

AMOGHVARTA

ISSN : 2583-3189



The Portrayal of Women's Sentiments in the Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



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Abstract

Women have an important place in the fiction of Bharati Mukherjee. Her female characters often face problems related to family, marriage, love, migration and identity. They have to adjust themselves to new places and new cultures, especially when they move from India to foreign countries. Through their experiences, Mukherjee presents their feelings of loneliness, fear, hope, pain and desire for freedom. The women in her novels and short stories are not always weak or helpless. Many of them face difficult situations with courage and try to make their own decisions. Their emotional journey shows the struggle between traditional values and modern life. They also search for a clear sense of self in an unfamiliar world. This paper studies how Bharati Mukherjee presents the inner feelings and changing experiences of women in her fiction. It also shows how her female characters struggle to find freedom, dignity and a meaningful identity. The study highlights Mukherjee's sensitive portrayal of women and their emotional strength in different social and cultural situations.

Key Words

Bharati Mukherjee, Women, Emotional Struggle, Freedom, Sentiments, Migration.

Introduction

Bharati Mukherjee is one of the well-known writers of Indian origin who made an important contribution to Indian English literature and immigrant writing. She was born in India but later lived and worked in different countries. Her life as a migrant deeply influenced her writings. In her novels and short stories, she presents the experiences of people who move from one country to another and face new social and cultural situations. Among the important subjects in her fiction, the experiences and feelings of women occupy a central place. The women characters created by Bharati Mukherjee come from different social and cultural backgrounds. They experience love, marriage, family relations, loneliness, fear, pain and hope. Many of them leave their familiar surroundings and enter a new world where they have to face many difficulties. Migration brings new opportunities but it also creates emotional problems. The women often feel separated from their past, family and native culture. At the same time, they try to adjust themselves to the customs and values of a new society.

Mukherjee presents the inner world of women in a simple but powerful manner. Her female characters are not presented only as silent sufferers. They think, question and struggle for their own identity. They may face domination, discrimination and emotional insecurity but many of them try to overcome these difficulties. Their lives show a movement from dependence to self-awareness. Through their personal experiences, Mukherjee presents the changing position of women in modern society. The conflict between tradition and modernity is also

important in the portrayal of women in her fiction. Many female characters are influenced by traditional Indian values but their lives change after coming into contact with Western society. As a result, they often experience a conflict between their past and present. They have to decide how much of their old identity they want to preserve and how much they want to change. This struggle creates many emotions such as confusion, guilt, loneliness, courage and hope.

Another important aspect of Bharati Mukherjee's fiction is the search for identity. Her female characters often live between two cultures and do not always feel completely accepted by either of them. This situation affects their thoughts and emotions. Their search for identity becomes a major part of their personal journey. They try to create a new life while carrying the memories of their past. The present study focuses on the portrayal of women's sentiments in the fiction of Bharati Mukherjee. It examines how she presents the emotional struggles, hopes, fears and desires of women in different situations. The study also tries to understand the role of migration, culture and social change in shaping their lives. Through her female characters, Mukherjee presents the strength and complexity of female experience and shows how women continue their search for freedom, dignity and self-identity in a changing world.

Bharati Mukherjee's novel, *Wife* is a remarkable work of art in which the author makes use of an Indian immigrant's wife to depict the cultural dislocation and loss of identity of Indian immigrant women in a foreign country. The wife in this novel undergoes the physical, social and psychological isolation and alienation in an immigrant country. Dimple Dasgupta, a middle-class girl from Calcutta was married to Amit Kumar Basu, a consultant Engineer who had been waiting for immigration clearance to Canada or to the U.S. After getting immigrant visa Dimple and Amit went to New York where Amit began to search for a job. They stayed in Meena and Jyoti Sen's small middle-class apartment. After getting a job Dimple and Amit moved to a Bengali Professor Pradosh Mookerji's apartment in New York University campus who had sub-let a part of his quarters to them. Without a degree, without guidance she had no intimate friends in New York. Being a typical patriarch Amit could not observe Dimple's lacerated self and her eventual disintegration. This paper aims at portraying the conflict self of Dimple Dasgupta. Dimple Dasgupta, a twenty-year-old girl and protagonist of the novel had been waiting to be married off to a prospective groom by her parents. She wanted to be married to a Neuro surgeon. She thought,

"Marriage would bring her freedom, cocktail parties on carpeted lawns, fund-raising dinners for noble charities. Marriage would bring her love." (*Wife*, 3).

Dimple's frantic efforts to look attractive reflected the social construct that a bride should be wealthy, intelligent and beautiful. Marriage as a specific area had many deep underlying rules conditioning women. The deeply wounded psyche of Dimple was further taunted by Amit's wish to marry a convent-educated one with fluent English. She read magazines in English to improve her vocabulary. Her choice of letters in English indirectly insisted the loyalty of a wife to her husband. Legendary Sita's sacrifice impressed Dimple. Her friend Paramita Ray's job as an announcer in Akashvani Calcutta made her think of her friend as an independent ideal woman. Pixie or Paramita Ray's description of her work as announcer seemed to be with authority to Dimple. Pixie seemed to be a super real person to Dimple. The fragmented and vulnerable self of Dimple took her motherhood as a claim on her body. The Basus' happiness to welcome the new arrival upset her very much. The Basus' claim of the child as their property seemed to her a verbal vestment. Her thoughts of clearing the fetus by drinking drainage powder and slipping in the bathroom were bizarre. Expecting a happy free life in America, she found it difficult until the foetus was aborted. Her tormented self and her obsession with a luxurious life without encumbrance see her own child as responsibility. Her frantic measures in viewing the child as an obstacle in her attempt to visit America blinded her eyes to see the child as a part of herself. Her misconception of freedom by her divided self made her see the child as 'other' and tried to abort the child.

At Meena Sen's house Dimple tried to be a typical Indian housewife. She was often oppressed by Jyoti Sen. She felt she was observed by Amit for enjoying her life and spending luxuries. Amit, ironically she liked luxuries, and she thought that in the marriage market she could have been married to somebody else other than Amit. She expected Amit to support her financially saying, "evidence won't do it in the Hindi films by film heroes." (36). But eventually she conformed to the wishes of Amit and tried to look happy. Ina Malik, Milt

Glasser, Jyoti Sen appreciated her adaptability in a new environment. Dish Prumm had characterised this adaptive response as “substitution conformity”. Prumm said,

“The individual ceases to be himself, he adopts entirely the kind of personality offered to him by cultural patterns and he therefore becomes exactly as all others are and as they expect him to be.... this mechanism can be compared with the protective colouring some animals assume. They look so similar to their surroundings that they are hardly distinguishable from them” (*Wife*, 418).

Dimple’s yield to Ina’s sister influences reveal her seemingly easy adaptation to the new environment in the US and personality expected of the new cultural patterns. In reality Dimple was afraid of Ina’s son and wanted to be away from her influence. She lacked the courage to oppose Ina and expected Amit to be more supportive and promising. Various TV channel programmes, magazines, advertisements intruded on her and attracted her attention revealing her tendency towards dispersal and a fragmented self. An advertisement in a magazine instructing to “discover your own grand passion” made her hate the middle class apartment of Sens and think about the newly constructed spacious house owned by her. Her love for luxury made her compare the apartment of Vinod Khanna to sets in Raj Kapoor’s movie. She could not realize that in reality, millionaires alone could own such houses.

Bharati Mukherjee’s *Wife* presents a powerful and tragic picture of the psychological disintegration of an immigrant woman. Through the character of Dimple Dasgupta, Mukherjee explores the conflict between traditional Indian values, personal desires and the unfamiliar realities of American life. Dimple enters marriage with dreams of freedom, love, luxury and social advancement but her expectations remain unfulfilled. Her unhappy marriage, dependence on Amit, social isolation and inability to establish a meaningful identity gradually intensify her inner conflict.

Dimple’s migration to America does not bring the freedom she had imagined. Instead, the new environment deepens her sense of alienation and loneliness. Caught between the cultural values of India and the attractions of American consumer culture, she becomes increasingly divided within herself. She is unable to adjust completely to either world. Her attempts to imitate the behaviour and lifestyle around her do not give her a stable identity. Rather, they make her personality more fragmented and confused.

Thus, *Wife* is not merely the story of a failed marriage but also the story of a woman’s loss of self in an alien cultural environment. Dimple’s final act of violence and her psychological collapse represent the extreme consequence of her suppressed desires, emotional isolation and cultural displacement. Mukherjee successfully portrays the painful condition of an immigrant woman who remains trapped between dream and reality, tradition and modernity and dependence and freedom. The novel ultimately reveals that when an individual fails to find emotional support and a secure sense of identity, alienation may lead to psychological disintegration and tragic destruction.

Bharati Mukherjee’s *The Tiger’s Daughter* presents a sensitive portrayal of women caught between tradition and modernity, homeland and foreign culture and individual desire and social expectations. Through the central character of Tara Banerjee Cartwright, Mukherjee examines the condition of an Indian woman whose identity becomes divided after her exposure to Western life.

Tara belongs to an affluent Bengali Brahmin family and receives her education in the United States. Her marriage to David Cartwright, an American, further distances her from the traditional world in which she was brought up. When she returns to Calcutta after several years, she expects to rediscover the warmth and familiarity of her homeland. Instead, she experiences a painful sense of estrangement. India appears different to her and she herself has also changed. Thus, Tara becomes a woman living between two cultures without being completely at home in either.

Mukherjee also presents the limitations imposed upon women by traditional Indian society. Tara’s upbringing has taught her to be conscious of family prestige, social customs and cultural restrictions. However, her life in America gives her a new perspective and makes her question the assumptions of her earlier life. Her marriage to a foreigner and her independent experiences create an inner conflict between inherited values and acquired freedom. The other women in the novel also reflect different aspects of Indian womanhood. Through them,

Mukherjee depicts the complex social world in which women are expected to maintain family honour and conform to established conventions. At the same time, the novel reveals their hidden anxieties, desires and dissatisfaction. Women are not portrayed as simple victims but as individuals struggling to negotiate their place within a changing social order.

The condition of women in *The Tiger's Daughter* is therefore closely connected with the larger theme of cultural displacement. Tara's identity is fragmented because she belongs simultaneously to India and America but feels complete belonging to neither. Her return to Calcutta becomes a journey of self-discovery and disillusionment. Mukherjee shows that migration affects women not only physically but also emotionally, psychologically and culturally.

In conclusion, *The Tiger's Daughter* offers an important study of women's identity in a world of cultural transition. Through Tara, Bharati Mukherjee presents the emotional insecurity, alienation and divided consciousness of an Indian woman who has crossed geographical and cultural boundaries. The novel demonstrates that for women, the search for freedom and identity is often complicated by the conflicting demands of family, tradition, marriage and cultural belonging.

Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* is a powerful portrayal of feminine sensibility in the context of migration, cultural displacement and the search for identity. Through the life of Jasmine, Mukherjee presents the experiences of a woman who refuses to remain confined within the traditional definitions of femininity. The novel explores her fears, desires, emotional conflicts, courage and continuous struggle for self-realization. Jasmine's feminine sensibility is closely connected with her experience as an Indian woman. In her early life, she is surrounded by the conventions of a patriarchal society in which women are expected to remain obedient and submissive. Her marriage with Prakash, however, introduces her to a different vision of womanhood. Prakash renames her "Jasmine," and this new name becomes symbolic of transformation. Jasmine begins to develop an individual identity and dreams of a life beyond the narrow boundaries imposed upon her. The death of Prakash becomes a turning point in her life. Although deeply affected by grief and emotional suffering, Jasmine does not surrender to despair. Her journey from India to America represents not merely a physical movement but also a psychological transformation. Her feminine sensibility is expressed through her intense awareness of fear, loneliness, memory and loss. At the same time, she possesses an extraordinary capacity to survive.

One of the most striking aspects of Jasmine's character is her ability to transform herself. During her journey, she assumes different names and identities such as Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase and Jane. Each identity represents a new phase of her life and personality. This multiplicity reflects the fragmented but dynamic nature of female identity in a multicultural world. Jasmine does not remain a fixed or passive individual; she constantly recreates herself according to new circumstances. The novel also presents feminine sensibility through Jasmine's emotional relationships. Her love for Prakash, her attachment to Taylor and her domestic life with Bud reveal different aspects of her emotional personality. She is capable of love, tenderness and affection, but she also desires freedom and independence. Mukherjee thus presents womanhood as complex and dynamic rather than simply sacrificial or submissive.

Jasmine's response to violence is another important aspect of her feminine consciousness. When she faces sexual violence and humiliation, she refuses to accept victimhood as her permanent identity. Her reaction marks a decisive assertion of selfhood. In this sense, Jasmine challenges the conventional image of women as weak and helpless. Her feminine sensibility is therefore associated with courage, resistance and the determination to survive.

Mukherjee also explores the conflict between tradition and modernity through Jasmine. She carries the memories and values of India, yet her experiences in America compel her to adopt new ways of thinking and living. Her identity is formed through the interaction of East and West. Thus, Jasmine becomes a representative figure of the immigrant woman who must negotiate between cultural inheritance and personal freedom.

In conclusion, feminine sensibility in *Jasmine* is presented through the protagonist's emotional depth, vulnerability, courage and continuous transformation. Jasmine experiences pain, displacement and uncertainty, yet she refuses to be defined solely by her suffering. Bharati Mukherjee presents her as a woman who creates

her own identity through struggle and experience. Thus, Jasmine is not only a story of immigration but also a powerful exploration of feminine consciousness, self-discovery and the assertion of woman's individuality.

Bharati Mukherjee's fiction presents women's identity as a journey of transformation, often marked by migration, cultural dislocation, and the struggle between tradition and modernity. Her heroines are not static figures bound by inherited roles; they are dynamic, constantly reshaping themselves in response to new environments. In *Jasmine*, the protagonist moves from Punjab to America, shedding names and identities along the way. Mukherjee writes, "Jyoti was now Jasmine. Jasmine would become Jane," a line that captures the fluidity of selfhood and the courage to reinvent. This metamorphosis is not simply survival but an assertion of agency, showing how women can claim power through adaptation. In *Desirable Daughters*, Tara Bhattacharjee resists the expectations of being the ideal daughter, declaring, "I am not the Tara my parents raised. I am Tara who makes her own choices." Her rebellion against tradition reflects the immigrant woman's negotiation between familial duty and personal freedom. Similarly, in *The Tiger's Daughter*, Tara's return to Calcutta after living abroad reveals the estrangement of diasporic identity: "Calcutta was no longer hers; it had become alien." Mukherjee's women thus embody the tension of belonging to two worlds, neither fully at home in India nor America, yet carving out a hybrid identity that embraces both. Through these narratives, Mukherjee emphasizes that women's identity is not fixed but fluid, shaped by displacement, resilience, and the courage to redefine themselves. Her heroines are warriors of selfhood, negotiating the fractures of migration and patriarchy to create new spaces of belonging. In this way, her fiction celebrates transformation as the essence of women's identity in a globalized world.

Bharati Mukherjee's portrayal of women constitutes one of the most significant aspects of her fiction. Her women characters are neither merely passive sufferers nor idealized symbols of sacrifice. They are complex individuals who experience fear, loneliness, displacement, love, frustration and conflict, yet they constantly struggle to shape their own identities. Through characters such as Tara, Dimple and Jasmine, Mukherjee presents different stages of feminine consciousness and reveals the changing position of women in both Indian and diasporic contexts.

The women in her novels often begin their journeys within the restrictions of patriarchal society and traditional expectations, but their encounters with new cultures and circumstances compel them to question established norms. Migration becomes an important force of transformation in their lives. The experience of crossing geographical and cultural boundaries also leads them to cross psychological boundaries. As a result, Mukherjee's women gradually develop a stronger sense of individuality and self-awareness.

At the same time, Mukherjee does not ignore the emotional and psychological suffering of women. Her female characters face alienation, marital conflict, cultural displacement, sexual oppression and the crisis of identity. Tara in *The Tiger's Daughter*, Dimple in *Wife and I* and Jasmine in *Jasmine* represent different responses to such pressures. While some characters become victims of their circumstances, others resist and reconstruct themselves. Their struggles reveal the complexity of feminine experience in a changing world. Mukherjee's women are especially remarkable for their capacity for transformation. They do not possess a fixed identity. Their personalities are shaped and reshaped by memory, migration, relationships and social experience. This process of transformation makes her female characters dynamic and psychologically convincing. They represent women who seek not merely physical survival but also emotional fulfillment and personal freedom.

CONCLUSION

Bharati Mukherjee is a significant novelist of women's experience and consciousness. Her portrayal of women goes beyond the conventional image of woman as submissive, dependent and silent. She presents women as thinking, feeling and struggling individuals who negotiate between tradition and modernity, home and exile, dependence and freedom. Ultimately, her fiction affirms the woman's right to self-definition and self-realization. Bharati Mukherjee's women, despite their suffering and uncertainty, remain memorable for their courage, complexity and continuous search for an identity of their own.

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