

‘Voice of the Voiceless’ in Bharati Mukherjee’s *The Tiger’s Daughter and Wife*.

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Abstract

This paper attempts to project a woman’s place in the modern Indian society with a focus on different roles as an obedient daughter, a devoted wife and a loving mother picturized by Bharati Mukherjee in her fiction and also shows how the various predicaments experienced by the women, their culture shock and their struggle to cope up with the hostile circumstances which spring up from the author’s her own experiences as an expatriate in Canada, making them appear to be fighters, adventures, confident persons with a central status in her fictional world.

Keywords: expatriate, culture shock, disharmonious marriage, nostalgia, alienation, depression.

In the patriarchal society, the place of a woman, her role, and her identity have been a core issue. This patriarchal society expects a woman to play the role of an obedient daughter, a devoted wife and a living mother. A woman does not always have an identity of her own and a purpose for living. The ultimate goal of different feminist groups has been to liberate women from male domination and to elevate women’s position. Radical feminists have raised their voice against male

oppression for treating women as slaves because of their biological function. In this circumstance, a woman's status is largely dependent on the biological fact that she has to bear a child and has to take care of him or her. This becomes her responsibility throughout her life. Thus, a woman's sphere is 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)

The worst part of the patriarchal society is that a female child's life is designed by her parents and the society. As a child, she was strictly under her parents' control and supervision. She has to grow as an object according to the parents' wish and to be prepared to be sold in the marriage market. According to this society, the only ambition of a girl is to get married, and she has to be always someone's daughter or someone's wife or someone's mother and she never has any identity of her own. Undoubtedly, our human civilization is made up of women, and they have to play an integral part in it. Unfortunately, man has treated her as a pleasure object and a beast of burden. Everywhere on the earth, man has been the master of everything and it is glorified even in *the Bible* and man's authority and superiority over others is found in the following statement:

“Adam is portrayed as the master who gives manes to all beasts and also his wife whom he calls Eve”.(p.148)

St. Pauls also gives a secondary position to women:

“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 started raising their voice against inequality and oppression, and female consciousness against male domination in all spheres of life. For foregrounding the feminine values and issues, the feminist movement and literature play a vital role. In Feminist Literature, the central focus is on the experiences of women in this dominated society. Hence, the women writers started writing about their own literature to provide a central concern to women in all ways, thematically, structurally, and stylistically. Women writers like Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, Dorothy Richardson, George Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Margaret Drabble, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai have voiced some of the important female issues in their works. A woman in Indian society has to possess a chaste, virtuous, submissive, homely, graceful, obedient, and devoted attitude to her family, as she is considered to be:

“An embodiment of sacrifices, silent sufferings humility, faith and knowledge”

(Everett,76)

Bharati Mukherjee too follows the principles of those women writers so as to project feminine issues and problems in her writings.

Bharati Mukherjee is recognized worldwide as an expatriate writer par excellence. As a writer, she has the special quality that she resists classification as an Indian English writer, Indian woman writer, feminist writer, expatriate writer, immigrant writer, because she develops herself in a way that all these are at once. She is an Indian by birth and also brought up in a traditional Indian family, so she is an Indian writer. Her writings always lay focus on women’s oppression and their struggle to overcome to achieve individualism, so she is also a neo-feminist writer. Even though she has been an American and a mainstream American writer, her writings are infused with an Indian sensibility to the fullest. Her words 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 on life”. (p.651)

Bharati Mukherjee is very different from other writers in handling the theme of expatriation from a novel perspective and in her treatment of expatriate women characters in a new way she shows her excellence and speciality as an expatriate writer. She used ‘Forgiveness’ as a tool to liberate the inhabitants and mental blocks, reducing the liberty of the women characters in her novels. In Bharati Mukherjee’s fiction, women not only come out of the home but also show their courage to overcome cross-national and racial barriers.

Bharati Mukherjee is a writer interested in the expatriate who is not in a position to expect help financially or moral support from anyone and she is not interested in the backend theme of a woman being a victim of hostile social forces. In the context of expatriation to another country, Survival implies both courage and self-sufficiency. Bharati Mukherjee shows the capacity of women to overcome the challenges of unfair treatment in an alien culture. Her female characters have a heroic nature by all means. The protagonists of her novels, like Jasmine, deserve to be called ‘heroes’ in feminine form. Their numerous difficulties in an alien land, their cultural shock, and their struggle to cope with the alien circumstances come out of her own bitter experiences as an expatriate in Canada. Her expatriates are fighters, adventurers, confident people occupying the central status in her novels rather than the stereotypes struggling for homes and failing to find one. All the women characters are emotional, unlike Anita Desai’s characters, who indulge in the art of insulting themselves to the rest of the world. Bharati Mukherjee’s women are true to themselves. Her attention is 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).

Bharati Mukherjee, as a novelist, shows her maiden venture in the novel *The Tiger's Daughter*. The novel portrays a Bengali Brahmin girl named Tara who came to America for studies. Tara is suddenly uprooted from her protective world of affluence in India, but she soon adapts to the new country. There she takes a crucial decision in her life. Tara falls in love with an American, David and decides to marry him. 'Nostalgia' plays a vital role in her life and makes her to visit India after seven years. There she realizes that she is not exclusive to any one in the world and returns to America. Tara's confrontation between illusion and reality is clearly depicted and documented by Bharati Mukherjee. A newspaper reporter Sobha Shinde, puts it:

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

Tara's visit to India brings out the trauma and some events are interlinked to bring it out. The narration is omniscient and the protagonist goes on without any interference. For fifteen years, Tara had lived in India and those fifteen years were a cocooned one. In India, her world is very small, restricted to her parents, her affluent circle of friends and the nun at St. Blaise. She is unknown about the real India or Calcutta with its strife, poverty and the unrest. To her, the Bengali Tiger, her father, is a hero who is capable of facing any situation and he is like an immense banyan tree to guide her, to think for her and to decide for her. He decides to send her to Vassar for studies and ignoring his wife's anxiety about Tara's marriage. The narrator's comment is quoted here:

“Changes in 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 is under the control of her parents and never leaves them. She has been beyond Shambazar and feels completely at bay. All of a sudden, Tara is uprooted from her homeland and thrown into an alien land to survive. Unlike any other girls who would have rushed to India at the end of the first week but she stays there for survival in that alien land. Bharati Mukherjee's women characters possess this quality of courage to face any situation, yet appear meek and submissive. They never feel desolate or accept a defect till the end. Tara's transformation from an over-dependent daughter to an independent woman can be shown by Tara's rapidly growing confidence and decisions in life. Though she knows well about how conservative her parents are, her falling in love with an American man, David, and the decision to marry him show her act of individuality. This decision of Tara is considered to be the first major act of heroism. Like a plant growing towards light, she is also prepared to step out of the protective circumstance and strive for her own happiness by herself.

After her marriage, she started facing the real world of New York. As an expatriate, she has to face a lot of cultural shock in the new place. Towards expatriates, the American Society shows great discrimination, and more particularly towards women. This discrimination has depressed her a lot. The violence of New York shocked her and made her think that her real happiness would be in India. Tara's overprotective life in India prevented her from the understanding her own India and its traditions. This is a big weakness for her. Her writer husband asks naïve questions about India and she is unable to answer those questions about India. This insufficiency is the main reason for her depression and this causes her to decide to visit India.

By the end of the novel, she faces a lot of perplexity, bitter experiences and alienation. The problem with Tara is that she neither belongs here nor there. All the difficulties in her transition can be shown in various elements that happen during her short stay in India. When she steps on Indian soil, she finds difficulty, and her visit to India is a total disappointment. Tara's 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 and she sees this as a symbolic representation that he has not understood India through her. ‘Congenitally suspicious’(p.50), she thinks that he has not understood her either. She feels pain because her husband no longer loves her and her mother no longer treats her as a Brahmin. She feels hurt and feels like she should go away. Then the day moves on, her husband begins to appear like “a foreigner with an accent on television.”(p.63) The Calcutta of her dream 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)

Like New York, now India also begins to appear like a frightful nightmare and she feels India is not the safest place to live in. Tara decided not to stay any longer in India and would go back to her husband without any regrets. Tara's sudden decision to move back to America is generally criticized as symptomatic of her inability to grasp reality in India or America. Though Tara is not a total failure, she is suddenly uprooted from her homeland, but she does not collapse out of shock

and struggles to re-root herself. Her struggle to adapt to the alien land is shown in her transformation. Her transformation from nostalgia, homesickness, and bafflement at the multiplicity of cultures to the realization of the culture and the acceptance of the effect of the immigrants in the alien land. This attitude of acceptance gives strength to her life. Tara's destiny shows that the core of identity does not depend on nationality or is not determined by geographical changes, but on the personality and on knowing oneself. As Prof. Padma has put it, "But way of Tara, Bharati subtly highlights Tara's marginal belonging in all worlds"(p.143)

Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife* is the second novel published in the year 1875. Her second novel is about a slightly neurotic and depressed young woman named Dimple, who is married to a mechanical engineer, Amit Basu, but her strange desire is to marry a neurosurgeon. Dimple is highly disappointed in his company and his life with him. She has imagined him to be an ideal husband and an affluent life, but nothing has happened the way in which she imagined. This leads to neurosis, which is shown in her behavior and actions. A few months after the marriage, the newly married couple immigrated to the United States. There in the U.S., she feels alienated and the difference of her husband caused her depression. Then the gossip about rapes, mugging, murders and above all the media (which always depicts violence more exotically) all these worsen her neurotic tendency and she stabs her husband with a kitchen knife. Some of the critics analysed this novel sympathetically in terms of culture-shock, female oppression, violence-ridden and media-dominated society, sadomasochism, etc., but some of the critics severely accused Bharati Mukherjee of casting blame on the glorious traditions of the Indian womanhood. She feels that it is equivalent "to subverting the framework of an entire culture"(*Wife*, 65)

This novel, *Wife*, is an account of Bharati Mukherjee's psychological insights into the disintegrating personality of an unfortunate victim of neurotic nature. The evidence of 'neurosis'

is shown in the portrayal of Dimple's hallucinations, erotic fantasies, her talking aloud to herself and her occasional sadism. Even though she is disappointed with her husband and the flat she lives in, but she accepts and obeys whatever he says and looks loyal to her husband from the very first day. She wears bright colored sarees to please her husband and she serves her mother-in-law in spite of her nagging. One day, Amit expresses his disappointment that he wants to marry a tall girl who can speak English fluently. She takes it seriously and positively and tries on 'Basic conversational English' and starts spending hours on reading magazines in English. When she reads the stories about women with broken marriages and torture by husbands, she feels that they have happy endings. Amit is responsible for her neurosis recurring because he is too mechanical and unromantic. He does not even consider and understand her feelings, emotions, and desires. This indifference, the monotony of her routine, and loneliness make her sink back into despair and depression again and also some other features of neurosis. In her subconscious mind, the seed of hatred and revenge is waiting to germinate at the correct time. While she is in such chaos, she discovers that she is pregnant. Pregnancy is a matter of pride for a traditional Indian woman but it is not so for Dimple.

When she learns that her husband's immigration is granted, surprisingly, her depression disappears. For a few days, she is perfectly sane, and these short-lived bouts of sanity are characteristic of Dimple is shown in her sudden recovery from her illness when her marriage is fixed. Dimple's married life is like an oscillation; she feels excitement for a moment, then she slides back to depression. The novelist's intention seems to give an account of Dimple's behavior and to show that a woman of Dimple's mental state is prone to intense violence, regardless of where she is, whether she is in India or in America. Amit's behavior of anger, frustration and his indifference towards Dimple, slowly sinks her back into her own neurotic world. Even Amit's

gestures start irritating Dimple. This resulted in the act of revenge for her affair with Milt Glasser and this is her mounting resentment against Amit. Even her fantasy that he would try to fill her life with the magic of adventure, everything ends in greater misery. “After he left..., she would cushion her hand in her arms and wept”(Wife,201). She feels crushed when she finds nobody is giving her any consolation. As her psychotic spells become more frequent and more intense than before, she starts to experience death as close, first in dreams, then in wakefulness. She starts to wonder whether she is really dead or alive. Even her behavior of killing Amit occurs in a dream. “It is final explosive release of the pent-up tension,” says rightly Rajeswar (p.71). Thus, Dimple falls prey to psychotic depression increased by culture shock.

To conclude, in the present world, ‘neurosis’ is almost a common thing for some, inborn and for others it is promoted by circumstance, and in others given the tensions and frustrations of modern lifestyle. As a writer, Bharati Mukherjee’s integrity lies in the convincing portrayal of her chosen subject, good or bad, beautiful or ugly. Her literary ventures are always successful, “be they forays into realism, flights of fancy or incisive insights into human motivations” (p.146) the partial success of Tara or the imbalance of Dimple cannot nullify the “striving” germane to the mapping of their careers. Success is never a guarantee in our changeable human life. Mental courage is revealed in the willingness to venture and in this sense, Bharati Mukherjee’s heroines deserve to be called heroes, by asserting their place as chief protagonists and making the male protagonists take a back seat.

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