



THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN AS REBELS IN THE LITERARY WORKS OF JHUMPA LAHIRI AND BHARATI MUKHERJEE

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ABSTRACT

Aristotle considered woman an inferior entity to man. Shakespeare called her 'frailty thy name is woman.' Schopenhaur asserts woman is by nature meant to obey. Woman is 'God's second mistake' said Nietzsche. All these definitions about women were given by men. But these ideas underwent a change under the western influence, coming though liberal education, forced new values and norms of life upon women. It became a time of social, cultural, economic and political change. With these changes (educational opportunities and economic independence) women became conscious of their status. They took pen in their hands and started writing. The writers of the contemporary world came out swiftly from historical romance and mythical stories and presented the realities of the life of women. As the image of woman, family and society kept on transforming all these years, the writers' opinions, too, were all wavering resulting in a variety of realistic impressions. A common contemporary issue facing every country is the question of woman whether in Europe/America or Indian literary tradition, the women are seen as launching themselves. The 'new women' today challenges/rebels the traditional notions of 'angel in the house' and 'sexually voracious' image. The 'new women' are essentially aware and conscious of their low position in the family and society. The 'new women' are contemplative about their predicament and choose to protest and fight against the general, accepted norms and currents. What is different about these women is that they are prepared to face the consequences of their choices. The female protagonists of JhumpaLahiri and Bharati Mukherjee are new and different. They are independent, courageous and dress and smoke like men. Weak will, dependence and shyness are alien to them. They are educated and enjoy financial freedom. These women protest not for equality but for the right to be acknowledged as individuals—capable of intelligence and feeling. They do not only look for freedom outside the house but within as well. These characters are rebels for they fight against the current of the patriarchal



society. The 'new women' in their quest for identity, liberty and individuality act and react in radical ways to the set conventional construct.

Keywords: liberal education, economic independence, contemporary world, tradition, patriarchal society.

I. INTRODUCTION

Bharati Mukherjee and JhumpaLahiri are the two prominent female novelists of Indian diaspora who have achieved respectable position not only in their homeland (India) but abroad as well. In 1988, Mukherjee had a major public breakthrough that brought her into the top ranks of all writers. She was awarded the National Book Critics Circle Award for short story collections *The Middleman and Other Stories*. Lahiri's genius was internationally recognized when she was declared the winner of the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2000. Expatriation, immigration, nostalgia, alienation, despondency, conflict between tradition and modernity and conflict between eastern and western cultures are some significant issues in Bharati Mukherjee's and JhumpaLahiri's fictional as well as non-fictional works. Their works illustrate the importance of multiculturalism in the contemporary world where people of different ethnicities and nations live and work together. Their writings also provide us an insight into various issues, for instance, the life and day-to-day affairs of Asian diasporic communities in Canada and America. The characters in their novels more often struggle with issues of identity, personal relationships, the feeling of alienation, isolation, yearning, loss and hope which time and again mark the immigrant experiences. Mukherjee's and Lahiri's novels and short stories present the experiences of Indian immigrants in America/Canada. They not only portray the lives of immigrants from India but from other ethnic groups in multi-cultured American and Canadian society. In fact, one of the chief characteristics which distinguish these two novelists from other diasporic writers is that their protagonists are not only South Asian immigrants but almost all people from the continents of Asia, Africa and North America. Their works, particularly the novels, have made an important contribution to the multi-ethnic literature of the United States. The status of women across the world has been undergoing a swift change in recent past. In Indian English fiction, especially in the works of Kamala Markandaya, Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Desai, Bhabani Bhattacharya, JhumpaLahiri and others, we get a true and realistic picture of the position, behavior and personality of Indian women, settled both in India and abroad. The feminist viewpoint offers a fresh look at the anecdotes dealing with women in modern society.

JhumpaLahiri's female characters are mostly diasporic women. Her women characters are from both first and second generation immigrants in America. The former finds it very difficult to get adopted with an alien culture whereas the later assimilates themselves with the mainstream culture. It is to be mentioned that women characters from both generations are invariably caught between the Indian culture/tradition and American/foreign lifestyle. The best example of first generation is JhumpaLahiri's mother, grandmother and other elder members of family/community. She represents herself those of second generation expatriates. Lahiri's women characters are both traditional and modern in character. The traditional women characters belong to first group whereas the modern or 'new women' represents later generation. Lahiri's traditional women are diffident/reserved, meek, and quiet. They are deeply attached to their family, culture, tradition and



household items. These women are generally confined within four walls. They are known for self-sacrifice, devotion, religiosity, obedience and so on. On the contrary, Lahiri's modern women challenges/resists against the generally believed norms. They are the ones who are ready to face the repercussions of their choice. They are essentially women who hardly remain diffident, meek and quiet in desperate situations. Though the modern women to some extent are sensitive yet they disdain weak will, submissiveness, shyness, dependence etc. The modern women are courageous, autonomous/self-independent and self-assured. They love liberation, equality, individuality and other realities of life. These kind of women struggle for their identity come what may.

In *Unaccustomed Earth* Ruma's mother represents the traditional Indian life style in America. She is a first generation immigrant woman in the USA. She wears bright saris (garment worn exclusively by Indian women), speaks Bengali, cooks Indian dishes, and teaches her grandchildren Bengali. Like an orthodox traditional Indian woman she tries to stop her daughter from getting engaged to a foreigner. She tries to maintain or preserve the Indian tradition willy-nilly. American lifestyle seems alien and a direct assault on her culture which is why she finds it difficult to adjust with new surrounding/environment. Likewise, Ashima in *The Namesake* spends too much time in making or preparing Bengali dishes for her family members. She too wants to preserve her Bengali culture in America. Like Ruma's mother she could not get adjusted with American environment. On the contrary, Sang, Ruma and Moushumi are Lahiri's those women characters who accept American way of life and are assimilated with it. These women actively rebels for their rights and choices. They even accept their partners according to their will. They neglect their Indian background and marry foreigners. These women are modern educated women who know what is better for them. They are well aware of their will and choice. They are capable of taking independent decisions.

Jhumpa Lahiri, like many other diasporic women writers, focuses on the confrontations between the first and second generation expatriates and the communication barriers they encounter day in day out, and the conflicts between Indian parents and their half-American children. Most of the women characters in her novels and short stories are either expatriate mothers or their daughters who are confronted with the dichotomy between their Indian tradition/belief and new world life style. The diasporic women in *Interpreter of Maladies*, *The Namesake* and *Unaccustomed Earth* have women characters who enjoy the freedom of choice in America yet could not easily adapt themselves to changing environments. Ashima Ganguli in *The Namesake* is a typical Bengali woman in America who is caught between the native culture and host culture. She is an epitome of the majority of women immigrants who are unwilling to change or adapt to the culture of the recipient country. She is a quintessential Indian traditional woman who sacrifices everything for the sake of her family, husband and children. Though Ashima Ganguli lives physically in America yet she finds it difficult to assimilate with the new culture. In her works, Lahiri expresses the feelings and emotions of women characters who have immigrated to the foreign countries, particularly the USA. What distinguishes her portrayal of women characters from other diasporic female novelists is that her women are not the victims of socio-economic exploitation. Rather they are the victims of cultural identity; they are straddled or mostly caught between their native past and alien present. She depicts women who stand for energetic spirit, who can assist and foster the lives of other people. She presents the different roles played by the women, such as, daughter, sister, wife, mother, grandmother, mother-in-law, daughter-in-law, mistress, and so on. One important feature of Lahiri's women characters are though these women live in foreign countries but they remain India to the core. They exhibit their native cultural traits



through cooking, dressing, worshipping, obeying etc. Jhumpa Lahiri has delineated profoundly woman's disquietude and her persistent struggle to adjust with the new world. She describes all major hurdles immigrant women face in a new cultural world. She is one of the celebrated contemporary women writers who have given truthful picture of Indians in America. She has documented expatriates' issues in her novels and short stories. There are two types of women characters in her works. The first group women are deeply attached to their cultural past and are not ready to shun their tradition. Due to this fact, they more often do not get adjusted with the new surroundings. The second generation women immigrants are self-independent. They believe in assimilation and acculturation.

Bharati Mukherjee's artistic skills lie in the projection of the feminine sensibility. Her women characters are precisely adventurous, candid and influential. They are no longer attached to traditions and customs. They are ready to endeavor innovative ideas and new way of life. She has portrayed women characters artistically. Her characters are born rebels. They face violence, terror and hardships/sufferings courageously. They do not believe in taboos and superstitions. They mostly refuse to adhere to social customs and traditions. Whether her characters are in America or in India they take their own decisions which reflect their mind and emboldened spirit. They believe in action and not merely contemplation. They do not blame others for their faults and sufferings. They do not even complaint about them. They give up their past and move ahead. Moreover, they face trials and tribulations of life yet they take them as a part of their struggle for survival. Jasmine, Dimple Dasgupta, Tara and others can be called new women characters for they possess all these characteristics. They are the symbols of rebellious nature and adventurous spirit.

In Bharati Mukherjee's fictional and non-fictional works, most of the women characters are born and brought up initially in India. They usually come from upper middle class background. These characters are women who embark on adventurous journey abroad. They face many obstacles and trials but they are not sufferers. The aforementioned female characters are not fatalists. They believe in action and taking decisions. They believe that human beings are destined to make choices. The choice may be right or wrong. Only time proves it. They often suffer but do not blame fate nor do they regret for the past actions and decisions. Thus these characters are an epitome of modern, adventurous, new women for they fight against feudalism/patriarchy and orthodox customs. They treat themselves equal to men in all respects. These characters never consider that women are inferior to men in any respect. They practice what they stand for because they are self-assertive and firm in their ideology. Another important feature which differentiates Bharati Mukherjee's female characters from other writers, especially women novelists, is they are independent-minded and hardly rely on their menfolk. They are highly adaptive and their ability to adapt to circumstance makes them successful in all situations.

Women have been suffering since centuries in a male-centric Indian society. They are vulnerable to traditions, customs and gender discrimination. They are sexually vulnerable and from time to time face sexual exploitation. In a traditional society like India, women have to face gender discrimination since their childhood days. The lives of Indian women more often are restrictive and constrained. They have a very limited freedom in the affairs of marriage, education, employment, sex, social equality and so on. Mukherjee's Jyoti, (another name of Jasmine) in *Jasmine* is a rebel and vehemently opposes the outdated conventions. She raises her voice against dowry system, forced marriages and customs related to widowhood. Her grandmother Dida (represents traditional Indian life) does not approve women's education and grumbles against Jyoti's going to school. Dida



asserts that women's duty lay in the kitchen and within the confines of a home and not outside. Joyti refuses to abide by her grandmother's ideas. She rather disdains a society/home where women have no freedom to decide anything related to their own future. She hates and boldly protests against the prophecy of an old astrologer. In India astrologers are highly respected. Hindus have a deep faith in the discipline of astrology. The main functions of an astrologer is to predict an important event in a person's life; assess marriage compatibility between prospective partners, s/he states auspicious/inauspicious times in one's life and so on. Being an assertive woman, a woman who is capable of turning traditional values topsy-turvy, Jyoti refuses to believe in the prophecy of an astrologer when says: " I know what I don't want to become" (Mukherjee 1989: 5). This statement of Jyoti symbolizes a new woman with rebellious nature and adventurous spirit. Though Mukherjee never liked to be called a feminist writer yet she stands for women's rights to equality, freedom and independent identity. She explores female psyche in search of identity. Mukherjee's female characters reflect her own experience in Canada and America. Her diasporic experiences are vividly portrayed through the characters of Tara and Dimple. They are always in search of their identity. They experience the sense of alienation and rootlessness. Finally, one would like to add that Mukherjee's female characters are global and universal. They stand for love, tolerance and compassion for one and all. They are not weak and vulnerable. In fact, they can bring peace, love and understanding in our lives.

II. CONCLUSION

The writings of JhumpaLahiri and Bharati Mukherjee suggest that these writers are not merely documenting the reality of the present world but they have used their fictional and non-fictional works as a medium for the exploration of women's struggle to overcome and fight the opposition along with certain conservative forces in society. Their works represent a constructive attempt at the re-definition of a woman's selfhood in an environment where established patriarchal assumptions conflict with liberal ideas of individual. Their protagonists realize the need to rebel against the oppressive forces which ultimately leads to an interrogation and rejuvenation of not only personal relationships but also an entire way of life hallowed in the name of tradition.

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