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Bharati Mukherjee's Heroines Asserting Their Place as 'Heroes' with a Transformation in Personality to the Core: An Appraisal.

Parvatha Varthini M[1], Dr.C.Ramya[2]

[1]RegNo.MKU22PFOL10508, Ph.D Research Scholar in English(PT), Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai-21(Tamil Nadu).

[2]MBA, MA, M.Phil, Ph.D, Guide & Research Supervisor (ID No. 1763), Assistant Professor of English, PG & Research department of English, E.M.G Yadava College for Women, Madurai-14(Tamil Nadu).

Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee is one of the renowned women writers of the Indian diaspora. She has won laurels for her works related to women's identity in a foreign country. The present research paper is a humble attempt to make an emphatic statement about the gendered and ethically defined identities of women, especially Indian women who are picturized in the fictional world of Bharati Mukherjee as heroines strongly asserting their place as 'heroes', with an effective change in the transformation of their personalities through some substantial amount of hardship's and struggles for shedding the tangles of the complex expectations and chains of conventions so as to lead, their lives the way they aspire to live and examine how Mukherjee's characters make journey to become self-dependent and create identities of their own on their own terms with the spirit of manliness and heroism for which the protagonists Tara, Dimple and Jasmine are chosen for depiction of heroines turned heroes facing varied situations as women and immigrants to find a sense of self and individuality in the new world.

Keywords: Diaspora, personality, transformation, expatriate, identity, protagonist, neurosis.

Bharati Mukherjee is universally acknowledged as an expatriate writer par excellence. Her special quality as a writer is that she defies classification as an Indian English writer, Indian woman writer, feminist writer, expatriate writer, immigrant writer, or mainstream American writer, as she claims. She is in a way of combination of all these at once. She is also an Indian writer, for she is an Indian by birth, brought up in a traditional Indian family. She is also a neo-feminist writer, as her writings focus on women and their oppression and their struggle to overcome it. She is an expatriate writer because the primary thrust of her fiction is on the hardships and ill-treatment faced by immigrants from the poor third-world countries like Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and India. She can be included among mainstream American writers, as her language style bears the stamp of perfect American English, a matter of envy and wonder even to writers born in America. But she is out and out different from all these categories of writers. Even though she refers to herself as an American and a mainstream American writer, the resonances of an Indian sensibility pervade her writings. This is evident from her own statement in an interview with Carb:

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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 in different from that of an American writer believes that he only has one life.(654)

Her specialty, however, lies in her handling of the theme of expatriation from a novel perspective, very different from other writers and in her treatment of expatriate women characters in a new mode explored by either expatriate or feminist writers. Generally, feminist writers impose an irreconcilable antagonism between the dominant male and the helpless female. But Bharati Mukherjee is not interested in perpetuating such stereotypical role allocation to men and women. Her espousal of women's struggle to come into their own seems to stem from an informed awareness of 'trends' in society and of an increased desire on the part of individuals to venture into 'pastures new' to attain a better life, rather than stay put in one place and allow their hopes and aspirations to go to seed.

Women, in Bharati Mukherjee's fiction, not only come out of the house, but also show enough courage to cross national and racial barriers. Protagonists in her novels have to cope with the problems of second-rate status, first as foreigners, and second as women. Over and above the feminist concern for gender-based discrimination, Bharati Mukherjee is interested in using the image of the woman as an index of the trend. In so far as women act as the cohesive force in a family, her decision to leave the native land to migrate to another country brings home the power of new motivation. Mukherjee is not interested in the backdrop theme of women being victims of hostile forces but rather in the expatriate who, more than anyone, is not in a position to expect help or financial or other support from anyone. Surviving, in the context of an expatriate in another country, implies both courage and self-sufficiency. Bharati Mukherjee offers glimpses of this capacity of women, for rising to the challenges of unfriendly treatment in an alien culture.

Bharati Mukherjee's women are heroic almost to the core. The protagonists of all her three novels ***The Tiger's Daughter, Wife***, and ***Jasmine***- all deserved to be called heroes. Their various predicaments in alien lands, their cultural shock, and their struggle to cope with hostile circumstances seem to stem out of her own bitter experiences as an expatriate in Canada. Mukherjee's expatriates are not stereotypes of struggle for homes and failing to find one. They are fighters, adventurers, confident people, meant to be Americans like her. Her women occupy a central status in her novels. They are emotional, but in unlikely Anita Desai's women characters indulge in insulating themselves from the rest of the world. Unbothered by conventionality, her women are true to their own inner promptings. Mukherjee focuses not on "backwardness as an area of darkness, but on her characters' growing awareness of the dark spots in their lives and their courage and efforts to discover areas of light… a struggle for self-actualization"(Padma 85)

The Tiger's Daughter is Bharati Mukherjee's maiden venture as a novelist. Her characters generally reflect her personal concern, and the protagonist of *The Tiger's Daughter,* 'Tara' is no exception. Commenting on the book, she says:

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It is wise of my novels in the sense that I was between both worlds; I was detached enough from India, so that I could look back with affection and irony. But I didn't know America enough to feel any conflict. I was like a bride, poised between two worlds.(46)

The novel portrays a well-to-do Bengali Brahmin girl, Tara, who is sent to America for studies. Though Tara is suddenly uprooted from her cocooned world of affluence in India, she very soon adapts to the new country. The adolescent Tara, who has never left her parents and been beyond Shambazar alone, feels completely at Bay. She is suddenly uprooted and thrown into alien soil to survive, and she survives. Any other girl would have rushed to India at the end of the first week, but Tara stays. Her heroines are, no doubt, baffled but never feel desolate or accept defeat. Tara's growth from an overdependent daughter to an independent woman can be traced through Tara's rapidly growing confidence and decisions in life. Her will to survive even during the first weeks of your landing in America: "In the first week each atom of newness bombarded her. She longed for Cama Street" (The Tiger's Daughter 10).

She prays to Kali for courage and strength. Her first assertive act of individuality may be cited as her falling in love with the American, David, and her decision to marry him, though she knows fully well how conservative her parents are for all their outward shows as highly modernised and Westernized people. This decision of Tara may be considered her first major act of heroism. Taken out of the cocoon, she is prepared to step out and strive for her own happiness as naturally as a plant growing towards light. Coming out into real world of New York after her marriage, she has to face a lot after her marriage; she has to face a lot of cultural shock as an expatriate. The American society, which shows great discrimination towards expatriates more particularly towards women depressed her. The violence of New York unnerves her and makes her a victim of the hectic pace of everyday life. She knows the rapes are part of New York ethos, but it is hard for her to believe that such as outrages can happen even in India. The Calcutta of her dreams is found to be disappearing, "New dreams occurred with each and ball dozer incision in the green and romantic hills. Slow learners like Tara were merely victims" (TTD 199).

Tara's destiny proves that the core of identity is never in nationality but in personality. *Wife* is the story of a slightly neurotic and depressed young woman, Dimple who strangely desires to marry a neurosurgeon but gets married to a mechanical engineer, Amit Basu. She is disappointed in him and the life with him, for in her fantasies, she has imagined an ideal husband and an affluent life based on glossy ads. Despair leads to neurosis. The couple immigrates to the United States a few months after the marriage. And there in the U.S., gossip about rapes, muggings, and murders, her alienation and depression, the indifference of her husband, and above all the media- all these culminated in aggravating her already present neurotic tendency. And in one of the flaring fits of insanity, she stabs her husband with a kitchen knife. A discussion of Dimple's story throws light on Bharati Mukherjee's fine psychological insights into the disintegrating personality of an unfortunate victim of neurosis. As her psychotic spells become more frequent and more intense, she begins to experience death at close quarters, first in dreams, then even in wakefulness. She begins to wonder whether she is really dead or alive. Even her killing of Amit occurs in a free-floating dream-like state. It is "a

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final explosive release of the pent-up tension"(Rajeswar 71). Thus, Dimple falls prey to psychotic depression augmented by culture shock.

In the evolutionary process of achieving self-actualization, first as a daughter and then as a wife, Bharati Mukherjee's woman hero has fully blossomed into the fragrant Jasmine in her third novel *Jasmine.* This novel, *Jasmine,* depicts the success story of a poor Punjabi girl, Jyoti, who has challenged her most hostile fate. Her first challenge is with the astrologer who foretold her widowhood and exile. But once his first prediction comes true, with the death of her husband, she rebels against her widowhood. With the terrible courage of a survivor, she comes to the U.S. and with might and rage of Kali, kills her rapist. She begins a new life, wins the love first of Taylor and then of Bud. But in the end, she leaves Bud, "greedy with wants reckless from hopes"(241).

In the case of Tara and Dimple, it is seen that Fate has never been adverse. Both of them are born and brought up in affluence, possess a good education, and are married off. Only a lack of poor understandings in one and the neurotic tendency in the other have hindered them from achieving self-actualization. But with Jasmine, fate has always been hostile at every turn of her life. She can survive and succeed only with her will to "reposition the stars and her never-yielding courage". Jyoti, as she is named by her parents, which means 'light-giving flame ', has indeed been a never-dying flame all through her life, although she has straddled continents and acquired many identities as Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase, and Jane. Just as a flower is born with fragrance, Jasmine displays an ingrained superior intelligence and courage from her childhood days, and that too in spite of all the restrictions laid on her. She says that it is her third eye that would enable her to peer through the invisible world like a sage. She wants to become a doctor. Her father asks her what she would like to become. She replies, "I want to be a doctor and set up my own clinic in a big town"(*Jasmine* 51)

The heroism she displays in killing the mad dog is an act even the men would not dare to take up. It is a touchstone to her courage and capacity for quick decisions. In the words of Steven G. Kelimen, "Jasmine has indeed achieved self-actualization in America the only land on the earth that gives one ample opportunity to work at making a dream a reality"(84). Thus, Jasmine, the hero of this novel, proves that fate can indeed be outwitted and one can be the author of one's own life.

Personality transformation can be said to be central to all Bharati Mukherjee novels. The different impact expatriation has on each one of her women protagonists, Tara, Dimple and Jasmine, is linked not just with the unpredictability of Darne Luck but with their own different experiences in life and the different world views they have developed. Tara's problem lies in her own inability to align herself either to her Indian or American identity. Not having acquired the maturity of mind to realise that human potential is above national identities, she alternately feels nostalgic about childhood memories of her native country and intense love for her foreign husband. Her intense desire for belongingness brings about a transformation in her personality. Dimple is too eager for a change. She does not turn between divided loyalties like Tara. She wants to be transported to a radically different world. The 'world' she wants to flee is not the world of geographical territories but the world of sheer subjectivism. The images

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they see on the TV make her alter her expectations of life. Her feelings and all her actions, including the killing of her husband, are 'shadows' cast on her personality by violence-ridden media.

Tara and Dimple seem to be victims of the changes in the external scene, by them in the form of cultural discrepancies or psychological maladjustments. But Jasmine is totally different. Though she is more battered by fate than the other two in terms of the ordeals she has to go through, she keeps her cool. If 'to be Indian or American' is Tara's problem and 'to be anybody but by herself' is Dimple's problem. Jasmine's problem is how to retain the sanctity of herself from the encroachment of both culture and convention. Her destiny is shaped not by her own self and discovering that Indian dreams lay not in the land of America but in hearts like her fiercely yearning for freedom and fulfilment. At each phase in her life, she has to literally and figuratively bid farewell to a particular way of life, and each time she is found to be proceeding with courage and determination. In her final farewell to Bud also, she is content to link her life with Taylor not just to live happily 'even after' but to fare forward in the adventurous portals of life. It is this eagerness to espouse full responsibility for her own future that makes Jasmine emerge as a 'hero', almost a powerful personality with a profound transformation in her character and attitude. In short, mental mettle is revealed in the willingness to venture, and it is in this scene that Bharati Mukherjee's heroines deserve to be called heroes, asserting their place as chief protagonists, making the male protagonists take a back seat.

To conclude, all protagonists in Bharati Mukherjee's novels are Indian women, who take the heroic decision to emigrate-hence expatriates. They have the willingness to adventure, thereby trying to create their own happiness, unbothered by conditionality.

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