the multiplicity of cultures. The realization of culture is a phase of growing to the effect that immigration is to be accepted not with defeatism but as a strength giving acceptance of life. Tara's destiny proves that the core of identity towards her own personality and that the changes wrought in human personality are not determined by geographical change but in knowing themselves. As Prof. Padma has put it, "But way of Tara, Bharati subtly highlights Tara's marginal belonging in all worlds". (P 143)

Wife, the second novel of Bharati Mukherjee, published in 1975, is nothing but the story of a slightly neurotic and depressed young woman, Dimple who strangely desires to marry a neurosurgeon but married to an engineer, Amit Basu. Being disappointed of her fantasies, she has imagined an ideal husband and an affluent life based on glossy ads. Despair leads to neurosis which is revealed in her behavior and action. The couple immigrated to the US a few months after the marriage. In US, there were gossips about rapes, mugging, and murders, which are aggravating her neurotic tendency. One of the flaring fits of insanity; she stabs her husband with a kitchen knife. The critics analyze itsympathetically in terms of culture shock, female oppression, violence ridden and media dominated society, sadomasochism and Bharati Mukherjee for her casting a slur on the glorious traditions of the Indian womanhood as "to subverting the framework of an entire culture". (Wife, 65)

This novel *Wife* is, no doubt, picturizes Bharati Mukherjee's psychological insights into the disintegrating personality of an unfortunate victim of neurotic nature. Portrayal of Dimple's hallucination, erotic fantasies, her talking aloud to herself, her occasional sadism, and all these traits are evidences of 'neuroses'. Though she is disappointed with her husband and his flat, even from the first evening, she meekly accepts whatever he says, not disloyal to him. To please her husband, she wears bright colored sarees, she serves her mother-in-law when she is ill, in spite of her naggings. Amit expresses his disappointment that he wants to marry a tall girl, who would speak fluent English, she takes it positively and seriously. She tries on 'Basic conversational English' and spends hours reading magazines in English. She reads a lot about women, with broken marriages and tortures by husbands, she feels like inventing happy endings. Amit is responsible for her neurosis, because he is too mechanical and unromantic and he does not understand her feelings and desires but her neurosis recurs very soon. This indifference and the monotonous way of her routine life make her embrace loneliness and sink her back into depression and other features of neurosis. She feels hatred and revenge in her sub-conscious mind waiting to germinate at the right time against her husband. While she is in such a state of mind, she discovers that she is pregnant. To a traditional Indian woman, pregnancy is a matter of pride but it is not so for Dimple.

It is surprising that her depression magically disappears when she comes to know about husband's immigration being granted. She is perfectly sane for a few days, but a sudden recovery from her illness when her marriage is fixed, and her elation at her husband's finding a job in America. But this excitement at every new prospect is only momentary in the case of Dimple and every time one finds her sliding back to depression. The novelists' intention to give an account of Dimple's behavior seems therefore, to be to show that a woman of Dimple's mental state is prone to intense violence whether she is in India or in America. Amit's behavior, his anger and frustration, his indifference – all slowly sink Dimple back into her own neurotic world. Even petty gestures of Amit begin to irritate her. Her affair with Milt Glasser also is an act of revenge – the result of her mounting resentment against Amit. Even her fantasy that he would fill her life with the magic of adventure only ends in greater misery. "After he left...., she would cushion her head in her arms and wept" (Wife, 201). Not finding anybody to give her consolation makes her get crushed. As her psychotic spells become more frequent and more intense, she begins to experience death at close quarters, first in dreams then even in wakefulness. She brings to wonder whether she's really dead or alive. Even her killing Amit occurs in a free – floating dream – like state. It is final explosive release of the pent up tension" says rightly Rajeswar (P 71). Thus, Dimple falls a prey to psychotic depression augmented by culture shock.

To conclude, in the present world 'neurosis' is almost a common ailment inborn or promoted by circumstances, in others given the tensions and frustrations of modern life. Bharati Mukherjee's integrity as a writer lies in offering a convincing portrayal of her chosen subject with neat manner. Her literary ventures are successful, "be they foray into realism, flights of fancy or incisive insights into human motivations" (P 146). Tara's partial success or Dimple's imbalance cannot nullify the 'striving' germane to the mapping of their careers. Success is never a guarantee in our mutable human life. Mental mettle is revealed in the willingness to venture and it is in this sense that Bharati Mukherjee's heroines deserve to be called as heroes, asserting their places as chief protagonists making the male protagonists take a back seat.

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