

New Woman in Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife, Jasmine* and *The Tree Bride*

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The status of women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few millennia. From equal status with men in ancient times, through the low points of the medieval period to the promotion of equal rights by many reformers, the history of women in India has been eventful. Scholars believe that in ancient India, women enjoyed equal status with men in all spheres of life. Works by ancient Indian grammarians such as Patanjali and Katyayana suggest that women played a pivotal role in the Vedic culture and were given an opportunity to reach their real potential in life. Unfortunately the position of women deteriorated during the medieval period due to the outside influences that had crept in because of the foreign invaders either militarily or culturally. Since then women have often been victims of male oppression and treated like beasts of burden. As a result, women's individual selves lack recognition and hence self-effacement is the only option left to them.

During the British Raj, attempts were made to restore women's status and question some of the forms of oppression. Post-independence, India acquired an identity of its own and thus women too strove hard to attain their own identity. The Feminist Movement which originally started in the west widely affected the Indian sensibility. In 1948, Simone de Beauvoir expressed her disgust with humanity in *The Second Sex*: "This humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him, she is not regarded as an autonomous being...she is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the absolute-she is the Other" (Beauvoir 86). Chaman Nahal defined feminism as "a mode of existence in which the woman is free of the dependence syndrome. There is a dependence syndrome: whether it is the husband or the father or the community or whether it is a religious group, ethnic group. When women free themselves of the dependence syndrome and lead a normal life, my idea of feminism materializes" (Nahal 30). Thus women writers began projecting the image of a 'New Woman' in their writings and feminism, free-sex, identity crisis, self-assertion etc are some of their thematic concerns.

The concept of 'New Woman' began in the west at the turn of the nineteenth-century. Throughout the main part of the nineteenth-century in Britain the great majority of women were content with a subordinate place in home and in society, though a few writers had protested against that state of inequality. Towards the end of the century numerous women were expressing in various ways their discontent with an inferior status and were agitating for inequality with men. This unrest became known as 'the Women Question' and anyone who declared the right to be given an independent place in the community was called a 'New Woman'. According to a joke by Max Beerbohm, "The New Woman sprang fully armed from Ibsen's brain." The term was made famous in 1894 with the publication of Sarah Grand's essay 'The New Aspect of the Woman Question'. In the words of the novelist George Gissing, it was an era of "sexual anarchy"; an era in which the laws governing sexual identity and behavior were

no longer valid. The 'fallen woman' was replaced by the 'New Woman'. The institution of marriage and traditional relations between the sexes were re-examined. Once the door closed behind Ibsen's Nora, social structures oppressing women became the theme of plays by Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw, and novels by George Moore and Thomas Hardy. Shaw supported women's rights, and in *Freedom for Women* (1891) wrote: "Unless woman repudiates her womanliness, her duty to her husband, to her children, to society, to the law, and to everyone but herself, she cannot emancipate herself. It is false to say that woman is now directly the slave of man: she is the immediate slave of duty; and as man's path to freedom is strewn with the wreckage of the duties and ideals he has trampled on, so must hers be." Most of his heroines have the characteristics of a 'New Woman': they are independent in spirit, self confident, clear-headed, morally courageous and emotionally well controlled.

The Woman's Liberation movement of the west has had deep ideological impact on the intellectuals and the educated masses of India. In her essay "Women: Persons or Possessions", Nayantara Sahgal, the noted Indian novelist, castigates those who regard women as 'property' and discourage individuality in them:

When I heard someone remark "we never allow our daughter to go out" or "I can't do that, my husband would not like it", it sounded very peculiar, alien jargon. As if, I thought, women were property, not persons (Sahgal IV).

Women writers are therefore illuminated and this awakening is helping them project in their writings the image of a 'New Woman'. M. Rajeshwar writes, "In such times when radical change is going on all over the county, it has become quite desirable for woman to redefine her new role and determine the parameters so as to become an integral part of family and society, striking a true balance between extreme feminism and the conventional role of subjugation and self-denial."

Bharati Mukherjee's women characters often epitomize the qualities of a 'New Woman'. A significant woman novelist, Bharati Mukherjee is a prominent author of the Indian diaspora. She has evoked the study of feminism in her writings. She is concerned with issues related to women in works like *Wife, Jasmine and The Tree Bride*. In the Introduction to *Conversations with Bharati Mukherjee*, Bradley C. Edwards writes,

Feminism is a major theme throughout Mukherjee's fiction, from Dimple, The protagonist of her second novel who murders her husband, to Tara, the main character of her most recent two novels who divorces and takes a lover. In her essay "A-Four-Hundred-Year-Old Woman," Mukherjee reflects on her inherited position: "I was born into a religion that placed me, a Brahmin, at the top of its hierarchy while condemning me, as a woman, to a role of subservience." Mukherjee's notions of feminism are rooted in her upbringing and the example set by her mother (Edwards xii).

She deals with the phenomenon of migration, her emphasis being on her female characters, their struggle for identity, their psychological trauma and their final emergence as self assertive individuals free from the bondages imposed by relationships of the past. In her 1990, Iowa Review Interview she emphasizes that many of her stories are "about psychological transformation, especially about women immigrants from Asia"(Mukherjee 15). Mukherjee

excels in depicting cross cultural conflicts of her characters and the emotional and psychic consequences of search for self identity. Her heroines endeavor for self realization and finally take control over their destinies. Dimple, Jasmine and Tara Lata, the female protagonists of Mukherjee, pass through tortuous physical, mental and emotional agony, which affects their entire personality largely turning them into a whole new being.

Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife* (1975) centers round the life of Dimple, a twenty years old, timid, middle-class Bengali girl who is eagerly waiting to be married. She has a romantic disposition towards life, a result of reading novels and film magazines which makes her negate the harsh and gruesome realities of life. From the very beginning she is different from normal girls. She has set her heart on marrying a neurosurgeon, but her father is looking for engineers in the matrimonial ads. The author has pin-pointed here the dilemma of the Indian woman whose social role, by tradition, is defined by a patriarchal culture. It is the feminine duty of a woman in a male dominated society to subjugate her feelings and desires to the will of her father. Thus she believes that marriage is a blessing in disguise which will bring her freedom, fortune and perfect happiness, things she is too subservient to ask for in her own family: "Marriage would bring her freedom, cocktail parties on carpeted lawns, fund-raising dinners for noble charities. Marriage would bring her love" (3).

Dimple desires a different kind of life- "an apartment in Chowringhee, her hair done by Chinese girls, trips to New Market for nylon saris" (3). But at the same time, owing to her traditional upbringing, she imagines herself as "Sita, the ideal wife of Hindu legends" (6). She thinks that premarital life is some sort of a dress rehearsal for actual life. What pleases her most is imagining about marrying a man who would give her all materialistic comforts. Meanwhile her father finds a suitable boy for her. He is Amit Kumar Basu, a Consultant engineer. He has applied for immigration in Canada and his job application is pending in Kenya. Dimple is excited about her marriage but after marriage her desires remain unfulfilled. At her in-laws she dislikes everything and her sense of dissatisfaction irritates her. Thus comes a shift in her psychology. She dislikes the new name given to her by her mother-in-law. The apartment is horrid and so is the interior decoration of the apartment. All of a sudden she finds her expectations and dreams shattered. The thought of happiness eludes her mind and she abhors the very idea of being a wife. What's even worse, she regrets her pregnancy. While she is excited about going abroad, she does not want to "carry any relics from her old life" and wants everything to be nice and new (42). In order to get rid of the vile fetus she begins "eating hot green chillies in the hope that her body would return to its normal cycle" (30). Her fanatically killing of the mice suggests her uneasiness with her own pregnancy. At last she skips her way to abortion.

She had skipped rope until her legs grew numb and her stomach burned; then she had poured water from the heavy bucket over her head, shoulders, over the tight little curve of her stomach. She had poured until the last of the blood washed off her legs; then she had collapsed. (42)

This being her first act of assertion marks the commencement of her evolution. She regenerates herself as she has never done before. In view of some critics Dimple's act of abortion is "a sacrament of liberation from the traditional roles and constraints of womanhood." She frees herself from the traditional role of a Hindu wife by revoking her motherhood.

Having immigrated to America, she does not get any consolation from it. The life of New York seems destructive to her and provides little freedom to Indian house wives. She feels isolated from her new surrounding and finds that there is great disparity between her fantasy world and the real world. Instead of showing signs of improvement, she goes worse. She is caught in the crossfire of an American communalism which she is unable to understand. She is completely alienated and has nothing to look forward to. In this new world too, Dimple is hardly permitted to talk of liberation and cannot assert her will. She tries to adopt the modernity and openness of the new land but cannot afford to do so either on account of money or due to her inhibitive and shy nature. Sen's apartment is completely contradictory to what she had imagined. In America also, Amit decides her fate and put constraints upon her. Very often the Sen's have cautioned Amit to keep Dimple away from Ina Mullick so that the former may not get corrupted by her ideas. As a result Amit forbids Dimple from even accepting Ina's drink: "She does not like alcoholic beverages," Amit said. "She does not even like Coke"(77). She is frustrated with Amit who fails to provide her not only physical comfort but also emotional comfort. Her frustration increases and she begins having repulsion for Amit. She begins comparing her husband with the ideal man of her fantasy world and to her utter disgust soon realizes that he is not the man of her dreams. Lack of job makes him self-centred and insensitive. He is oblivious to the emotional turmoil of his wife. When Dimple prepares the salad with great care, he refuses to have it. He even turns down her offer of fixing his tie. Hence the gap between them keeps on increasing and soon Dimple cuts herself away from him to become a reticent introvert. He fails to satisfy her in all aspects-physical, mental, and emotional. He remains indifferent to her psychological imbalances, her insomnia, her inertia, her imbalance, her exhaustion up to the day of his death. She has numerous complaints against life.

She remains confused and frustrated even when they move to the bigger apartment of Mookherjis'. She turns to Ina, Leni and Milt Glasser for support but to they fail in providing her with permanent comfort. Her rebellious spirit generates in her an inner violence and converts her into a glum killer devising almost seven ways of committing suicide. The image of chimera anticipates the upcoming action when like a lion she would pounce on her husband to kill him. "Her own intensity shocked her-she had not considered herself susceptible to violence" but gradually "she began to realize that violence was right, even decent" (117). The story of Dimple bears a close resemblance to that of Maya in Anita Desai's *Cry, The Peacock*. Maya too murders her husband in a rage of madness. Dimple's seduction of Milt is an attempt to find her own identity in America. Dimple here can be compared to Flaubert's Madame Bovary who also searches for independence and self-realization through sexual experimentation. Dimple tries modern dresses of Marsha but they fail to provide her comfort and stability. She is torn between the feminist need to be independent and assertive and the traditional Indian need to be submissive and self-effacing. Finally in a fit of frenzy, out of depression and disgust, she takes out the knife from the kitchen drawer, chooses a spot near her husband's hairline and stabs him repeatedly at the same place seven times. Seven stabs are symbolic of liberation from the bondages imposed by matrimony. Dimple frees herself from the constraints of relationships and regenerates herself through blood.

Thus this final act of Dimple shows her complete transformation into a New Woman. It proves to be negative and descending and is quite contrary to the changes in Jasmine and Tara Lata. Had she lived in India, she would have either reconciled to her frustration or ended up

committing suicide. She would have accepted it as her fate since she would be made to realize that for an Indian wife, her husband is everything. It is the American notion of freedom which makes her act as a rebel against the conservativeness of her dominating husband and helps her get rid of all the predicaments that lie as obstacles in the way of her desired life. She evolves inwardly from a docile, obedient, submissive and typical Indian wife into a dejected, psychotic, sick and furious murderer in order to attain individual freedom.

In a Patriarchal society, women find themselves in shackles of oppression and suppression. Women can only dream of liberation if their male counterparts consider them equivalent to themselves and understand their importance in uplifting the society. Mukherjee in her novel *Jasmine* (1989) deals with this aspect of liberating a woman from the feudal society who owing to her immense strength forges her identity on the American soil. *Jasmine* is primarily a story of evolution, a growth which can be termed as Darwin's Code of Survival. It deals with a widow's successful attempt to reshape her destiny in order to achieve happiness. Jasmine is a fighter, a survivor and an adapter. Her journey through life leads her through many transformations - Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase, Jane. In this novel, unlike *Wife*, Bharati Mukherjee "depicts this transformation and transition as a positive and an optimistic journey" (Malavally). Jaiwanti Dimri is of the opinion that "Dimple and Jasmine are antithetical to each other. Jasmine takes over from Dimple...She is running away for life not escaping from life which is again a positive step" (Dimri 173).

Jasmine is a rebel from the very childhood. At every step she revolts against her fate, the life dawn for her. In this novel, Mukherjee has presented a conflict between tradition and modernity. Jasmine rejects the constraints and traditional values of the patriarchal society in which she is born for the liberal American values. Jyoti hails from a feudalistic society where girls are considered a 'curse', as proved through these lines:" the bruise around her throat was to spare her the agony of a dowry- less marriage" (35). She further tells us:

All over our district, bad luck dogged dowry-less wives, rebellious wives, and barren wives. They fell into wells, they got run over by trains, they burnt to death heating milk on kerosene stoves.(41)

Usha Anand states , "The new woman in the novel *Jasmine* rejects the moribund traditional values and avidly accepts America and American values. The scales are heavily loaded in favor of new, Western values." Jyoti is the fifth daughter of her parents. Since childhood she is bold and intelligent and has the desire to become educated. In the eyes of Masterji, she is his finest ever likely student fit for English education. She revolts against the prophecies of the village astrologer in harsh terms. She says, "You're a crazy old man. You don't now what my future holds!"(3). A disbeliever in the prevalent conviction that "village girls are like cattle; whichever way you lead them, that is the way they will go", she refuses to marry the widower selected by her grandmother and marries Prakash Vijn in a court of law (46).

Prakash sows the seed for liberation in Jyoti. He christens her as Jasmine and says: "you'll quicken the whole world with your perfume" (77). Prakash instills modern values in her which make her bold enough to fight wrong. Pushpa N. Parekh says that through transformation, she learns a lesson that "later empowers her voice with speech" (Parekh 111). Jasmine's odyssey begins with the murder of her husband by Khalsa Lions. Her husband's death does not deter her

courage and she decides to fulfill the dreams of her husband by visiting the institute where he was supposed to get admitted. She is brave enough to leave the country on forged papers. Her first encounter with America is in the words of Malashri Lal, “a regeneration though violence” (Lal 59).

Just after her arrival in Florida, she is raped by Half-Face, the captain of the ship in which she has travelled. Instantly she realizes, “I could not let my personal dishonor disrupt my mission” (118). Goddess Laxmi now assumes the avatar of Goddess Kali by slicing her tongue and kills the demon that has violated her chastity. This act of Jasmine is a kind of self-assertion and reflects a self-affirming transformation.

Post this incident, she begins a new life and reinvents her identity by adapting the American way of life. She gets a support system in the form of Lillian Gordon who names her Jazzy and teaches her the American way of life. Jasmine spends five months in a state of frustration with Prof. Vadhera and his family. Jasmine decides to leave his house when she realizes that her stay in that house would be an impediment in the path of her self-discovery as their “artificially maintained Indian-ness” forces her to lead the life of a widow (145).

In the next stage of her life, a humane Physics Professor called Taylor enters her life who rechristens her as ‘Jase’. She gets independence and becomes self-reliant through her work as ‘day-mummy’ to Duff, the adopted child of Taylor and Wylie. She becomes completely Americanized and also falls in love with Taylor. She seems to be contented with her life but there comes about a drastic shift in her life when she sees the murderer of her husband in New York. She escapes to Iowa where she gets a job of a teller girl in Bud Ripplemayer’s bank. She adopts a new identity as ‘Jane Ripplemayer’ as she becomes a live-in-companion to Bud and stepmother to Bud’s adopted son Du. Violence again creeps in her life when Harlan Kroener shoots Bud for having denied a bank loan to her. She nurses him back to health and in order to please and comfort him, even carries his child in her womb. She is completely alienated and more so when Du leaves the house to revive his identity.

At this juncture, Taylor comes to California to take her back. Her love for Taylor and responsibility to Bud are at loggerheads with each other. She finally chooses to leave with Taylor without any moral scruples or feeling of guilt. The woman who walks out with Taylor “greedy with want and reckless from hope” is entirely different from the woman we had encountered in the beginning of the novel (241). Here is a woman who is ready to explore the best that future has in store for her.

It isn’t guilt that I feel it’s relief. I realize I have already stopped thinking of myself as Jane. Adventure, risk, transformation: the frontier is pushing indoors through uncaulked windows. Watch me reposition the stars, I whisper to the astrologer who floats cross-legged above my kitchen stove(240).

Jasmine defies estrangement in the society and rejects cultural stereotypes. In an interview to *Jouvert : A Journal of Postcolonial Studies* Bharati Mukherjee said, “She is still open to many more self-inventions.” She not only transports us from one place to the other but also from one identity to the other to realize that transformation is inherent in her personality.

Another icon of New Woman is to be found in *The Tree Bride* (2004) in the form of Tara Lata Gangooly who according to legends, marries a tree at the age of five and eventually emerges as a nationalist freedom fighter. She portrays a sense of independence and lack of

inhibition that characterizes a 'New Woman'. *The Tree Bride*, the second in a planned trilogy, is an eloquent portrait of a family steeped in ancient culture and conservative traditions. A brief account of Tara Lata's childhood is found in *Desirable Daughters* (2002), the first part of the trilogy. Tara Lata is one of the three daughters of Jai Krishna Gangooly, a lawyer in the Dacca High Court. Tara's fate has been decided by her father very early in her life. At the age of five, she is expected to marry the thirteen-years-old Surendranath Lahiri who belongs to a wealthy but greedy family of the nearby village. Her father has observed all the ancient Hindu practices – the giving of dowry, caste consciousness, the star charts, and the observance of auspicious days. To Jai Krishna, "his were placid and obedient daughters who would make loving and obedient wives. Tara Lata, his favorite would be no exception" (10). Jai Krishna, in spite of being a student of modern science is dominated by the rigid traditions and conventions of Indian feudal society. Mehmooda Ali Ahmed Shah, considered to be the founder of modern educational system for women, opines that "Indian society has been plagued by the feudal system as far as its treatment to the fair sex is concerned." While the wedding party is travelling through a jungle, the bridegroom dies on account of snake-bite. Tara Lata is held responsible for his demise and bitterly cursed: "Your happiness-wrecking daughter is responsible: may she die as horrible a death"(11). In order to save her from the fate of a "despised ghar – jalani, a woman who brings – misfortune – and death to her family", Tara Lata's father decides to tie her knot with a sundari tree (15). Thus begins her life of life-long virginity.

She grows-up playing with Sameena, the cook's daughter, in the dark glade of uvari trees planted around her house. In spite of living in a remote village, she teaches herself to read and write Bengali and English. She is very well read and in 1931, she is even familiar with the works of George Orwell. She even teaches her servants to read and write and then sends them to remote villages to teach five others. Vertie Treadwell remarks, "Well, she was another one of them. She'd managed to take the curse of virginity – the worst thing a woman can be in that country – and elevate it into something worthy of a Catholic Saint" (211). Known as the "teacher of literacy, distributor of grains and oracle on subjects of Indian freedom and communal harmony", she is greatly revered by the people of Mishtiganj (255). She organizes protests and is an inspiration to all. She believes that, "No boy is too young, no sudra too poor, no woman too weak to fight for the freedom of India"(61). Going to the extent of donating her buried dowry gold for the work of freedom struggle, Tara Lata brings Mishtiganj on the map for being the biggest contributor to the freedom struggle. Like Dimple and Jasmine, she too has an aggressive side to her personality. Though she herself does not indulge in violent activities like them, she advocates them strongly. The violent streak of her personality can be seen when she breaks off with Gandhi to support Subhas Bose. Her house is known to be a printing press, and "munitious factory for seditious elements"(207). Even though, she never sets foot outside the campus of her house, she keeps herself well informed through a strong network of informants in about two hundred villages in the district.

Acting as an instrument for spreading un-reported news about atrocities committed on families who have contributed to the freedom struggle, she passes her files to Nigel Coughlin in order to get them published. Tara Lata becomes a victim to a conspiracy plotted by Sameena and her husband. In order to take possession of Tara Lata's house which had been promised as delayed dowry, Sameena feeds her name to the British authorities and gets her arrested. She suffers a bad death at the hands of Dominick Mackenzie, a strong defender of British India

against the Japanese empire. She is hanged at the gallows and her body is tossed over the prison wall into the sewage ditch where it is ribbed off by vultures and stray dogs.

The Tree Bride is a celebration of the strength of a woman as it traces the transformation of Tara Lata from a docile Bengali Brahmin child into an impassioned organizer of resistance against the British Raj. Owing to her strong will and revolutionary spirit, Tara Lata recovers from her painful past and develops into the steely Mother Courage of the independence movement.

A few decades ago Jawaharlal Nehru had said, “While the world sleeps, India awakens to freedom.” But the trust of Indian women with destiny is still elusive. Though the country has made a lot of progress, the role of Indian women in society remains only peripheral. Gender discrimination has been a universal phenomenon in human history from time immemorial. Subsequently, the position of women has certainly been enhanced and women have now certainly got a status in society. But in order to iron out the unevenness in society, they need to learn to assert their rights and shun the injustices heaped on them. They are required to experience development of their body, mind and soul. The Indian woman has not only to liberate herself from the suffocation of male dominance, but also has to fight the forces of patriarchal subjugation which still dogs the struggle of women. Women should remember that they are shakti power in female form, a creative power in peaceful form which is the agent of all changes. She needs to realize that a tremendous force of Kundalini exists within her which has the potential to create, nurture and transform. Winnifred Harper Cooley says in *The New Womanhood*, “The new woman, in the sense of the best woman, the flower of all womanhood of past ages, has come to stay- if civilization is to endure. The suffering of the past has strengthened her, maternity has deepened her, education is broadening her-and she now knows that she must perfect herself if she would perfect the race, and leave her imprint upon immortality, through her offspring or her work”(Cooley 32). Thus, Bharati Mukherjee’s characters like Dimple, Jasmine and Tara Lata are embodiments of the traits of a ‘New Woman’. They transcend the limitations of their cultural setup in order to make their voices heard and also to be a fit in the mainstream of the world.

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this paper titled 'From Submission to Assertion: New Woman in Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*, *Jasmine* and *The Tree Bride*' is my original work and has not been published anywhere.

Sincerely,
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