

Bharati Mukherjee as an adept in her genuine portrayal of ‘Women’ and candid depiction of the rootless life of an Indian woman as reflected in her fictional world: An Appraisal.

Dr. S. Chelliah

Professor, Head & Chairperson,
School of English & Foreign languages & School of Indian Languages,
Department of English & Comparative Literature,
Madurai Kamaraj University,
MADURAI-21(TN)-India.

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an explorations of the fictional world of Bharati Mukherjee, her vivid life experience and a genuine portrayal of it in the form of it. The repression and suppression of woman and the emancipates of Indian woman is reflected through large number of women characters and also she focuses women her attentions on expatriate women characters who faced a lot of bafflement, bitter experiences and alienation.

Key words: adept, candid depiction.

Truly speaking, human experience has chiefly been a masculine or what may be called a ‘malist’ experience. Hence the cumulative image humanity offers is a titled, distorted one with female vice denied an equal force, with the woman remaining behind the arras. “Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands”, strongly voices with a sense of protest by Jane Austen in her novel **Persuasion**. From Christine de Pisan to Mary Wollstone craft, from Simone de Beauvoir to Jane Austen and beyond, women have been demanding their rights in a male-centric world. ‘Feminism’ sprang up as a protest movement launched by women of the west for equal social, political, legal, moral and cultural rights with men. It is an anti-masculinist movement of the women, by the women and for the women.

The rise of feminism in Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries laid focus on the economic prosperity of the domestic work. In the 19th century, feminism was nothing but a protest movement against the suppression of women’s rights. In the beginning of the 20th century, it formulated the structure and texture of the suffrage Movement with Mary Astell’s **A Serious Proposal to the Ladies** stressing the role of women’s education in removing their inferiority and insecurity. Later on, Virginia woolf endorsed

Astell’s view that education alone could expand woman’s consciousness of the world and ensure her place in the society. What has to be generally understood is that Sophia, a pioneer of women’s liberation Movement in the 18th century questioned male authority over property and pleaded for women’s open access to employment opportunities and political freedom in her women not inferior to Man while Mary Wolstone craft in her **Vindication of the rights of women** opposed restrictions on woman’s freedom for self-expression and self-development. Elizabeth Lady Staton, 19th century American Suffragist, stressed self-sovereignty as a moral imperative, while Condorcet strongly endorsed the belief that there could be no social justice without women’s rights to equality with men, with a stress on the classic feminist argument that women are neither biologically nor intellectually inferior to men.

Dale Spender called the literature made by men ‘man-made language’ which Varda one satirically designated’ Manglish. Such an attitude made women ‘invisible’. The detiographer made them inaudible. Consequently, women produced fewer words than men, published fewer and their books remained in print for fewer years. Tillie Olsen pointed out that out of five books published only me was by a woman and that two remained unrecognized, untaught, unknown and the voices of women unheard in a patriarchal world. This

was the voice of frustration, the female voice of failure which one could hear in Dorothy Parkin's verses filled with bones, shrouds, weeds, graves, linen, ghosts, worms, in the funeral titles of her books. Woman was considered incomplete without man. Situations got changed in such a way to make women protest against false male genetics. Today suppressed female voice has started getting articulated and the dignity of woman got affirmed. She has a greater share of social responsibility and a great readiness to author her own authority. Rosalind in **As you Like it** put on a man's garb and went about looking for her lover. Even Sita, an oft-quoted example of anti-feminism, had the guts to resist Ravana. Elizabeth Barrett Browning and George Eliot revolted against social conventions. Simone de Beauvoir in **The Second Sex** was concerned with the physical suppression of woman. Kate Millet in **Sexual politics**, Virginia Woolf's in **A Room of one's own** and Simone de Beauvoir in **The Second Sex** explored the question of woman and in exploring it, they did expose the myth of male superiority.

Feminism has rather strongly challenged the traditional view of woman as the weaker sex and the belief that her place is in the kitchen. It did assume the equality of the sexes and sought to achieve for women a role in society which such a rethinking on gender relations reflected in literature and life. Contemporary feminist movements and partly rooted in transformations and feminism can be identified as the liberation of women from social taboos and male dominance. Jane Flax, in fact, considered gender as the basis of feminism and said: "Gender relations enter into and are constituent elements in every aspect of human experience" (P 40). The repression and suppression of woman from times immemorial is to be traced to the gender relation. Feminism is the study of gender relation and the analysis of male domination: "To emancipate woman is to refuse to confine her to the relations she bears to man" (Miles iii). The emancipation of Indian woman was a byproduct of Gandhiji's non-cooperation movement. The independence struggle paved the way for women out the hearth and chimney nooks into the life of the nation. It gave them an opportunity to realize the potentiality they possessed. In pre-independent India, the picture of Indian womanhood was stale and perverted. The women of the early Indian

English novels had no identity. Women in early Indian English fiction suffered mostly owing to the infidelity of her husband or the stigma of childlessness. "The early works of Anand and Narayan are dominated by the male point of view. Both have observed, shown and given prominence to the boys in Indian families in their novels. The girls are shown as subordinate creatures. They are rarely shown in depth and come before us mainly as pictures of pity and suffering" (Shirwadkar 47). Women novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Attia Hosain, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal and Vimala Raina tried to explore the feelings and emotions of women who fall a victim to the conflict between the traditional and the newly acquired values. Today the novelists started depicting a large number of women characters who occupy the centre of the stage in the novels written not only by women but also by men. These women characters are depicted in the novels as showing courage enough to fight with social evils and male superiority.

Bahati Mukherjee is one among the notable women writers who are concerned about the suppression, oppression, rape, sexual inequality, feminine issues like the equality of women and search for identity. Born on July 27, 1940 to a reputed family of Sudhir Lal and Bina Mukherjee, Bharati spent almost two first decades of her life in India and stay abroad afterwards. She had her education in Kolkata, England, U.S.A. Even at the age of ten, she made up her mind to become a writer. Graduating from the University of Calcutta in 1959, she got her MA Degree in creative writing in 1963 from the University of Iowa and she received her MA Degree in English and Ancient Indian Culture from the University of Baroda. She got her Ph.D Degree from the Department of English and Comparative Literature in the USA. Bharati Mukherjee took up teaching as a career holding various academic posts at the various Universities in Canada and USA. She accepted the fact that she is an American at heart though born in India. Her experiences as an expatriate in Canada and the USA are the major source of her creative writings. Her works do focus on the experiences and feelings of expatriates, their alienation, assimilation and struggle for identity. She has to her credit publication of such notable novels as 1. **The Tiger's Daughter** (1971), 2. **Wife** (1975), 3.

Jasmine (1989), 4. The Holder of the World (1993), 5. Leave it to Me (1997) and 6. Desirable Daughters (2002). In the fictional world of Bharati Mukherjee, most of the protagonists are born and brought up initially in India. They come from upper middle class background. The protagonists are mostly women who embark on adventurous journey abroad. They face innumerable difficulties and or deals but they are not sufferers. They do not complain but fight with the circumstances quite boldly. Generally speaking, literary tradition is to exhibit woman a subordinate status as the heroine. It is essentially a passive role. When a male protagonist is referred to as 'hero', the authentic implication is that he is the centre of contending forces that are chosen to constitute the plot-line. The word 'heroine', on the other hand, denotes only an emotional link with the hero normally as love or wife. All the varied roles allotted to woman whether as attractive or sympathetic companion or mother are geared up to highlight the heroic element in the character of the protagonist. The central role given to women in modern fiction can be considered on one hand as indices of attitudinal changes and on the other as pointers to the greater vulnerability of women to end up as 'victims of modernism'.

The stress of coping with life devoid of all stable values, whether on the domestic or social fronts, has increased the desire in the lives of women for more space for themselves to attain personality growth in line with their own inner aspirations. As rightly pointed out by Ellen Morgan in her attitude, "Human Becoming Form and Focus in the Neo-Feminist Novel", heroism in the sense of 'becoming' is the common inheritance of all human beings. If the desire to explore the unknown or the courage to cross the pale of the permitted is a proof of heroism, then it has to be admitted that Eve is more of a hero than Adam. Bharati Mukherjee's women protagonists are fit enough to suit this definition of word 'hero'. To be more specific, her women characters deserve to be called heroes as their most ardent wish in life is for a chance to assume control of their lives. Literary conventions are not isolated mushrooms that suddenly crop up from now where. 'Ideas' are picked up by the radars of the writers sensibilities. Bharati Mukherjee's use of a woman

as hero is thus more a concretization of the literary overtures of the earlier ages. "Woman", as Morgan rightly points out, "is not only psyche, but a political being, not only a product and victim of her culture but also a personal being who transcends it" (P 183).

Bharati Mukherjee can be listed under neo-feminist writers, for her novels are bildungs Romans her characters grow from the 'aloofness of expatriation to the exuberance of immigration'. The protagonists in all her novel are Indian women who take the heroic decision to emigrate and they all have the willingness to adventure by trying to create their own happiness, unbothered by conventionality. Woman in the fictional world of Bharati Mukherjee not only comes out of the house but also shows enough courage to cross national and racial barriers. Protagonists in her novels have to cope with the problems of second rate status, first, as foreigner's concern and second as women. The novelists is not interested in the backend theme of woman being victim of hostile social forces but rather in the expatriate who more than anyone is not in a position to expect help or financial or more support from anyone. Survival, in the context of expatriation to another country implies both courage and sufficiency. Bharati offers glimpses of this capacity of women for rising to the challenges of unfriendly treatment in an alien culture. Her women are no doubt heroic in all respects. The protagonists of her three novels- The Tiger's Daughter, Wife and Jasmine as the titles themselves suggest are woman and all deserve to be called 'heroes'. Their various predicaments in alien lands, their cultural shock and their struggle to cope with hostile circumstances seem to stem out of her own bitter experiences as an expatriate in Canada.

The women characters of Bharati Mukherjee are not stereo types struggling for homes and failing to find one, but they are fighters, adventurers, confident people who all occupy the central status in her novels. They are, no doubt, emotional but not like Anita Desai's women characters who indulge in insulating themselves from the rest of the world. Quite unbothered by conventionality, her women are true to their inner promptings. Shanta Rama Ru, Kamala Marakandaya and Bharati Mukherjee as pointed out by Roshni Rustomji Kerns in her

article “The Three South Asian Women Writers” are:

“intensely aware-even self conscious, regarding the position as South Asian women recreating in their writing, the living of immigrants and expatriates. Their works constantly reduce around people who caught in the awkward act of juggling with multiple culture” (P 655).

Bharati Mukherjee focuses her attention not on “backwardness as an area of darkness, but on her characters growing awareness of the dark spots in their lives and their courage’s efforts to discover areas of light..... a struggle for self-actualization” (Padma 78). Curious the expatriate women characters in Bharati Mukherjee’s novels seem to bear a strong resemblance to her. Her own growing self-confidence and satisfaction in her ‘American identity’ seem to be reflected in their friction free sense of belonging.

The Tiger’s Daughter is Bharati Mukherjee’s maiden venture as a novelist. Her characters generally reflect her personal concern and the protagonists of **The Tiger’s Daughter** ‘Tara’ is no exception. The novel does portray 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 very soon gets adapted to the new country. There she falls in love with an American, David and takes the crucial decision for marrying him. Nostalgia makes her visit India after seven years. Although utterly disappointed, she realizes that she belongs to both the worlds and not exclusively to both one and returns to America. Bharati adopts the technique of documentation in depicting Tara’s confrontation between illusion and reality. In the words of Sobha Shrinde, “the author leads her heroine through a series of adventures and misadventures to a final realization reconciliation” (P 355). Tara stay of fifteen years in India is a cocooned one. Her 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. The Bengali Tiger, her father is her hero, capable of facing any situation. He is like the 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. She is suddenly uprooted and thrown into an alien soil to survive and she survived. Bharati’s protagonists, though appearing meek, submissive and ordinary, possess the tremendous quality of courage to face any new situation. No doubt, they are found to be 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 rapidly growing confidence and decisions in life. Her will to survive is evidently seen even during the first weeks of her landing in America: “In the first week each atom of newness bombarded her, she longed for camac street” (TD 7). Three weeks in poughkee prie and “I am undone” (11), thought Tara. But then she strongly felt that she must defend her family and her country. She felt nervous, but she prayed to Kali for strength so that she would not break down before those polite Americans.

Coming into the real world of New York after her marriage, she had to face a lot of cultural shock as an expatriate. The American society which showed a great discrimination towards expatriates more particularly towards women depressed her. The violence of New York unnerved her and as a commoner in New York, she had to be a participant, witness and victim of the hectic pace of everyday life. Naturally she felt very insecure in America and thought of Calcutta as a peaceful place and strongly felt that her real happiness would be in India and not in America. Her cocooned life in Calcutta prevented her from understanding her own India and its fine details and traditions. This proved to be a big handicap for her, for she was unable to answer her husband’s naïve questions about India. This inadequacy is the main reason for her depression and precipitated her decision to visit India on the pretext of proposed research. The problem of Tara is that she was neither here nor there and by the end of the novel, she faced a lot of bafflement, many bitter experiences and alienation. Her seven years stay abroad is said to have eroded her Bengali sensitivity. Tara’s decision to follow her parents to a local Shrine in Darjeeling proved to be a very fruitful one. Her parents’ joy at her decision released Tara of all her suspicions, fears and misunderstanding. Her visit to Mata Kananbala Devi’s ashram led her to the realization that any truly religious experience requires self-

abandon. In the Mata's presence, she felt that it is easy to love everyone, even the American Antonia who irritated her. So moving is the experience that warm and persistence tears gush out in Tara's heart:

“some new and reckless emotion made tiny incisions in her body and forced her inhabitations to evaporate through the window that overlooked the mountains” (TD 173).

This trip, indeed, was the most significant part of her visit to India for it enabled her to understand that universal love is the crux of the whole Indian philosophy and revived her original boldness and strength. Her horse-ride in the deserted part of Darjeeling could be taken up as an example for her courage and adventure. Tara's sudden decision to return to America was criticized as symptomatic of her inability to grasp reality either in India or America. But Tara was not a failure, though suddenly uprooted from her home, she did not collapse out of shock, but struggled to re-root herself. This could be clearly traced in her growing from homesickness or nostalgia, from bafflement at the multiplicity of cultures to the realization that culture is a phase growing, that immigration is to be accepted not with defeatist-attitude but as a strength giving acceptance to life. Tara's destiny proved that the core of identity is never in nationality but in personality. In brief, Tara faced racial discrimination but faced it rather bravely. She defended India and her culture in an alien land and she found herself like an alien in her own country, feeling torn between New York and Calcutta, between David and her own paternal family. The novel **The tiger's Daughter** is thus, journey of Tara from expatriate's sense of alienation to acceptance of the foreign land as her own homeland, wherein the expatriate sensibility is touched upon with a feminist perspective.

The novel **Wife** is nothing but a candid depiction of 1970's life of an Indian woman whose mind is torn due to her cloudy headedness and whose life is made rootless. Bharati Mukherjee through the inclusion of Epistles, songs, advertisements and other mudane information succeeds in portraying an unsteady modern woman's life in an alien land. Being a mimetic novel, **Wife** portrays its milieu- a middle class woman's life in Calcutta in part-I and

the morbidly materialistic Indian ghetto of New York city in Parts-II & III. This novel is nothing but “a funny but upsetting account of the conflict of western and Indian cultures and of modern and old-fashioned traditions of female identity” (Diane 50). In the novel, Dimple and Amit Basu marry much against each other's wishes for the reason that Amit wanted Miss Meena Sen while Dimple wanted to marry some surgeon rich enough to look after her. The couples emigrate to New York where they stay at Jyothi and Meena Sen's house. During this early phrase of life, Dimple is never happy. Often she is struck by mental disorders and indubitably she attempts for suicide. A kind of insomnia witch haunts her. No surprise, at times and again, as Linda Sandler points out, “Dimple walks through fire for love, takes the myths of her culture for literal truths and so on. In the second part of the novel, the description about dimple and Amit's life at Jyothi and Meena's household in the New York is something sensible, attesting to the fact the Indian women in the flux of race and sexuality turn victims of their own crisis. Evidently, Dimple is caught in a tradition of positivity, female treachery and covert violence. In the third part of the novel, it is sad to note that American boy friend of Ina, Mr. Mitt Glasser drops to Dimple's house often and falls in love with her.

By this, the lady betrays Amit and one day, she is misled by the popular American culture, to murder her husband. In this way, the story of Dimple bears a close comparison to Anita Desai's novel *Cry, the Peacock* where heroine kills her husband in a rage of madness.

The protagonists killing her husband is the main reason for evoking the “chee chee” feeling in many Indian critics. Her alienation and depression, the indifference of her husband and above all the media which depicted violence more exotically-all these culminated in aggravating her already disturbing neurotic tendency. While some critics sympathetically analyze the novel in terms of culture-shock, female oppression, violence ridden and media dominated society, sadomasochism etc., some condemned both the novel and its author perverse. A critic like Ragini Raachandra for example, slashes Mukherjee for her casting a slur on the glorious traditions of the Indian womanhood. She feels that it is tantamount “to subverting the frame work of an entire

culture” (Wife 65). Ragini is of the view that Bharati is bent on making deliberate distortions of Indian womanhood. The novel she has felt is symptomatic of Bharati’s sick mind. Bharati Mukherjee is not a propagandist. Her integrity, as a writer, lies in offering a convincing portrayal of her chosen subject-good or bad, beautiful or ugly. Her literary ventures are successful “be they forays into realism, flights of fancy, or incisive insights into human motivations” (146). Jasmine is a novel that depicts the experiences of an expatriate in a multicultural society. Here in this novel Jasmine is pictured as a rebellious girl who rebels against the traditional society of India. The novel depicts the success story of a poor Punjabi girl, Jyoti, who has challenged her most hostile fate. Her first challenge is with the astrologer who foretold her widowhood and exile. But once his first prediction comes true, with the death of her husband, she rebels against her widowhood. With the terrible courage of survivor, she comes to the U.S and with might and rage of Kali, kills her rapist. She begins a new life, wins the love first of Taylor and then of Bud. And in the end, she leaves Bud, “greedy with wants and reckless from hopes” (P 241). In the case of Tara and Dimple, it is seen that ‘fate’ has never been adverse. Both of them are born and brought up in affluence, possess good education and are married off well. Only lack of proper understanding in one and neurotic tendency in the other, have and hindered them from achieving self-actualization. But with Jasmine, fate has always been hostile, at every turn of her life. She is able to survive and succeed only with her will to “reposition the stars” and her never yielding courage. Jyoti, as she is named by her parents, which means light giving flame, has indeed been a never dying flame, through her life, although she has straddled continents and acquires many identities as Jyoti, Jasmine, Kali, Jase and Jane. Jyoti’s husband is killed by terrorist’s bomb but she does not want to live the life of a widow. Jyoti’s journey from Hasnapur to America changing her from Jyoti to Jasmine. On way to USA, a trawler captain Half-face rapes her. At first, She contemplates new life. She kills Half-face. She comes in contact with Mrs. Gordon and her daughter who introduce her to Prof. Vadhera. She adopts American way of life and lives Chamelion-like life changing names and husbands. She was Jasmine for Prakash, Jase for Taylor, Jane for Bud and Kali for Half-face. She nullifies all the

obstacles bravely. Jasmine is a new woman with indomitable spirit and independence of mind. Thus, Jasmine, the hero of this novel attests to the fact that fate can indeed be outwitted and one can be author of one’s own life.

To conclude, the very desire for betterment is in a way an expatriation- a shift from a lower to a higher plane of existence. The desire for plane may be an emotional bond as in the case of Tara’s falling love with a foreigner, or a Chimora, a hankering non-existent reality as in the case of neurotic Dimple. It may also be a ‘actualization’, a flowering of ideas lying dormant in one’s psyche which happens in the life of Jasmine. Tara’s partial success or Dimple imbalance cannot nullify the ‘striving’ germane to the mapping of their careers. Success is never a guarantee in our mutable human life. Metal 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 place as chief protagonists making the male protagonists take a back seat. In brief, as mainstream American writer primarily concerned with feminist issues, Bharati Mukherjee, remains as one of the most influential writers born in India and settled in the USA. It may honestly be said that no Indian woman expatriate novelist in the foreign soil is as remarkable as Bharati Mukherjee for her vivid life experience and a genuine portrayal of it in the form of fiction.

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