

CONCEPT OF INDIAN MARRIAGES AND WOMEN IDENTITY IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE

Dr. LIBERATA MARIA LUCAS,
Asst.Professor of English,
Bon Secours College for women,
Vilar Bypass,
THANJAVUR.

ABSTRACT

The universe is energy and man seems to create his/her own negatives or positive energy. If one goes against the flow, it creates friction. Fiction by women writers constitutes a major segment of contemporary writings in English. It provides an insights, a wealth of understanding, reservoir of meanings and a basis of discussion. One of the reasons that women have, in such a large number, taken up their pen is because it has allowed them to create their own world, free from the direct inference from men. Similarly, so many women have taken to reading of women's writing. It has allowed a 'safe place' from which they can explore a wide range of experience of the world, from which they can identify with a range of characters and a variety of existence. Thus women's writing has occupied such a significant and central place in women's lives, it is also why women's writing can share much the same disparaged status as women in the world dominated by men. Bharati Mukherjee's novels range widely across time and space, dealing especially with the consequences that emerges out of culture and tradition of the East and West in the host countries. All her novels are female centered and the changing psyche of the protagonists, who hail from India. This paper focuses on the issues of marriage according to the Indian sensibility of parents, who consider it as their holy duty and how the female characters struggle to create an identify in their patriarchal society.

KEY WORDS: Identity, Indian culture, tradition, patriarchal, dowry, education, girl-child, marriage, family, struggle.

Bharati Mukherjee's novels explores the opposition of tradition and modernity. It creates a new orientations of women identity dealing with the conservative thoughts of the patriarchal system, where the parents decide the future of their girl child according to their past beliefs. Similarly they prepare them according to their plans, without considering the desire of the girl child. Once the girl is grown up for a marriage age, the Indian parents harbor some fear that the girl child any soil the name of the family and before she does, they start looking out for a suitable boy. The boy should match with the horoscope of the girl, he should equal their religion, education and economic status. Young Indian girls are usually found to conjure visions of a husband. The novel "Wife" is the story of a young Indian woman, Dimple. (she was dark and had a inferior complex about herself) To prepare Dimple for a marriage preparation, her parents send her for beauty treatment, photo session etc., so that she could face the marriage market Dimple desires to marry a neurosurgeon and she also fantasizes about young men such as young cabinet ministers, heroes etc. Her parents decide Amit, an engineer for her husband, Dimple reconciles to the Bengali ideal of a perfect passive wife, along with the demands of real life.

Jasmine the protagonist of the novel “Jasmine” was the fifth daughter of the nine children. Being born a girl was a curse itself because by the time her turn comes for marriage, the family may not have enough to pay the dowry. Jasmine’s mother was a snipper, she loved her so much that in order to spare her the pain of dowry less bride, she would choke her neck and red bruise of fingerprints was found around Jasmine’s throat. Due to poverty her grandmother Didama arranges a rich widower with three children to be married to Jasmine, so that she could lead a comfortable life. The parents did not seek the approval of Jasmine. But when she marries Prakash willingly and become a widow. Didama accuses her of getting married in a court like Christians and it became a curse for her, because no horoscope was matched for their compatibility and Prakash died because of god’s punishment as he desired to abandon India and go to America for earning more money. One side Didama wanted Jasmine to lead a rich life with the widower, on the other side she blames Prakash just because he desired for a better material world.

Describable Daughters, the first novel in Bharati Mukherjee’s trilogy, is a tale of immigrants and the attitude of the three sisters – Padma, Parvati and Tara and their ways of dealing with situations. The prologue of this novel talks about Tara Lata, the Tree bride, daughter of Jai Krishna Gangooly and grand aunt of Tara Chatterjee. Tara Lata’s would be husband dies of a snake bite, for which she was accused by her father-in-law as unlucky and belonging to a cursed clan. Tara Lata was only five years old, and child marriages was very much prevalent then, Jai Krishna Gangooly got his daughter Tara immediately married to a ‘tree’, thus saving her from the taunt of the in-laws, the society, and from a life-long widowhood, he did not feel the need to ask Tara Lata’s opinion, all he thought was saving his daughter from the harassment and cruelty of the inlaws. Similarly destiny seemed to infer into Tara of ‘Desirable Daughters’, where Tara’s father Motilal followed the tradition and arranged the marriage of Tara his third daughter. He saw Bish to be “the best husband in the market” and Tara followed the footsteps of her fathers decision. Tara was nineteen year old, holder of M.A. degree, committed for more honours, yet could not raise her voice against her patriarch. Padma was already married and established in New York, Tara could not follow in the footsteps of Paravati who married aboy of her own choice.

Anjali Bose, the protagonist of “Miss New India” comes from a traditional Bengali family, her family members were restricted by mythological norms of the society, where they did not cross the border of morality and linked with the patriarchal society. Anjali’s father, Mr.Prafull Bose, a typical Hindu duty bound father, got his elder daughter, Sonali, married to a man chosen by him. Sonali’s marriage became a failure and she was accused of ruining the honour of the family. “The patriarchal legal principles influence the society and results in male superiority. The masculinization of the society leaving little room for the female growth oppresses women” (Sujatha and Gokilavani 73). Same way Mr.Bose, planned to get Anjali married to a suitable boy of his own choice for the sake of family reputation. He found SubodhMitra, who was the seventy fifth boy for marriage inspection. He was tall and handsome, a distant relative, an engineer with a MBA degree, his family had powerful connections in government, so he could never be unemployed. Anjali exhausted every possible reason for rejecting him. To enhance the possibilities of marriage, Anjali’s parents bestowed special attention on her regarding her food, new saris, trips to gold stores, beauty parlor etc. Anjali knew that marriage will lead her to a life of confinement of all her ambitions, but she agreed to the wishes of her parents as Mr.Bose made it clear that it was not her happiness but the name and reputation of the family was important.

Her parents were ready to face another failed marriage in their family, as long as they have done their duty of getting their daughters married in time. According to the Indian traditional sensibility, girls will be allowed to leave the house only as a bride of a man chosen by the father. When the marriage negotiation of Anjali and SubodhMitra turns out unpleasant, Anjali runs away from Gauripur to Bangalore to create her own identity. Her father could not bear this humiliation and he commits suicide. “It demands the sacrifice of all ambitions, liberty and Identity for the sake of happy family life” (Tandon 131)

To create an identity, Dimple of “Wife” believed that; “Marriage, she was sure, would free her, fill her with passion. Discreet and virgin, she waited for real life to begin” (Wife 13) When she plans to go to America with her husband, she thought she would live with freedom and happiness, create an identity for herself in American clothes and western life-style. But, Amit being a traditionalist, does even allow her to take up a job and this leads her to neurotic demands. In “Jasmine” the protagonist, after she becomes a widow of Prakash, she decides, not stagnate herself or go back to live like her mother and grandmother. She wants to fulfill the mission of Prakash and leaves to America., There she faces many trials and tribulations, but does not give up or loose her hopes. She adapts and transforms herself to the American life style without a feeling of guilt. Thus Jasmine achieves self-actualization in not exercising of the Indian or American but the human rights to be at peace with herself.

In “Desirable Daughters” Bish the husband of Tara was a traditionalist, and Tara also desired for the liberating promises of America after marriage. She awaited to travel the wider world, but had to stay at home because of the baby, while Bish travelled to many countries. Bish lived in a culture of vigilance, Indian men whatever their faults are programmed to provide for their wives and children, Tara felt; “If I had wanted only to be provided for, stupendously, provided for inside the gated community, endlessly on display at dinners and openings, I would have stayed in Atherton “(D.D, 27). Tara was not satisfied with all the material comforts provided by Bish. To search for happiness and her identity, she walks out of his life and becomes a live-in-partner with Andy. On the other hand love-marriage was tragic enough in Tara’s traditional family, but Parvati’s rebelliousness lead her to a love-match with Aurobindo Banerjee and she was more conventional of the three sisters by adapting to the patriarchal set up in India by creating a high class standard of living Padma, after getting married to Harish Mehta, made an identity for herself in New York, as a celebrity, that probably she would not have been able to do if she had to marry in Indian traditional set up.

Anjali Bose growing in the midst of her traditional town had a quest for freedom and in her soul, she longed to fly high in the sky without having any bondage. Bharati Mukherjee adds that Anjali might provide insight into the new India but, she might not be entirely accurate representative of the new generation of Indian’s shaping the countries economy. After all the hurdles Anjali faced in the city culture of Bangalore, she realizes that job is the key to happiness and it will bring her money, respect and power. Being morally slippery, Anjali experiences and moves on unlike her sister and mother, she gets in touch with Mr. Gujral for a job. Anjali becomes aware that money will bring her a transformation from a girl of Gauripur into a woman from Bangalore. The author depicts this transformation and transition as a positive and an optimistic journey. Thus the novel “Miss New India” is a record of the heroine’s discovery of both place and identity, showing that life at the margin has its comforts and there is creativity and acceptance.

In Indian patriarchal society daughter and her life is directly linked with the honour of the family. The girls in an Indian society are allowed to leave their home only as a bride of a man selected by the parents. Bharati Mukherjee exposes the truth of Indian society, by exploring the inner conscience of aspiring girls who become the victim of early marriage and finish their potential within the four walls of the house. The author ridicules the Indian sensibility about education of women in which job or personal growth is not of much important but only to enhance the marriage market value. Dimple in “Wife is not allowed to take up a job. Anjali of “Miss New India” in sent for spoken English course by her father, to stand a better chance for marriage, while Anjali takes this course as a positive investment, that would help her in taking tutorial classes for others, for her survival in case any misfortune turns up in her life. The author also tries to condemn the child marriage system in India, where Tara Lata, the Tree bride is married to a Tree at an age of five. Indian sensibility of having a girl child is viewed as a curse and a burden. It is seen how, Mr. Bose would fire his wife for giving birth to only daughters. He would remark; that it is an ancestral curse and

that, the daughters are a burden, as he has to save his earning for the dowry of Sonali and Anjali, without having built his own house. Also in 'Jasmine', her mother tries to strangle Jasmine to save her from dowry death.

The Indian patriarchal duty is to find someone equally good for their daughters, in terms of family, caste, religion and material comforts. It is observed when Didama accuses Jasmine of not getting married to a widower with three children, she determines Jasmine's future happiness in terms of wealth. The irony is noticed in Tara of "Desirable Daughters", where Tara has all the material comforts, but it does not guarantee her marital bliss. Mukherjee has pointed out the short coming of the Indian men's feudal mentality, who think of earning money, neglecting the physical and mental needs of the wife. When Padma advises Tara on her divorce: and though Tara sways away, she ultimately returns back to the fold to claim her Indian sensibility of family reputation. Bharati Mukherjee wants to say that though India is lagging in something, it attracts every immigrants towards the Indian family system to sustain a marriage and its family life. Her novels explores the implications of the patriarchal system of match making, that is based on astrology and worldly status, rather than the personal understandings. "The consideration of family honour, one's status as wife and mother, etc. suppress the protagonist, if not she is portrayed as a person tormented with guilt."(Sujatha and Gokilavani 47)

In the contemporary time of liberalization and globalization, women's roles have changed drastically. They should not be looked upon only as a liability or as an object of gratification, confined to the conservative family restrictions because they have started to challenge the patriarchal marriage system to fulfill their desires and ambitions Mukherjee admits in her interview. "Her characters are a breed of pioneers who have the guts to forsake a predictable life in order to throw themselves into a new one"(Interview in the Indian Express Sunday magazine)

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