



BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES AND CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION IN THE NOVEL *THE TIGER'S DAUGHTER*

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Abstract

Feminism is the belief based on the objective that women should have equal opportunities as men. The women in the society have been struggling since ages to achieve that status. Many writers have succeeded in becoming the feminist voice of such women by narrating their plethora of suffering and transformation during their shifting from one nation to another. Bharati Mukherjee is one of the famous diasporic writers born in India, who later on became an American citizen. Her novels delineates the different shades of women immigrants and their suffering, displacement, alienation, at one hand and at other hand she applies the feminist theory to portray the delight and pleasure of transformation and being a part of a new land. In the novels of Mukherjee, feminism acts as a tool to overcome the agony of immigration and ensures the feeling of acceptance in an alien land. The paper is an in depth analysis of women immigrants in the novels of Bharati Mukherjee. It also explores the transformation process of heroines of Mukherjee.

Keywords: *Feminism, Diaspora, Transformation, Displacement*

Introduction

Feminism can be defined as the social, economical and political equality of the sexes or the advocacy of the women's rights based on equality of sexes. The word Feminism in itself is a belief that women should have equal rights and opportunity similar to the men. It's a doctrine which advocates women socially, politically and in terms of rights equivalent to the men. The



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concept of equality of men and women several times, give rise to the argument that men and women are not similar, therefore they cannot be equal. Men and women are physically different and have different physical capabilities. It does not mean that equality is not possible among them. It will not be wise to justify 'same' as 'equal'. Men and Women are not same and they don't need to be same in physique to have equal rights. The basic issue is about equal rights and equal opportunity and not equal physical characters.

Feminism can be defined in several ways, for some, it is a political movement which functions for women with wider spectrum covering issues like independence, self-identity, right to decision making in the field of education, career and family. Some even consider it as a spirit to keep the rights of women up. With the spread of feminism across the globe, the Indian feminist came to limelight and paved way to a new change where women wanted to be independent and became aware of their rights, freedom and fought for equal status to that of a man. There are many women social workers who fight against discrimination, patriarchal society, domestic violence and other social evils framed against women. According to Simone de Beauvoir, "She defines woman as 'a free and autonomous being like all human creatures [...] finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the other'".

The present feminism which became a social movement was developed in 1960. It came in three waves; the first wave came in nineteen and early twenty century in the United States of America, Canada, Netherlands and The United Kingdom. The second wave refers to the thoughts and effects related with the female liberation movement in 1960's. The third wave feminism refers to the reactions arising out of the failure of second wave feminism, which began in 1990's. The twenty first century feminist movement focused women as a major contributor in society and as a powerful human resource. Now she was independent, confident and she had power to take her own decisions of life. Many women writers have brought among the world the different subjects of feminism. One of the major causes of transformation of feminist view point in English fiction is the mass migration of Indians to the western countries, which further dissembles before them the busted identities of the narratives. Feminist writers through their prose, poetry or fiction show casted feminism in their literary work. **One of those prominent writers of feminism is Bharati Mukherjee,**



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whose writing chiefly focuses on women immigrants experience, alienation, expatriation, cultural confrontation, racial discrimination, transformation of a women etc. Mukherjee's work reflected her ideas, thoughts on the women immigrants. Mukherjee asserts her immigrant's status and quotes:

We immigrant have fascinating tales to relate. Many of us have lived in newly independent or emerging countries. When we uprooted ourselves from those countries and come here, either by choice or out of necessity, we suddenly must absorb 200 years of American history and learn to adapt to illustrate this in my novels and short stories. My aim is to expose Americans to the energetic voices of new settlers in this country." Bharati Mukherjee, The Times of India, 1 Oct.1989.

Mukherjee's novel is her own experiences of entrapment between two cultures. Mukherjee went to U.S.A to marry an American and settled down in America. According to Mukherjee culture, by the mode of education and communication paves way to necessary intermingling change and interweave with other cultures. Mukherjee's first novel *The Tiger's Daughter* explores the crude experience of cultural shift by her protagonist Tara. The novel is embedded with feminist sensibility and concern. The novel highlights the psychological state of expatriates during their journey of transformation. **Sandra Ponzanesi writes: "The transformation of identity from dutiful submissive widow into assertive, criminal and individualistic American women is in full swing."** (Sandra 89). The protagonist Tara is brought up in a traditional Indian family. She went to Irish missionary school and then to a missionary school in America. Tara transforms herself after marrying an American man named, David cartwright just like Bharati Mukherjee and settle down in America. Tara's clan consider her polluted, due to her marriage to a foreigner. She misses her homeland, people, food, culture and turns homesick and nostalgic. When she returns India after seven years, the process of transformation in Tara's life led her to a state of trauma. Her visit to Calcutta leads to clashing of her American self with her roots in India. The novel is a fine manifestation of cultural transformation. Her displacement traps her between traditions and she tries to maintain equilibrium between her dual attachment for her own nation and acquired nation. However, at one hand she is distressed with her dislocation and on the other hand she is excited to bond with a new culture of alien land. She is very well concern with the self-



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elimination with her motherland and at the same time tries to balance by being aware to the confrontation in the newly adapted culture. She tries to adapt the cultural ethics of both the nations. After coming to India, she tries to find how much she belongs there and to what extent and manner she is different from India. She returns to India to invest her trust in improving her saleability and cultural roots as an Indian, but she fails to do so. She is enmeshed between the old Indian self and the newly adapted America. She is unable to reject any one of them. She goes to dilemma to see a different society than what she expected. She is neither able to forget the memories of her past life in India nor she is able to adjust to the new homeland completely. Tara finds it difficult to drain out the innate native culture that entrenches her blood and flesh. She is unable to vacate her mind of the old values and cultures and adapt the new culture of the alien land. She could barely separate between the Calcutta and the New York City. She gets confused about herself, her native land and the country of preference. The Indian life that was somewhere in her mind till now did not match with the present Calcutta life. Her return to her motherland made her acquainted of her foreignness and womanhood. Tara rejects her Indian modes of life. She finds Calcutta overpopulated, full of perpetual violence, politically unrest, class conflict etc. She recalls her past memories of childhood and the real present Calcutta where she returned. Tara's English education makes her more conscious of the degenerating social and political setup of Calcutta, which adds up to her frustration and disgust. Her childhood memories of perfect Calcutta disappear in the polluted air and degraded environment of the city. Now she finds Calcutta equally dangerous and alien as America, when she first visited there. Tara's India of past does not meet any of her expectations. In the novel Tara's home which should serve as a purpose of narrative return fails to match the idyllic memories as a child and the adolescence. According to Fakrul Alam,

The Tiger's Daughter, then, is designed to capture the predicament of someone returning to her homeland after a period of self-imposed exile: to such a person, home will never be home again, and life in exile, bitter draught though it often is, will be preferable to what home has become.

Tara came to India in search of peace and pleasure that she did not receive in America. The cool green space where children use to run was missing. The music and culture were



changed. The vision of new India in the newspaper only depicted epidemic, collision and fatal quarrels and so on. Thus, the novel discusses the emotional reactions and transformation of Tara on her return to India after seven years. *The Tiger's Daughter* is a heroine-centred novel based on the cross-cultural issues of immigration. As a result of two different cultural encounters the protagonist undergoes pain and agony and she repents after discovering the present Calcutta. Tara was confused for her New York life and homesickness. Now Tara felt lonely in her native land. Tara finds her transformation led to loss of her relationship with her mother and the relatives in India. She discovers that her relationship with her mother was based on cultural context. The faith between her and her mother was missing now. Her relatives approve of the western education system but they didn't approve a foreign matrimonial alliance. Tara felt alien in both the worlds. Mukherjee has reflected her own experience of rootlessness through Tara. Tara tries to hide the American bitterness from her parents and relatives and at the same time hides the facts about India from her husband David. Mukherjee has succeeded in presenting her own disillusionment from Tara's point of view. She has narrated her own experience of longing between both the worlds. Mukherjee just like Tara was detached from India and looked back to be a part of it sometime in future, although she also did not know America very well. She felt as if some bridge was poised between the two worlds. She too transformed herself just like Tara in attempt to get adjusted between the two different poles of culture and traditions. Tara forgets her own culture after settling to America. She is unable to sing the bhajans, which she used to sing as a child. Thus, Tara's transformation leads to a number of drastic changes, the most painful was the change in attitude of her mother. Her mother no longer felt the love and sensitivity towards Tara which she had earlier.

Tara could not cease completely the conventional model of Indian woman due to her perceptions built in the Indian environment at home, watching her mother. Perhaps her mother, sitting serenely before god on a tiny rug, no longer loved her either. After all Tara had willingly abandon her cast by marrying a foreigner. Tara is unable to abandon the ideology of conventional Indian women due to her perceptions built at home as a result of traditional upbringing by her mother. There is a great impact of civilization and religious conviction on children in India. The cultural roots of Indian culture rest on,



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Perhaps her mother, sitting serenely before God on a tiny rug, no longer loved her either, After all Tara had willfully abandon her caste by marrying a foreigner. perhaps her mother was offended that she no longer a real Brahmin, was constantly in and out of this sacred room, dipping out like a crow. (TTD, 50)

In the case of Tara, It appears that she has outgrown her own identity, and now she had new preferences, new attitude and identity, that didn't match either the nation she was born nor the acquired one. Now she really searched who she really is, an Indian or an American. The India in her imagination was peaceful but in reality, it was quite different of what she thought. The converge of wealth education, spiritual cultures and the new knowledge forced at the same time, as a result of British colonialism, paved way to distressed procedures of self-identification and self-absorption since the beginning. It further leads to increasing bewilderment when Tara reaches the United States of America. The homesickness and rootlessness of Tara lead to distress and nervousness. She was unable to decide which way of life is appropriate to attain and which one to reject. Tara soon discovers her maladjustment in India. She is torn apart, still tries to be an Indian, when it comes to treat her friends and relatives. She is unable to adjust with the changed environment, culture and society of Calcutta and decides to return America. Her individual identity was split.

According to Bharati Mukherjee it is very difficult to exchange or acquire culture of a new nation. Mukherjee through her works succeeded in framing the different phases of feminist life where different women try to adjust to the newly changed life and environment. Many of her protagonists get entangled between both the boundaries, while a few are courageous enough to accept the new world and a few fall prey to despair and depression. Some of the protagonists of Mukherjee are full of revenge against the unfavourable. M. Rageshwar writes, *the characters are therefore shown grappling on one hand with the psychic conflicts of personal origin. These conflict and trauma 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. (Rajeshwar,142)*



Mukherjee basically focuses on the concept of migration and also the position of new Indian women and their struggle. Her writing discovers spatial and temporal dimensions of different cultures by means of her feminist approach in her writings.

Conclusion

Immigration is a tool for Mukherjee's female protagonists to rediscover themselves. It also depicts the heroic endeavour of the female protagonists. Mukherjee portrays her heroines in a new land of opportunities by making them free from the social and cultural restraint of their custom-bound nation. Several times the characters are posed as explorers and survivors. They are treated as inhabitants of a new changing America. They are uprooted and believe that the alien country will pave them the unlimited opportunities, but they are left with the feeling of cultural shock. They can neither free themselves from their past nor become a part of their new nation completely. Mukherjee's female protagonists leave their own nation due to various reasons and settle down in U.S.A with a hope to begin a new life. At this stage the female perspective of Bharati Mukherjee plays an eminent role in the quest of own identity in an alien land. The female characters experience many prejudices and feminine problems. America being a developed nation still practices racial discrimination against their immigrants. Mukherjee's character pictures the racial hatred and feminine quest in their novels. She has forecasted the woman's who tries to free themselves from the framework of male dominating and ethnic suppressing cultures and traditions in a society. Bharati Mukherjee through her writing's emphasis the issue of women, who immigrated to foreign countries. She not only reveals the real trauma and pain of losing one's homeland, identity, culture, and their transformation but at the same time explores their freedom opportunities offered in the new land. All her women protagonists are presented bold and assertive and reveal the ideology of feminism. Mukherjee portrayed her women characters as strong female survivors, who happily embrace the new culture and its people and venture out to fulfil their ambitions and dreams in a strange and alien land. Her writing focuses on women protagonists and their consciousness. In the present era presentation of female psyche has become a prominent factor of writing and several writers are enlightening on feminism. The topics of women opportunities, equal status and rights are now being deliberately investigated by researcher. In spite of the social, cultural dissimilarities between the east and the west civilisation, there has



been a tremendous increase in immigration in the past few years. This effect is visible in the viewpoint of women fiction writers. Mukherjee's writing replicates the feelings and beliefs arising as a result of the cultural difference. The immigrants in order to adjust in a new zone bear the most changes due to displacements. Mukherjee's attempts to change the conventional face of traditional tolerant women to a violent human being attempting to rediscover her identity within the web of existing social relationship. The female protagonist gasps to breathe freely as they strangle between the congested old traditions and the new one. As a result, a feeling of confusion is created as she tries to maintain the equilibrium between the two different poles.

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