

## THE CONCEPT OF 'NEW WOMAN' IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S WORKS

SHOWKAT HUSSAIN DAR, DR. NASREEN MALIK

**Abstract:** From Mary Wollstonecraft to Simone de Beauvoir, from Jane Austen to Virginia Woolf, from Kamala Markandaya to Bharati Mukherjee and from Kiran Desai to Jhumpa Lahiri, women have been demanding their rights in a phallogocentric/male-centric world. Mary Astell (1697) stressed the role of women's education in removing their inferiority and security. Centuries later, Virginia Woolf accepted Astell's opinion that education alone can expand woman's consciousness of the world and provide her better place in the society. Mary Wollstonecraft (1798) opposed restrictions on women's freedom for self-expression and self-development. Virginia Woolf (1929), Simone de Beauvoir (1959) and Kate Millet (1969) explore the woman question and in exploring it, expose the myth of male superiority. Therefore, the vary basis of feminism is reformist. It subverts male strategies of oppression. It gives a better understanding of the woman condition. In literature, the character of the traditional woman and the woman with the modern outlook has been portrayed in an entirely male—oriented culture. The traditional woman has been left with no character/personality of her own. She even extols the suffering that is subjected upon her by the wanton male while women with modern outlook venture to come out of the suppression and begin to view their independent existence. The over changing reality of life reflects itself in contemporary literature. The status of women across the world has been undergoing a swift change in recent past. In Indian English fiction, especially in the works of Kamala Markandaya, Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Desai, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Jhumpa Lahiri and others, we get a true and realistic picture of the position, behavior and personality of Indian women, settled both in India and abroad. The feminist viewpoint offers a fresh look at the anecdotes dealing with women in modern society.

**Keywords:** Women's Education, Feminism, Contemporary Literature, Indian English Fiction, Indian Women, Modern Society.

**Introduction:** Bharati Mukherjee is one of the most outstanding writers of Indian diaspora. She has penned down more than a dozen books which have earned her international recognition as a writer. In 1988, Mukherjee had a major public breakthrough that brought her into the top ranks of all writers. She was awarded the National Book Critics Circle Award for short story collections *The Middleman and Other Stories*. Mukherjee was born in a Hindu Brahmin family in Kolkata in 1940. She spent almost first two decades of her life in India with periodic visits and abroad. In 1947 (the year of Indian independence), at the age of eight she moved to England where she stayed for three and a half years. Her education took place in India, England and the USA. She graduated from the University of Kolkata in 1959 and got her M. A. (creative writing) from The University of Iowa. It was at the University of Iowa she met a Canadian-American author Clark Blaise. They both fell in love with each other and eventually got married in 1963. The famous words of Michael Ondaatje, the famous Sri Lankan-born Canadian poet and novelist, about the their relationship are noteworthy: "this remarkable pair of writers – full of talent, full of verve, fully aware of the great world around us. Even now, it is very difficult to speak of them separately." In 1972, Mukherjee became a Canadian naturalized citizen. Eventually fed up with Canada, she along with her family moved to the United States. After holding several positions at various colleges and

universities she finally settled as the professor emerita in the department of English at the University of California, Berkeley. Because of the distinctively different experiences she had throughout her life, she had been projected as a writer who has lived through several phases of life, first, as a colonial, then national subject in India, thirdly as the postcolonial in Canada and finally as a citizen of the USA . Mukherjee lived in Canada for almost fourteen years. Her first two novels *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971) and *Wife* (1975) present her experiences in Canada. She portrays her humiliating experiences in Canada as an expatriate in these works. It may be noted that Canadians treated expatriates, especially of Asian origin, as second class, substandard citizens during the 1960s and 1970s. Bharati Mukherjee has to her credit non-fictional works, collection of short stories and novels. But her major contribution is surely to the genre of fiction. *Days and Nights in Calcutta* (1977) is a non-fictional work written in collaboration with Clark Blaise. It is partly memoir and partly travelogue. They also wrote *The Sorrow and the Terror* (1987). Her *Political Culture and Leadership in India* (1991) shows her observation on Indian politics and leadership. Mukherjee's fame chiefly rests on her novels. Mukherjee's novels can be divided into phases: the first phase depicts her experiences in Canada as an expatriate and the second phase later changed into immigrant sensibility. During the first phase she was

influenced by V. S. Naipaul and followed him as her role model. Finally, she made Bernard Malamud, an American novelist and short story writer whose works mainly deal with the theme of rootlessness and social problems of the day, as her model. In her early writings, Mukherjee represents cultural encounters between India and the USA. In her later works, she focuses on multi-cultural encounters that take place in America.

Mukherjee's novels focus on the experiences and feelings of expatriates, their alienation, assimilation and struggle for identity. Mukherjee's *Wife* depicts the inner world of Dimple Dasgupta. Dimple lives in the world of fantasy aspiring that marriage would bring freedom and love but she finds neither. Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* is concerned with the female identity and rerooting of the self. Mukherjee's female character Debby Di Martino wants to seek out her roots but her efforts make her understand that she is a part of the multicultural world. As a woman novelist, Mukherjee usually focuses on female protagonists. Her female protagonists are self-assertive and dominant in her novels. She portrays their conflicts while adapting to a foreign land. Mukherjee's character Tara defends India and her culture in an alien land. She has observed both Indian life as well as American life quite closely. She has also depicted violence, rapes, murders and crimes in her novels as well as non-fictional works. All these are part and parcel of modern life and cannot be overlooked.

Mukherjee's novels and short stories present the experiences of Indian immigrants in America. She not only depicts the lives of immigrants from India but from other ethnic groups in multi-cultured American society. In fact, one of the chief characteristics which Mukherjee differentiates from other diasporic writers is that her protagonists are not only South Asian but almost all people from the continents of Asia, Africa, and North-America. Her works, particularly the novels, have made an important contribution to the multi-ethnic literature of the United States. Mukherjee is mostly concerned with migrations, dislocations and relocations. Her works are engrossed with the subject of belonging, rootlessness, alienation, and search for identity. She in her works presents the inevitable changes that migration brings. Further, Bharati Mukherjee's works have an autobiographical touch both in her fictional and non-fictional works. In the conclusion, one would like to recall the words of Sunita B. Nimavat:

Bharati Mukherjee is one of the major Indian women writers ... She focuses on the inevitable consequences of cross-cultural encounters ... She also depicts the immigrants from different ethnic groups weaving the multi-textured American society ... She ... is concerned with female identity and rerooting of the

self ... The problems and issues that she deals with in her works are the problems and issues of multi-cultural, multi-ethnic countries like the USA and just the problems and issues of Indian diaspora. (pp. 1-5)

Bharati Mukherjee's artistic skills lie in the projection of the feminine sensibility. Her women characters are precisely adventurous, candid and influential. They are no longer attached to traditions and customs.

They are ready to endeavor innovative ideas and new way of life. She has portrayed women characters artistically. Her characters are born rebels. They face violence, terror and hardships/sufferings courageously. They do not believe in taboos and superstitions. They mostly refuse to adhere to social customs and traditions. Whether her characters are in America or in India, they take their own decisions which reflect their mind and emboldened spirit. They believe in action and not merely contemplation. They do not blame others for their faults and sufferings. They do not even complaint about them. They give up their past and move ahead. Moreover, they face trials and tribulations of life yet they take them as a part of their struggle for survival. Jasmine, Dimple Dasgupta, Tara and others can be called new women or empowered female characters for they possess all the mentioned characteristics. They are the symbols of rebellious nature and adventurous spirit. This is clearly reflected in the following lines:

Bharathi Mukherjee's heroines are intrepid and firm. They have the strong potential for compliance; they live in the dense land of actuality and accept the sour truth of their lives ... The significant feature of her women characters is that they have the strength of their own and in spite of confronting and warfare, they remain uncrushed. (A Rajalakshmi and Dr. K.M.Sumathi, 2014)

In Bharati Mukherjee's fictional and non-fictional works, most of the women characters are born and brought up initially in India. They usually come from upper middle class background. These characters are women who embark on adventurous journey abroad. They face many obstacles and trials but they are not sufferers. These female characters are not fatalists. They believe in action and taking decisions. They believe that human beings are destined to make choices. The choice may be right or wrong. They often suffer but do not blame fate nor do they regret for the past actions and decisions. Thus, these characters are an epitome of modern, adventurous, new women for they fight against feudalism/patriarchy and orthodox customs. They treat themselves equal to men in all respects. These characters never consider that women are inferior to men in any respect. They practice what they stand for because they are self-assertive and firm in their ideology. Another important feature which differentiates Bharati Mukherjee's female characters

from other writers, especially women novelists, is they are independent-minded and hardly rely on their menfolk. They are highly adaptive and their ability to adapt to circumstance makes them successful in all situations.

Women have been suffering since centuries in a male-centric Indian society. They are vulnerable to traditions, customs and gender discrimination. They are sexually vulnerable and from time to time face sexual exploitation. In a traditional society like India, women have to face gender discrimination since their childhood days. The lives of Indian women more often are restrictive and constrained. They have a very limited freedom in the affairs of marriage, education, employment, sex, social equality and so on. Mukherjee's *Jyoti*, (another name of Jasmine) in *Jasmine* is a rebel and vehemently opposes the outdated conventions. She raises her voice against dowry system, forced marriages and customs related to widowhood. Her grandmother Dida (represents traditional Indian life) does not approve women's education and grumbles against *Jyoti*'s going to school. Dida asserts that women's duty lay in the kitchen and within the confines of a home and not outside. *Jyoti* refuses to abide by her grandmother's ideas. She rather disdains a society/home where women have no freedom to decide anything related to their own future. She hates and boldly protests against the prophecy of an old astrologer. In India astrologers are highly respected. Hindus have a deep faith in the discipline of astrology. The main functions of an astrologer is to predict an important event in a person's life; assess marriage compatibility between prospective partners, s/he states auspicious/inauspicious times in one's life and so on. Being an assertive woman, a woman who is capable of turning traditional values topsy-turvy, *Jyoti* refuses to believe in the prophecy of an astrologer when says: "I know what I don't want to become" (Mukherjee 1989: 5). This statement of *Jyoti* symbolizes a new woman with rebellious nature and adventurous spirit. The following lines, in this regard, are important:

Bharati Mukherjee depicts a modern woman as a girl who rebels, revolts against all odds ... *Jyoti* .. is predicted of widowhood and exile by an astrologer when she is only seven years old. The beauty is that she is not dismayed down by fate. Instead she always tries to raise herself above blind beliefs and superstition. Her attitude is in contrary to the ancient women's lifestyle. (Mrs. P. Rajeswari and Dr. S. Rajarajan, 2014)

In Mukherjee's *The Tigers Daughter* (1971) Tara Cartwright is the protagonist who breaks all social taboos and marries a foreigner. She accepts her foreignness among her own people and the country. The novel is thus a journey of Tara from expatriate's sense of alienation to acceptance of the foreign land

as her own homeland. *Wife* is a second novel by Bharati Mukherjee that deals with the same theme, that is, expatriate's life in a foreign land. The protagonist of the novel is Dimple Dasgupta, an ambitious young woman who has an intense desire to go abroad and live a luxurious life. After her examinations, she marries a neuro-surgeon and goes to the USA with her husband. She comes from middle class background and dreams of luxury, fashion and fantasy. She tries to Americanize herself by drinking beer and attending parties. She watches TV shows showing rapes, murders, sex and violence. This symbolizes the empowerment and individual self which millions (women) across the world yearn for. In this regard the words of A Rajalakshmi and Dr. K.M.Sumathi, are noteworthy:

Through the character of Dimple, in the novel, *Wife*, Mukherjee has thus expressed the ambivalent attitude of contemporary educated women in India who can neither reconcile themselves to a new situation when their husbands ignore them and crush their ambition in life nor cast off their husbands simply because the husband is like a sheltering tree they cannot afford to live without. In a way, Dimple is a representative figure of the modern woman who resents her husband's callousness. The character of Dimple represents the modern woman ambivalent and becomes the victim of circumstances. By implications, attitude the character of Dimple represents the modern women's ambivalence to married life.

In Mukherjee's novel *Desirable Daughter* (2002) Tara rejects traditional life of India while she is in the USA. She divorces her rich husband after ten years because she feels that her marriage does not give her the true status of an American wife. She moves to San Francisco with her twelve year old son. She starts working as she has already abandoned the comforts of a wealthy man's wife. Tara wants to find her identity in the USA without obliterating her former identity (Indianness). She tries to combine her Indian past and the present of American life, it is no doubt a hard task but she faces it with equilibrium and poise. Diasporic literature is chiefly occupied with the individual's or community's attachment to homeland and also a longing for belonging to the host country. The diasporas are generally categorized as traditionalists and assimilationists. The former preserves separate identity while the latter consolidates with the host country. Bharati Mukherjee's works explores both themes but her characters can be grouped as assimilationists. Her works reflect this experience very evidently. Her subject of expatriation involves the voyage from unhousing to rehousing, uprooting to rerooting and merging with a new type of culture and creating a new set of global society. Mukherjee is one of those

diasporic writers who do not rely only on the theme of displacement and rootlessness but focuses on the need to assimilate with the environment of recipient country. She presents the fact that in a multiethnic and multicultural society like that of the USA assimilation and acculturation are the key to solution of the problems of expatriation. Her works has a thematic pattern of change from the old to the new, from tradition to liberalism. For instance, Jasmine is the narrative of transformation, accommodation and freedom of women. Mukherjee as a diasporic writer highlights that in a diversified society/multicultural nation, assimilation, acculturation and accommodation are important. The diasporic consciousness is reflected in almost all the major works of Bharati Mukherjee. In fact, she felt that is the duty of a writer to present and depict the reality of his/her times and this she does in her novels.

**Conclusion:** Though Mukherjee never liked to be called a feminist writer yet she stands for women's rights to equality, freedom and independent identity. She explores female psyche in search of identity.

Mukherjee's female characters reflect her own experience in Canada and America. Her diasporic experiences are vividly portrayed through the characters of Tara, Dimple and others. They are always in search of their identity. They experience the sense of alienation and rootlessness. Finally, one would like to add that Mukherjee's female characters are global and universal. They stand for love, tolerance and compassion for one and all. They are not weak and vulnerable. In fact, they can bring peace, love and understanding in our lives. Bharati Mukherjee's 'new woman' is essentially a woman who protests and fights against general, accepted norms and currents. She is prepared to face the consequences of her choices. Though, she is meek, diffident and quiet in the face of exploitation, yet highly sensitive and efficient and desperate to find an outlet to her pangs. In the conclusion, I would like to state Bharati Mukherjee's 'new woman' is not the one who surrenders but the one who takes a new road where no one can dictate to her.

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Showkat Hussain Dar  
PhD Scholar, Department of English, Mewar University, Rajasthan, India  
Dr. Nasreen Malik  
Professor English, J&K Higher Education Department, Jammu & Kashmir, India