

Quest for Identity of Women Protagonists in the Novels of Bharati Mukherjee and Shashi Deshpande

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*"Women are natural story tellers even when they don't write or publish. And in India we have seen how the marvellous Tarulata (Toru Dutt) wrote both a French and an English novel before she died at the age of 21 (1877). Other women writers too have since made their mark in Indian Fiction in English."*¹

– K. R. S. Iyengar

Indian writing in English has acquired a great significance in recent years, not only in India but throughout the globe. A large number of Indians use the English language as a medium of creative expression. In the fifty two years of Independent India, we have progressed in many fields; in the field of writing too there has been a great flowering, and the contribution of Indian women writers, especially novelists, is really remarkable.

Fiction is one of the most powerful and characteristic expressions. It is the latest literary form to be evolved, and the most dominant in the twentieth century. Writers like Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabwala, Anita Desai, Gita Mehta, Gita Hariharan, Namita Gokhale, Bharati Mukherjee, Nina Sabah, Shashi Deshpande, Uma Vasudev, Shobha De, Kalindi Sen Gupta, Arundhati Roy and Manju Kapoor through their writings, very successfully and skillfully, capture the Indian ethos.

Bharati Mukherjee, in an interview by The Time of India, October 1, 1989 states:

We immigrants have fascinating tales to relate. Many of us have lived in newly independent or emerging countries.....when we uproot ourselves from those countries and comes here, either by choice or out of necessity, we suddenly must absorb two hundred years of American History and learned to adopt to American society....I attempt 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 has been widely acknowledged as voice of expatriate immigrant sensibility. Expatriation is quite a wide spread phenomenon in this century and George Steiner describes the expatriate writer as "the contemporary everyman"² Uma Parameshwaram considers the phrase "the expatriate sensibility as a legitimate literary term in the context of today's commonwealth Literature."³ In common-wealth literature, one is at first struck by the bewildering variety of nations, facing numerous problems of identity in terms of culture, custom and belief. In some cases one finds a very strong resistance to its folk-culture, rituals and beliefs. While in other cases one finds a gradual process of assimilation or eclipsation all these experiences faced by the immigrants in various Common-wealth countries, however, result into an attempt at acceleration and adaptation.

Bharati Mukherjee as an Indian writer occupies unique position among her literary colleagues "the foremost chronicler of the multicultural New America."⁴ She wrote her first novel, *The Tiger's Daughter* in 1972 and the next *Wife* in 1975. Notwithstanding the relatively 'cordial reception' of her first two new novels, ten years passed before the publication of her third piece of fiction. In between she produced works of other genres and

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non-fictional writing in collaboration with her husband – *Days and Nights in Calcutta* (1977), *Kautilya's Concept of Diplomacy: A New Interpretation* (1976). Her decision not to write fiction temporarily was not made by choice, for Canada had by the 1970s become, for the author a place of rabid racial discrimination." As a result of the influx of South Asian immigrants into Canada, 'frightening outbursts' of Paki-bashing and dot-busting' towards Asian by white Canadians started taking place She tells Alison Carb:

The 1970s were horrendous years for Indians in Canada. There was a lot of bigotry against Canadian citizens of Indian origin, specially in Toronto and it upset me terribly when I encountered this or saw other people expressing it.⁵

Bharati Mukherjee noticed a pattern of discrimination for she was refused services in stores and she further says, "I would have to board a bus last when I had been the first person in line."⁶ She wrote an article, "An invisible Woman on Racial Strife in Canada". The essay is a blistering reflection on those years. She writes, "Many, including myself, left Canada unable to keep our twin halves together."⁷ This essay appeared in *Saturday Night* and won her the National Magazine Award.

Shashi Deshpande's very first novel *Roots and Shadows* in its own right is a work of great merit winning the author the Thirumala Rangammal Prize in 1984. Later she has been the recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award for 1990 for her *That Long Silence* and the Naiyangud Tirumalamba Award for 1990 for *The Dark Hold No Terrors*. These recognitions have proved that she wields her pen with a mastery that she stands out as an unrivalled artist in her own creative spheres. Her main subject of discussion is adjustment problems and conflicts of educated middle-class women who have to reconcile to the traditions and customs in spite of their desire to prove their individual identity in the society. Her women vehemently reject whatever seems from the past. They do not wish to look back but move on and make a place of their own in the male society.

Shashi Deshpande has given a clarion call to the women through her novels to awaken them to their worth in the society. She cannot be called a true feminist as per the definition put forth by her foreign counterparts because she stresses feminine freedom without open revolt and exclusion of male from their life. Abiding by the norms of our culture and society, Shashi Deshpande does not deny the necessity of the existence of man in a woman's life in our country, but at the same time, she defies total subjugation of woman before man absolving herself of her responsibilities towards herself as a human being. Awareness and awakening are two milestones which have to be memorized by each woman of today. They alone can uphold their identity and march on shouldering the hardships and hurdles which come in its wake. This campaign is not easy for common women but a writer like Shashi Deshpande has provided us with enough insinuations through her novels in which each protagonist is one amongst a common woman and has found a way out at the end. In *Roots and Shadows*, Indu, and in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Sanu present themselves as the women who want to go in self-quest and in the process, free themselves from the inhibition of the society, culture, nature and also from their own conflicting emotions.

The protagonist Jaya of *The Long Silence* is a perfect representative of the modern woman of today. Her ambivalence and consequent mental turmoil make her a perfect picture of present women. Through Jaya's character Shashi Deshpande has tried to portray the picture of a contemporary educated independent minded woman who undergoes a mental ordeal as she cannot reconcile to her husband's ignorance of her ambition and also cannot forsake him simply because a husband in our society is like a 'sheltering tree' without which life of an Indian woman becomes tedious.

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Shashi Deshpande upholds marriage as the social infrastructure of a healthy society. What is painful is the persona of the wife and not the institution of marriage. When the protagonist compromises with the family, she does not do so as a mere person to be taken for granted but as an individual with personal aspiration and desires. Jaya, in *That Long Silence*, undergoes a psychological tussle when the compliant Suhasini, her new name after marriage, is confronted with defiant Jaya whose animus had been sharpened by her father when young. Her period of married life comprises confrontations between the two phases of her personality where the latter had to be trampled in order to approach her husband's ego and save her marriage. But as comes off an inevitable outcome, Jaya is forced to choose between the two and put an end to a continuous struggle between the two phases of her personality which has totally left her thwarted and uprooted. Towards the end, she comes out, to be a decided and determined person who now knows how to strike a balance between her family and her identity in the family.

With the up thrust of women writers like Shashi Deshpande and many others, various problems and injustices against women have been spotlighted and has also proved to awaken women to their capabilities and rights.

Bharati Mukherjee through her female protagonists expresses her concern for the problems of assimilation, the assimilation of traditional Indian mode of living with new materialistic values encouraged by American society. Fear, constant anxiety, the obsession of 'not belonging,' the panic of crime-world and the final retreat to Indian spiritualism is the recurrent motif in the novels like *Jasmine*, *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Wife and Desirable Daughters*. Commenting on this aspect in the novels of Bharati Mukherjee, Pushpa N. Parekh comments:

Fear, anger, pain, bitterness, confusion, silence, irony, humour, as well as pathos underline her observations as she discovers for herself the undefined median between the preservation of old world and the assimilation into the new one. (197-211)⁸

In Bharati Mukherjee's novels, her woman characters are the victims of double civilization in their fighting against the atrocities said to be predominantly male ethos. In *Desirable Daughters* she has struck a balance between the past and the present through a deft blending of tradition and modernity. Thus she achieves through the character of Tara who has outwardly served the links with tradition, but is also very much rooted to the modern zeitgeist. She is searingly conscious of her existential predicament which is mirrored in the epigraph:

No one behind, no one ahead, the path the ancients cleared are closed. And the other path everyone's path... goes nowhere. I am alone and find my way.
("Epigraph" to the Novel)

Tara is thus the alienated self, languishing in the angst and ennui of the diasporic experience which to Sushila Nasta is "not only an unrequited desire for a lost homeland but also a homing desire to come to terms with an exile from it." (07) She is yet to carve out a niche for herself. She is the "nowhere woman" oscillating between the nostalgic fascinations of a traditional past and the romantic allurements of the present. Like the other diasporic characters of Bharati Mukherjee she "stands on the shaky ground where East meets West and the sound of cultures clashing could shatter glass." (Los Angeles Times).

Shashi Deshpande has successfully projected the urges, dreams and desires of Indian woman, in particular the middle class housewife who refuses to be suffocated by her environment. Such as Jaya in *That Long Silence*, who seeks fulfillment outside her marriage.

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She depicts woman in the context of the contemporary world, as an individual with freedom of choices. She portrays life in all its depth and complexity in her novels. She shows a deep insight into human nature and at the same time she catches the epiphanies of life in her work. She views life with a keen perception, sharp sensibility, an acute sense of observation and a fine sensibility.

Bharati Mukherjee is fascinated by people with a fluid identity, people who are adventurous, who are constantly on the go, people who live a life in transit, who have to forgo their former identities in order to accommodate and assimilate themselves in another country, in order to acquire the identity of the other. Through Tara of *Desirable Daughters*, Bharati Mukherjee voices her belief in the individual's liberty and freedom to mould herself to reconstruct and reshape her identity. She depicts a liquid society in her novels, which means a society in flux. It is a society of constant flow, flow of migrants, the flow of machines, flow of criminals, flow of extraterritorial power-structures, flow of people and commodities. Even we have the crossing of geographical boundaries when Tara in an essay to search her roots remembers her ancestral ties with Tara Lata, the "Tree Bride" of Mishtiganj. The novel is toned with excessive belongingness, homing desires, mundane attitudes, conflictual regionalism and dismemberment of the national myth. Quest for identity is a Third World concept in the post-colonial context that explores both history and values. Tara's quest for identity in the migrant society of affluent Indians and multicultural landscape of global migrants reveal the spaces of tradition and fixed sense of identity of immigrant Indians in their situatedness. In a review to *The Middleman* in Midday Bob Scocochis states:

Bharati Mukherjee has a genius for kidnapping our cultures, the returning it to us, with a ruby in its ear, cardamom on its breath, gold threads of syncretism woven through its imagination.⁹

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