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REMODELLING THE VICTIMS BY BHARATHI MUKHERJEE IN HER NOVELS  
*DESIRABLE DAUGHTERS, THE HOLDER OF THE WORLD AND THE TIGER'S DAUGHTER*

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ABSTRACT

The modern women writers have been successful in delineating the universal predicament of an alienated individual very insightfully. One such great woman writer Bharathi Mukherjee has attempted to remodel the victims to become victors. The protagonists of her novels *The Desirable Daughters*, *The Holder of the World* and *The Tiger's Daughter* in their anguish and desire to rule over the action, fail to distinguish between right and wrong and resort to violence at the end but have a gratifying sense of success in their lives. By portraying the victorious lives of these supposed to be victims, Mukherjee has evinced a lot of interest in the readers to study their lives. The process of remodeling of these victims happens by being non conformists of their culture and situations. They become successful in their idea by a careful and definite interplay of reality and fantasy. Self-awareness leading to enlightenment and self-realization are the techniques which help them to remodel themselves and emerge as victors

Keywords: victims, victors, challenge, individual freedom, identity crisis.

Discussion

Indian women writers have striven their best to reconstruct the existing norms of living set for women to new norms for an experiential living in the present. The geographical positioning of the women or the culture does not change the predicament of the women which has been much discussed by many. Mukherjee has explored the possibilities of escapism for these women who are prepared to defy their predicament in their own way.

Indian women particularly conditioned by traditions and conventions willingly submit to be the custodians of family honour and prestige at the expense of personal happiness and comfort. When their suffering and sacrificing individuality is undermined, they dare to defy the traditions and conventions and become non-conformists to the society. When there is a mutual interaction between individual responsibility and social causation, it creates a crisis. The writers chosen for this study implicitly crave for the upliftment of such people who are oppressed and neglected by society. The victims of marriage, fantasy and society are deprived of their individuality and live in a world of their own, oppressed by their own desire. Mukherjee highlights this theme of human deprivation through her protagonists and they also steer the way to extricate them from the bondage in a discreet and subtle way.

As a mark of liberation, the women protagonists of Mukherjee resort to various modes of rebellion spreading from silence to violence which become contentious in nature for the readers. The rebelliousness in them evolves in helping them recognize their strength, achieve the point of self-realization, resist dependence and decide independently.

In the novel **Desirable Daughters**, Mukherjee presents Tara Chatterjee in the lead role, as the youngest daughter of a privileged Indian family. The observations and reactions are autobiographical and allegorical of Mukherjee's experiences in the western countries. Mukherjee paints a clear picture giving attention to social class, castes, and the clash between old and new India. The sisters spend a great deal of time remembering their place and living up to an image that is slowly losing superiority. Tara leaves India to marry a computer genius and a multi-millionaire Bishwapriya Chatterjee. At thirty-six, Tara is a divorced single mother living in a remodeled house in San Francisco with her fifteen-year-old son and her red-bearded, ex-biker Buddhist boyfriend, bringing shame to the family and providing evidence that she's forgetting her heritage and family position back home.

Tara's comfortable life ends with the arrival of a young man claiming to be her nephew. When Chris Dey shows up in her living room, claiming to be the illegitimate son of her eldest sister, Padma, Tara questions her perceptions about her life with her family in Calcutta in the late fifties and early sixties. As Chris's involvement in her life becomes more sinister, Tara struggles to unravel the secrecy surrounding her past, to discover the truth behind her sisters' prevarications and fragmented stories. If he speaks the truth, it would mean that Tara's sister secretly had a baby twenty-five years ago. Social custom and proper Indian upbringing prevent Tara from simply blurting out her suspicions. Yet, keeping quiet may put her family in danger. The quest for more information leads Tara on a journey of self-discovery. The tale grows more complex as it progresses. There are many names dropped, religions judged and castes prioritized. Tara's search for answers leads her to New York, where she's introduced to her sister's Indian world. The "mysterious son" guides the plot, but Tara's re-emerging self-awareness is what makes this story shine.

Tara's story begins in Calcutta as the author depicts the colonial Bengali society, with the cultural dilemmas and the emergent social reforms seeping in through the Brahmo Samaj Movement and the scenario moves on to California, juxtaposing it with the westernized lives of Indians. Tara's quest for identity commences when her traditional Brahmin roots and American interludes coincide through which Mukherjee portrays the contrasting cultures and her eternal dilemmas. When she lives in San Francisco, she intermittently reminisces about her Bengali Brahmin childhood. She's not a jolly character; she's carrying around a huge weight, being pulled in two different directions, "I'll never be, a modern woman" (DD 27), although there is some self-knowledge gained at the end. Tara comes to terms with history and legacy after looking back at her family's past and into the future. She travels between the two worlds, between being American and Indian, both physically and psychologically. The novel is a marvellous exploration of first generation Indian-American culture-clash identity, "I feel just invisible but heroically invisible, a border-crashing claimant of all people's legacies" (DD 79), with an intriguing conspiracy theme explicating the transformation in the attitudes of women who claim to have accomplished liberation from victimization.

For the first time in years, Tara is shaken out of her complacency; her life has a fault line that will ultimately affect her son, ex-husband and eldest sister in a brilliant and convoluted plot characteristic of this author. No assumption or relationship is left untouched as Tara's "civilized" emotional paralysis is shattered and her family stalked by menace.

"Hate?" I felt myself collapsing suddenly, like a balloon hitting the ceiling and darting out of control all over the room. I love my sisters. It's the purest love I've ever known. Hate is the last thing I could feel for them; it's the only emotion that never entered our little sisterhood. If I don't have them to talk to and believe in, I have nothing. (DD 40)

The shallow intercontinental relationships of the three sisters are exposed to harsh reality. For Tara, this upheaval is life-changing, closing the chapter on innocence and opening the door to an unexpected future. With utter simplicity and craftiness, Mukherjee has prepared a fictional feast, rich in cultural detail and the endless complications of love and belonging.

While Mukherjee's protagonist Jasmine in **Jasmine** is a present-day account of the changing identities of a young Indian woman, who emigrated from India to America after the death of her husband, **The Holder of the World**, also by Mukherjee, is set in two different time zones, the seventeenth and twentieth centuries, and jumps between Puritan New England, present-day America, Britain, and the colonial India and its account of a modern-day asset hunter's fascination with Hannah Prynne, the Salem Bibi.

**The Holder of the World** is a beautiful narration about Hannah Easton, a woman born in Massachusetts who travels to India. She becomes involved with a few Indian lovers and eventually a king who gives her a diamond known as the Emperor's Tear (Alam 120). The story is told through the detective Beigh Masters searching for the diamond and Hannah's viewpoint. Mukherjee's focus continues to be on immigrant women and their freedom from relationships to become individuals. She also uses her female characters to explore the spatio-temporal (from Massachusetts to India) connection between different cultures.

Hannah was born in a period when the 1660's were a win-or-die decade for the English colonists. As Mukherjee says, "Hannah's subsequent years can be read as a sermon on any topic, as proof of any interpretation" (HW 30). While her mother's fall is considered more sinful than the fall of man, the life of Hannah is a witness of the sin itself. The counter act of Hannah was a deliberate attempt to neutralize her shame by emulating her mother's behavior.

Hannah is obstinate at restoring her dignity. "If status had mattered to Hannah, she would have stayed in Stepney. Her curiosity was robust. She wanted to earn, not inherit, dignity. She moved on. Without regrets." (HW 90) There are many things that Hannah acquired along with the innate qualities within her. She became an ideal correspondent, the perfect reporter, and learned to cultivate her garden too. Her identity as a healer with medico-sensibility was discovered when she intervened with the trained physician, Dr. Aubrey and helped him clinically. The doctor attested her ability saying, "She was not just a sailor's widow; she was in some way a woman blessed with healing powers.... Yes, it was true: she could regenerate skin and other scarring" (HW 83) which otherwise could have been considered as occult affinity. The victory of her special abilities surmised after twenty years and 'she began to trust the voices inside her' and by the spring of 1694, the voice had found a shape.

Bhagmati, the one-time servant girl had a vital role in the lives of the English masters. Born as Bindu Bashini in a merchant family, she was thrown into the river after being violated by river pirates when she was just ten. She managed to swim across the river literally and metaphorically, in her life, "Bindu, twice a victim, had run from her family, from her village, from all the familiar taboos and traditions" (HW223-4). When the factor Henry Hedges employed her for scrubbing the cooking pots in his house, fate, according to her, changed her life. Bindu who starts her life as a servant in the factor's house later becomes the mistress of Hedges.

The deaths of the male characters are described in remarkably similar terms. In **Jasmine**, the heroine kills her rapist with the knife that Kingsland has given her: "I pulled the bedspread off the bed and threw it over him and then began stabbing wildly through the cloth, as the human form beneath it grew smaller and smaller" (J 119). Hannah also kills with a knife:

Hannah thrust the long dagger she'd hidden in the fold of her sari into the exposed flesh under Morad Farah's battle tunic, through the muscles and organs, back across to the spine itself. Even his scream was cut short, barely an in-suck of breath, barely the registering of pain and death from an unexpected source. (HW 249)

Hannah and Jasmine do not hesitate to use violence, either to preserve their own life or to protect the lives of others; through destruction, they re-create themselves.

Like Jasmine, Hannah and Bhagmati of **The Holder of the World** are associated with movement changing names and shifting identities, rather than a fixed identity of home. They move beyond the protected circles of gendered space. Both Hannah and Bhagmati as companions use both sexuality and violence in power struggles with dominant authorities. Unlike Hannah, Bhagmati cannot choose to transgress boundaries. She is more dependent upon the protection of others: "She absolutely trusted Hedges' ability to keep foreignness at bay, just as she trusted Raja Singh to keep her safe" (HW 224). Bhagmati is a servant for most of the narrative; as a servant, she is "invisible to the women of White Town" (HW 133). Bhagmati is 'erased' by her race, class, and gender. Race, class, and gender define and limit Bhagmati's identity.

According to Appiah, **The Holder of the World** "...offers us a model of cultural cross-pollination and also argues that the novel resists summarizing and any attempt to summarize the novel is likely to disfigure drama into melodrama". Like Jasmine, who describes herself as "cocooning a cosmos" (J 224), Hannah contains worlds within her and she is literally the holder of the world. She establishes a link between the seventeenth century Massachusetts and pre-colonial Mughal India.

**The Tiger's Daughter** is a story about a young girl named Tara who ventures back to India after many years of being away only to return to poverty and turmoil. This story parallels Mukherjee's own venture back to India with Clark Blaise in 1973 when she was deeply affected by the chaos and poverty of India and mistreatment of women in the name of tradition.

It is a story of a west-educated girl returning to India and encounters the conflicts existing in the two cultures. The loneliness and the sense of loss start to affect her adversely. Tara's sense of loss is heightened by the claustrophobic rape by the politician Tuntunwala, a moral lapse that is as inimical to her status and self-identity as it is insidious to her role as a wife. Her sense of her own subservience reiterates her marginality, which is further compounded by her continuing frustration in adjusting to her old environment and new experiences. Though "tragedy was not uncommon in Calcutta... stretching before her was the vision of modern India" (TTD 117) which marred the visit of Tara. Yet her doubts and conflicts are resolved by the strength and determination of her parents.

Though the novels of Mukherjee follow the same trajectory of the lack of belongingness and rootlessness of different classes of Indian society in India and abroad, the ultimate aim of projecting their success amidst the devastating clash of cultures and traditions is worthy to be noted and appreciated. The ambivalent sense of identity gets reflected in almost all the protagonists. Suffering and alienation, which seem to be manifestations of spiritual crisis, tackled by most of the protagonists single handed shows their efficacy in finding resolutions. The turbulences in their lives are taken to be the rungs of a ladder to escalate into their world of happiness.

It is true that Mukherjee's novels are steeped in violence and it is through violence that many of the protagonists redeem themselves and affirm their humanity in a world that gives them very little choice to act and manoeuvre. Violence articulates women's predicament in a society where they are doubly victimized. Powerlessness and social deprivation of the major characters in the novels lead to violence both in thought and action. It is through remorseless rendering of violence that the protagonists achieve catharsis of fears, apprehensions and phobias in this world. S.P.Swain in his article "Problems of Identity: A Study of Bharathi Mukherjee's **Desirable Daughters**" has reiterated the theme of Mukherjee in his words, "[she] depicts a liquid society in her novels, i.e. a society in flux. It is a society of constant flow, the flow of migrants, the flow of machines, flow of criminals, flow of 'exterritorial' power structures, flow of people and commodities" (131).

The violent acts of some heroines may be seen as an expression of anguish and desire that lie outside the rule of reason. Foucault refuses to associate madness with any mental or physical change. He attributes the irrational behaviour to actions arising out of delirium. In his work **Madness and Civilization: A History of Madness in the Age of Reason**, he argues, "the ultimate language of madness is that of reason" (95). Insanity is sometimes a form of rebellion, a crucial turning point toward independence. The delirious actions liberate the mind of its passion and release its control over reason, "A rational hold over madness is always possible and necessary, to the very degree that madness is non-reason" (Foucault 107). Consequently, the victims fail to distinguish the right from wrong and good from bad and end up in committing serious offences,

To entrust madness and its empty world directly to the plenitude of a nature which does not deceive because its immediacy does not acknowledge non-being, is to deliver madness both to its own truth (since madness, as a disease, is after all only a natural being), and to its closest contradiction (since delirium, as appearance without content, is the very contrary of the often secret and invisible wealth of nature). This contradiction thus appears as the reason of unreason, in a double sense: it withholds unreason's causes, and at the same time conceals the principle of its suppression. ( Foucault 191)

Foucault's definition estimates the violent acts of the protagonists as the reason for the unreason, which can be considered a sign of success for the victim.

Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in their work **The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Imagination**, note the deteriorating status of women as, "Women in patriarchal societies have historically been reduced to mere properties" (12) They become objects whose subjective self conforms to and is confirmed by male ideology and discourse. All of them die, literally or metaphorically, in order to move beyond restrictions that would fix them in place. Despite the differences in race, class, and economic status Jasmine, Hannah and Bhagmati share many of the same strategies of resistance.

According to Himani Banerjee, art has a multifaceted role, especially in the social relations, which runs,

"It is not only that art, or 'culture' may be used to serve the people in understanding and expressing something but also that it must reformulate itself in terms of social relations" (2).

The novels portray the psychic conflicts of the helpless lot in a society, which foreshadows the destabilization of the established values and the replacement of humane values that promote happiness and creates a sense of victory in the minds of the concerned.

While the identities of the protagonists of Mukherjee are fluid and often change, the space they occupy in their own families is also challenged. The writers' intention to reshape and revise the existing hegemonic pattern in contemporary living is almost successful in the novels. The outdated attitudes and opinions, which are inappropriate to the cultural set up of today, are challenged by the protagonists in order to free the society of false idealism. Bharati Mukherjee also believed that a woman's progress must be measured in the context in which it occurs. Some of the protagonists exhibit their capability to transcend the maternal enslavement by their acts of violence. They are not victims but very adaptable, self-possessed, heroic characters that are victors in a different way.

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