



The Dissent Between Tradition And Modernity In Bharati Mukherjee's Select Works

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Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee one of the most widely read contemporary and commercially successful novelists of Indian Writing in English has published eight novels, which break the traditional conventions, customs and religion. Her novels represent the contemporary modern women's struggle to define and attain an autonomous selfhood. Her female protagonists are at great pains to free themselves from stultifying, traditional constraints. She presents her own experience that she faced as an immigrant. Accordingly, her women protagonists are caught between traditional values as well as hypocrisy and the free thinking and unbridled sexual freedom inspired by modernity. Hence they are neither the specimen of woman fighters for dignity and liberty nor the bruised and battered women of oppressive patriarchal structures. Mukherjee's novels represent the contemporary modern women's struggle to define and attain an autonomous selfhood. Her female protagonists are at great pains to free themselves from stultifying, traditional constraints. The social and cultural change in the post- Independence India has made women conscious of the need to define themselves, their place in society, and their surroundings. The present paper seeks to provide a modest study on Tradition and modernity of the novels of Bharathi Mukherjee, the most popular Indian Woman writer in English.

Keywords: contemporary, constraints, hypocrisy, patriarchal.

Introduction

Woman as fragmented, with the duality of self, who struggles hard to fight for her rights and assert her individuality; yet has to live as a wife subservient to her husband, as a daughter obedient to her father, or as a mother with infinite amount of self-sacrifice for her children. This entanglement of women in the mesh of tradition and modernity, between hegemonic values and contemporary women's transforming consciousness as a marginalized class, finds a ubiquitous place in the portraiture of women in the women's fictional works.

Absurdity of two Cultures

Bharati Mukherjee's first novel *The Tiger's Daughter* (1972) is a fine manifestation of cultural variance and presents before a milieu in which traditional gender roles are very much intact. The protagonist's awareness of the two cultures intensifies her concern for her own identity. She is in search of her true image, torn between the traditional values she has absorbed from childhood and the new values her education has bestowed upon her. Mukherjee brings out the contrast and absurdity of two cultures and says that the two are complementary



to each other. Tara, the heroine of *The Tiger's daughter* provides yet another facet of womanhood.

Tara's self-analysis brings about an unhappy conclusion. For years, she has dreamt of return to India. She believes that her heart will be filled with content if she could just return home to Calcutta. But it has only reopened fresh wounds. The cult of violence gaining ground in public life in Calcutta and the American culture she is introduced to by her husband David make her new to both situations. Later she prefers David and thereby America. She finds no real pleasure in calling on relatives, attending get-together parties. Her analysis of its genesis makes her realize the spirit of forgiveness and the sense of alienation.

Mukherjee's *Wife* (1975) centers round the life of Dimple, twenty years old, timid, middle-class Bengali girl who is eagerly waiting to be married. The novel is a celebration of the strength of a woman, not her weakness and it deals with the hardships of an Indian housewife who maintains a long silence in her life. Dimple fails to tread the path or play the societal roles traditionally assigned to an Indian woman. She is a symbol of a typical, submissive Indian housewife who patiently bears all the troubles afflicted on her by the male dominated society. He is insensitive towards her physical and emotional needs and thus there is considerable discrepancy in their attitudes. Amit expects his wife to adhere to the traditional customs of Indian society and be traditional, submissive, tolerant and compromising. The novel *Wife* presents the contrast between tradition and modernity, between rural

and urban way of living and thinking. She is caught between the traditional and modern cultures. It seems that Mukherjee is here espousing a better treatment for the meek and submissive Indian house wife. The tragic end of Dimple's married life with Amit is seen in her act of killing her husband and afterwards killing her own self by committing suicide.

Tradition and Modernity

The traditional culture of Jasmine's village, its simplicity, its slow and calm beauty and innate human values is destroyed by the instruction of modernity. The nectar of life of the rural spread is drained and the staleness and stink of the affluent from that emblem of modernity, the tannery, stay to corrupt and condemn. This tension between tradition and modernity pervades the entire novel, and though this conflict remains unresolved, there is a silent acceptance of change. People have to acquiesce in to modernity. The idyllic rural ambience is rudely ruptured, familial loyalties strained, if not totally shattered and migration to the urban wilderness begins. The pulls and pressures of life impact on the easy tenor of life and result in the conflict between tradition and modernity.

The Holder of the World unravels the quest of Hannah for sexual awakening, fulfillment, liberation and self-actualization. She has trained herself to suppress her passions. Gabriel's announcement that he is joining the Marquis as a pirate is a promise of more freedom and gives her a physical and mental relief from her sexual tormentor. The infidel relationship between Cephus Prynne and Gabriel makes Hannah long for emancipation. Though she does not



rebel against Gabriel, she waits patiently for a relief from the humiliation that she undergoes. Hannah's transformation occurs in the sudden appearance of Raja Jadav Singh, a disguised holy man, in the enemy territory of the Emperor of Aurangzeb. Mukherjee captures the political power struggle between the Hindus and Muslims in colonial India. Hannah finds herself in the Panpur place of Raja Jadav after the cyclone in the Coromandel Coast.

The novelist weaves a tale of sublime and passionate love between Raja Jadav and Hannah amidst the power struggle with Aurangzeb. The love and care from Raja makes her feel proud and get ready to sacrifice anything for their love. Hannah undergoes a transformation of her own. As Mukherjee did in her previous novel, *Jasmine*, she tries to cram too many story lines, too many minor characters into Hannah's tale. Like *Jasmine*, Hannah the puritan girl from Massachusetts, starts her journey around the globe, travels through three continents, straddles cultures transforms her and assimilates to the situation. She becomes the Indian Hindu woman and makes love to Raja Jadav Singh and she ends up as Mukta, a pearl in the court of Aurangzeb. She faces racial distinctions, religious barriers, cultural differences and linguistic hurdles. Hannah though her murder of Morad Farah, goes in line with *Jasmine* following violence as a concept of transformation. Hannah stabs Morad Farah, the ruthless commander who has been sent to capture Raja Jadav Singh. She confronts Morad Farah, who is mounted on a battle elephant. Hannah stabs him in the struggle that follows, and the elephant stabs him to death.

In the next novel *Leave It to Me* through Debbie's portrait, Mukherjee complicates the strong traditional view, that the core of an individual being, his/her primordial nature, is constituted by biologically inherited ethnicity. The title *Leave it to Me* holds a significant role in portraying the shift of the sensations in Mukherjee's mind to Debby's mind. She suggests that national and cultural identity is also a matter of nurture, rather than solely nature. Frankie creates a strong fascination for Asia in Debby's mind. He manages to change Debby's perspective of America. He plays a vital role in Debby's life, as he is the prime mover and initiator behind Debby's search for roots. His betrayal shifts the love to the quest for her bio-parents. They leave her in the desert of Rajasthan, India. Her childhood life gets registered in her young mind and this experience of accepting a neglected parentage, provides her the intellect to rebel against the barriers. The transformation is held when Debby picks up the name Devi from a vanity car plate and christens herself Devi Dee as the incarnation of the Goddess Kali. Mukherjee captures the moment of justification in the final scene of confrontation when Devi Dee assumes herself as the Goddess and kills Romeo Hawk, her bio-father who is the cause for all her sorrows. Having accomplished her mission, Devi Dee consummates her mission on earth. She finally gets her victory of to be in concrete. Debby prefers violence to revenge her bio-parents for abandoning her mercilessly.

The title of the novel *Desirable Daughters* is significant and ironical. It suggests that daughters are the object of family prestige, so their behavior should



be desirable, that is to say, in tune with the norms laid by the society and not deviant. The three daughters of Bhattacharjee family namely Padma, Parvati and Tara are desirable in their girlhood in the sense that they stay confined within four walls for the sake of family status and respect.

The novel *The Tree Bride* is a celebration of the strength of a woman as it traces the transformation of Tara Lata from a docile Bengali Brahmin child into an impassioned organizer of resistance against the British Raj. It depicts the exploration of the life of Tara Lata Gangooly, an East Bengali ancestor who according to legend married a tree at the age of five after the tragic death of her bridegroom. Later on Tara become involved with the Indian freedom movement. Tara Lata, the tree bride also shows triumph and victory over the hurdles in her life. *The Tree Bride*, a sequence to *Desirable Daughters* has prologue and epilogue. The prologue creates the aura of awe, about lives before and after birth. It exhibits the beliefs in incarnations and the angst of the soul waiting to re-inhabit another body, living. The epilogue also celebrates the rituals of the Hindus to conduct the deeds after cremation. Tara chaterjee, the protagonist in *Desirable Daughters* and one of the two women in *The Tree Bride* performs her responsibility and discharges her duties by recuing her husband and son in the bomb blast and by fulfilling the wish of her great grand aunt. *The Tree Bride* starts with the reminder of *Desirable Daughters*. The bombing of Tara's house in San Francisco and the consequent results of it are the interesting episodes in the novel. Just before the bomb blast Tara

and Bish reunite resulting in Tara's pregnancy. The bomb blast and the injury in Bish's leg become the reasons for the family's shift to India. And this makes Tara know more and more about her great-great Aunt Tara ma and realize the true spirit of freedom in her.

In *Miss New India*, the protagonist is projected to shuffle between tradition and modern world. Not only as an epiphenomenon of modern life but also as an interpretation of idealistic woman, the novel tries to spotlight the remarkable situation of India. Confidant and determined Anjali Bose are prepared to undergo the process of racial change. Suffering from a public shame due to Sonali's divorce, Anjali's father initiates her groom hunt. This makes Anjali move from Gauripur. She considers marriage as a lifetime imprisonment that controls her and limits her beyond imagination. Anjali wonders at Minnie Bagehot's effective administration. Minnie has moved into Maxie Bagehot's House as a young widow and Maxie a widower. Anjali's inspiration from Minnie makes her feel Minnie as a role model for her achievements in life. Though eighty-two, she is very alert, talented and she knows all tactics in life. "She knew how things were done and more important, how to get things done" (MNI 121). Anjali idealizes Minnie and tries to imitate her in great things in life having control over men. As a girl from village background Anjali gains knowledge of modernism through her stay in Bagehot's house.

The Mythical Consciousness

Anjali succeeds in her mission to become an empowered woman. She initially motivated by Minnie, gets



fascinated by Usha Desai's way of dressing and marvels at her ability to get on with all her duties. Anjali compares herself with the women she meets. Anjali finds herself Westernized by the companions in Bangalore. She fails to identify the strangeness in Husseina. But later Anjali guesses her link with terrorists. The throng of pedestrians loots everything in the Bagehot house and Anjali Bose is hand cuffed by police women. The ignorance of Anjali in certain matters has been the reason for such situations. If she has watched a TV or listened to a radio, she would have learnt about the conspiracy of the London-based husband of a Hyderabad-born Bangalore resident, Husseina. As a result, the Hindu nationalists and other rioters ransack the Bagehot house and unfortunately, the vulnerable owner, Minnie has died in the encounter.

Anjali is unaware of all these happenings. In the station, she is tortured. She has brought ruins to herself by being ignorant even of the important matters like that of Husseina's friendship. GG rescues her with some satisfactory explanations to the detective. Anjali remembers her parents' advice that there are conspiracies and corruption everywhere. The women in *Desirable Daughters* are seen caught in the flux of tradition and modernity. Neither can they completely detach themselves from their past, nor do they have any certitude in the future. The women are encompassing confrontation for equal opportunity and right of self-determination. Jasmine, Hannah and Debby get the notion of assimilation through the Goddess incarnation. The transformation has made them stronger, quicker, sharper and pleasant. The

protagonists of the earlier novel, *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Wife* have shown signs of devotion but they miss the way from their traditional and emotional bonding with the mythical consciousness. They suffer from coherent vision out of the chaos of their multiple predicaments. The women in *Jasmine, the Holder of the World* and *Leave it to Me* show remarkable success in forging these conflicting visions. Mukherjee insists that calling woman the weaker sex is a libel. It is man's injustice to woman. If by strength is meant brute strength, then, indeed, is woman less brute than man. If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man's superior. She has to be the complement of man. The woman who knows and fulfils her duty realizes her dignified status. Change is a necessary part of life. Without change, there would be no life at all. The lives of the heroines in *Jasmine, The Holder of the World* and *The Tree Bride* are fuelled by change, though the three protagonists exhibit a certain amount of strength. They learn to accept change as a helpful friend rather than something to be avoided, and as a result experience less stress.

Conclusion

Thus the fictional world of Mukherjee is thematically extensive as her distress is societal, fiscal, cultural and sometimes historical. Rural life, paucity, hunger, fear, despairs and deaths are her recurrent themes. Her themes and concerns are typical. There is yet another theme- tension between tradition and modernity. Tannery is the symbol of modernity and the protagonist's traditional village is on the other side. She



is also aware of the double pulls that the Indian woman is subject to; between tradition and modernity, between Indian and Western ways of living and values, between her decorum as a human being and her responsibility as a daughter, wife and mother between marrying for love her desire for autonomy and her need for nurturance.

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