ELEMENTS OF FEMINISM IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE

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Abstract

This paper is an in-depth analysis of women characters in the novels of Bharati Mukherjee. Bharati Mukherjee, is a famous diasporic writer born in India and settled in America. She calls herself as an American writer and not a hyphenated immigrant. The characters Tara in Tigers Daughter, Dimple in Wife and Jasmine in Jasmine are analysed in detail in terms of women migrants. The change in place and time brings about a change in the behaviour of human beings. The change happens irrespective of the gender. The conventional experience of migrants revolves round the phases as alienation, displacement, dislocation and depression. Breaking this, Mukherjee introduces the feelings of acceptance, delight and pleasure in being a part of new land. Feminism and feminist theory are applied for the study. The problems undergone and the transformations of the heroines are
1 INTRODUCTION

The word 'Feminism' can be defined or described in different ways according to one's understanding on the subject and perception towards the term. But, it's still a debatable topic as what it actually stands for. Feminism is equality of rights for a few, a prominent political movement for some group of people, the spirit to keep the rights of women up for few other. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word feminism as a belief in the principle that women should get equal rights and opportunities as men. However, feminism is a movement which functions for women with a wider spectrum, covering issues like identity, independence, right to action in education, career and family. With the growth of feminism across the globe, the Indian feminists came to light. Women have become independent and started fighting for equality, rights, freedom etc. Women social workers fight against discrimination, patriarchy, abortion, domestic violence and all other issues connected directly or indirectly to women.

2 Women Writers

Feminist theory is the expansion of feminism into theoretical and philosophical ground. Works related to roles of women, lives of women and feminist politics are covered under this theory. New issues are related with the conditions of the woman, gender identity and relationships within and between genders. Many women writers involve feminism in their piece of writings either it is a prose or poem. Fiction includes feminism as one of the major subjects. Indian feminists like Anita Desai, Nayantara Sagar, Kamala Das, Bharati Mukherjee have evolved as prominent writers in these last two decades. Bharati Mukherjee has become very popular where her themes include alienation, immigrant experience, expatriation, clash of culture, multiculturalism, racial discrimination, transformation of women, attitude of revenge, sense of new morality, man-woman relationship, woman in new
Bharati Mukherjee - born in India, migrated to Canada and then to U.S.A at different stages of her life. She has many novels to her literary credits. She is a woman of energy and enthusiasm. Her novels reflect her thoughts and ideas on women. Her first novel was published in the year 1971, when she was in Canada. Racial discrimination was on the top during that period. The novel explores the cultural shock met by the protagonist Tara, who was born in India and moved to America, where she marries an American. She suffers from nostalgia and homesickness as she misses her native land, people and culture. She returns to India after a long period of seven years and experiences a new and different society. Tara denies to forget the past and also is not ready to accept the present life. Only a few are brave enough to accept the new and others fall victim to depression, despair and loneliness.

4 Wife

Mukherjee has the element of transformation in most of her novels. Dimple, protagonist of the novel Wife plays different roles. Mukherjee shows through the novel Wife how Dimple undergoes transformation from a simple girl in Barlygunge to Amit Basus wife. Dimple, now the wife of Amit Basu wants to change herself, in an effort to please her husband. She makes several efforts like dressing up differently, trying new hairstyles etc. to please her husband, Dimple took to wearing bright colours: red, oranges and purples. Amit even compliments her on the different looks. In the same regard Mukherjee herself states that the kinds of women she writes about are those who are adjusting. Indian daughters have been raised to please, trained to be adaptable wives, and that adaptability is working to the womens advantage when they come over as immigrants.
5 Attitude of revenge

The novel has also several examples where the heroine is full of revenge against the unfavourable. M.Rajeshwar writes, "the characters are therefore shown grappling on one hand with the psychic conflicts of personal origin. These conflicts and traumas become too pronounced at a particular point of time in their life when a part of their psychic apparatus refuses to submit to several hostile cathexes they manifestly display three distinct tendencies: some move from neurosis to psychosis, others arise at a compromise solution for their problems and yet another group sets out to become compulsive idealists because they find the realities of life too harsh or repulsive to put up with." (Rajeshwar, 142)

The attitude of revenge, an element of feminism is also seen in the novel Wife. Dimple is shown as a sadistic woman. She gets sick of obeying her husband’s orders and the transformation happens slowly. From a traditional submissive woman, she changes into a crazy, unconventional wife, not ready to take orders but to give orders herself. The dominating husband, Amit has become overbearing for Dimple. To her, disobeying him would mean taking revenge. When Amit suggests her to wear a cotton sari while cooking, Dimple feels angry and decides: "I'll wear synthetic saris if I want to! I'll wear any god-damn thing I want to, so there! (Mukherjee 117). Dimple is hostile to her husband, she wants to hurt him while he’s asleep and she is so much filled with rage and vengeance against him that: "That night, trapped between the cold wall and Amit's heavy body, in post nightmare lucidity she sought revenge, she had a sudden desire to examine the body... until she knew just where to strike or pierce and make him bleed in the dark. Her own intensity shocked her she had not considered herself susceptible to violence...."Love is dread,” she whispered loudly to the sleeper.” (Mukherjee 116).

Dimple’s anger and violence becomes severe when her own body seemed curiously alien to her, filled with hate, malice, an insane desire to hurt, yet weightless almost airborne. The attitude of revenge in Dimple is abnormal and several critics have different views about this insane attitude. While some find it revolting,
others have an explanation for Dimple's undesired behaviour: "She has already been in a sick state of mind ever since she left India but the alienation from her husband, environment and the sham and outward glitter, fluidity and meaningless of American life drive her to fits of psychic depression and ultimate insanity." (Asnani, 45)

6 Jasmine and the letter 'J':

Jasmine- a novel by Bharati Mukherjee can be read as a feminist novel. The protagonist shows a proper balance between modernism and tradition, which is also an aspect of feminism. There are various instances of transformation of the protagonist in the novel. She changes herself and acquires multiple identity all the way through the novel. The heroine ‘Jyoti’ evolves as a village girl of Hasnapur, transforms to ‘Jasmine’ after her marriage with Prakash, she then becomes ‘Jase’ the undocumented immigrant, further changes into ‘Jane’ the Manhattan Nanny, finally ‘Jane’ as the Iowan woman. The letter ‘J’ represents as an element of continuity, transformation and feminism throughout the novel. Elizabeth Bronfen observes: This J serves as a signifier for the dialect of a progressive engendering of identities as these bar already existing identities, putting them under erasure without consuming them.....Jasmine’s dislocated other speaks out a self-conscious and self-induced effacement in the voice of resilient, and incessantly self-refashioning hybridity.” (Bronfen, 79)

7 Transformation of Jasmine

Jasmine is on an endless journey to explore, seek and find bright ways of life which are very different and new from the conventional ways. Jasmine realises the change herself: "In the white lamplight, ghosts float towards me. Jane, Jasmine, Jyoti." (Mukherjee, 18). Indira talks about this in an explicit manner: "With healing touch of people like Lillian Gordon, Kate and Taylor, who treated her as an intelligent, refined, sincere person, jasmine blooms from being a different alien with forged documents into adventurous Jase living only for the present. The
tugging between the opposing forces does not intimidate her, rather it excites her. Amidst the other immigrant domestics who hang suspended between the two worlds, Jasmine feels proud that she is getting rooted in the new world.” (Indira, 86).

Jasmine was only seven, an innocent seven-year-old girl in Hasnapur in the village of Punjab. Then she was married to Prakash Vijh and became Jasmine, the wife of a man who wanted her to change. Then, in America she was Jane, wife of a divorced man who is in his fifties. In a lifespan of twenty-four years, she has undergone many changes and accepted each change as a new challenge. She has played a completely different role at each transformation. Sandra Ponzanesi writes: “The transformation of identity from dutiful submissive widow into assertive, criminal and individualistic American woman is in full swing.” (Sandra 89). The transformation in the woman is reflected through the words of Jasmine herself. She is well aware of the change: "He wanted to break down Jyoti I’d been in Hasnapur and make me a new kind of city woman. To breakoff the past, he gave me a new name: Jasmine. He said, ”you are small and sweet and heady, my jasmine. You’ll quicken the whole world with your perfume.” "Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttled between identities.” (Mukherjee 70)

### 8 Portrayal of Women

In her first novel, "The Tiger’s Daughter" - Tara is portrayed as an immigrant sandwiched between two cultures. The novel was written when the author was in expatriate phase. In a new country, racial discrimination is common. Only a few are brave enough to acclimatise the new land. Others suffer a lack of identity as they cannot decide to which place they belong to.

Similarly, Dimple in 'Wife' suffers such kind of situation. Initially, she changes herself to persuade her husband. Later on, when moved to America, she wants to be free and make her own decisions. She had her own set of dreams and desires. But the limitations confined to her husband, aggravates her thoughts and she gets depressed. She cannot be a submissive wife nor a liberal.
She is left in a state of despair. The depression leads to destroy herself as well killing her husband.

Jasmine does not want to follow the age old traditions followed for years in the past. She is not worried of the scar on her forehead, instead has a positive attitude towards life. She considers it as the 'third eye' and calls herself as a sage. She would probably get insight into new worlds to explore with this third eye. Thus, Bharati Mukherjee's heroines are different, brimming with hope and ready to lay down rules for themselves. Mukherjee also shows that a woman is no longer a humble petty creature, content and happy with what life has to offer instead a fighter, who wants to achieve what she deserves. Thus the dreams and desires of new woman are different. Jasmine is a completely different girl, right from her childhood. She never follows or worries about the ancient beliefs but she makes a new path for herself and steady marching on it, with whatever the obstacles met, overcomes with a spirit. In an interview to the magazine Bomb, she says, "I think of Jasmine and many of my characters, as being people who are pulling themselves out of the very traditional world in which their fate is predetermined, their destiny resigned to the stars. Traditionally, a good person accepts this. But Jasmine says, "I'm going to reposition the stars." (The New York Times 1)

9 Conclusion

Many critics have recognised Mukherjee as a feminist writer, as she has taken up issues of female gender, related to those who migrate to foreign countries. She has explored the possibilities of freedom offered to women in the new land. Her woman characters are strong survivors, who venture out to fulfil their dreams and desires. Mukherjee believes in liberation of the heart and mind. The bold and assertive characters pervade in all her novels. The women characters project her beliefs and so she makes them to act with courage. Her heroines have pushed out of the domestic barrier of home to reach beyond geographical limits of the country itself. Mukherjee upholds the concept of globalisation calling the world a global village. Her characters convey the message to embrace the
new culture and its people, when we are a part of it. Her works reflect transformation which comes inevitably when one migrates from one's own country to a foreign one. This journey has many ups and downs, which becomes clear through her protagonists. All her protagonists are women who are bold and assertive. Thus, through her characters she holds up the ideals of feminism.

References


