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Novels of Bharati Mukherjee and Arundhati Roy: Issues and Perspectives

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Women novelists have been carrying the baton of Indian writing in English and they undoubtedly occupy a formidable space in the contemporary literary space. The women novelists by virtue of their lived experience faithfully and authentically represent the issues and concerns related to the life of womenfolk. Their endeavor of exposing the subtle architectonics of patriarchy through the medium of fiction, clubs them with the objectives sought by the Indian feminists. The growth of feminist movement in India coincides with the growth in terms of number of publications of novels written by Indian women novelists. Though women novelists do not claim their overt allegiance to the Indian feminist discourse, their novels do question the dominant patriarchal traditions and offer the readers multiple feminist perspectives to look at the subjugation of women in India. Continuing with the tradition, Arundhati Roy and Bharati Mukherjee in their novels foreground the issues that relegate a woman to a second rated citizen in the contemporary scenario. They chronicle the life of their female characters in a way in which they do not simply foreground such issues but they also offer a counter narrative to the discrimination fomented by the patriarchal ideologies. The present article endeavours to present a critical insight to the novels of Bharati Mukherjee and Arundhati Roy in the light of feminist perspectives relevant to Indian context such as marriage, family, religion, education, sexuality etc.

Fiction by women writers in India has been a major segment in Indian writing in English since independence. In *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* Rita Fleski points out that we find in the fiction written by women a “discovery of the female self...a recovery of what has always been present but suppressed” (Fleski 143). Women studies stress the importance of reading narrative written by female writers as “they create an identity, they construct a collective history, they effectuate a cultural critique and they offer alternative epistemologies” (Hoving 356). Both the novelists Arundhati Roy and Bharati Mukherjee through their novels create an indelible mark in the annals of the contemporary Indian writing in English. Being women, they raise the ever muffled voice of Indian women. Rita Fleski remarks, “The problems which women share as women can serve an important critical function in making women more aware of and less amenable to their own exploitation” (169). True to Fleski’s opinion Roy and Mukherjee record their personal experience in their novels with an authorial distance. Their fiction serves as a template to understand the machinations of oppression that women are subjected to in a patriarchal set up. However the kaleidoscope changes greatly since they are exposed to different experiences in their personal life to which their novels are the reliable testimony. On the one hand Roy enjoys the luxury of being closely associated to and exposed with the multiplicity of issues faced by women in India because of her staying in the country and on the other Mukherjee is benefited with both indigenous and diasporic experiences.

Arundhati Roy being entirely homegrown with authentic Indian sensibilities, interrogates the patriarchal codes from a multiple feminist perspectives by tracking the trajectories of female characters like Ammu, Mammachi, Rahel, Baby Kochamma, Margaret Kochamma and Kochu Maria. She in *The God of Small Things* lays bare the oppressive strategies of patriarchal institutions such as marriage, education, caste system religion and politics.

Ammu's life has been portrayed in the novel as a transgressor who does not remain a passive receiver of the patriarchal chastisements; rather she defies them outrageously. Her act of selecting a love match, divorcing her husband and eventually having a love relation with an outcaste speak volume of her feminist desire to break the age old shackles that deny a woman her genuine claim on her body and sexuality. In committing transgressions Ammu is determined as well as aware of her subordinated position and oppressions she endures at the hand of patriarchy. Her affair with the outcaste, Velutha is indeed a political statement against her subjection to male oppression. In this sense Ammu's acts of transgressions place her in the radical feminist frame work but her Indian sensibility regarding her children can never be debated. She retains the motherly care and love towards her children even when she commits bold transgression. Roy in the novel takes into consideration the whole ambit of discriminations against women in India. Mammachi and Ammu's predicaments show how traditional marriage and family pose a trap for a woman in realizing her potential as an individual. Mammachi's ability as a home manager is typically acknowledged worthless by her husband and son whereas Ammu's life gets relegated to the state of non-existence despite her useful contribution to the pickle factory. On the contrary Chacko, despite being useless fellow enjoys the privileges of being a male in the family. He is sponsored by the family to pursue higher education in abroad. His defiance of caste code in marrying Margaret is waived off and his 'manly needs' are taken care of in the family. Analyzing Indian family Roy seems to assert her engagement with feminist concerns enunciated by Gerda Lerner that family acts like an instrument which constantly creates and reinforces the patriarchal order. Foregrounding these aspects of Indian society the novelist gives voice to the socialist feminists' concerns of social and economic equality for women.

She also exposes the illusion of education system which is generally perceived to be a tool for women emancipation. Baby Kochamma' and Ammu's education is to be taken for the ornamental value which fails to serve any constructive purpose.

Arundhati Roy echoes in the novel what Kumkum Sangari has pointed out about the complex understanding of both patriarchies and women's place in them in Indian scenario where patriarchy works not just through coercion but also through obtaining consent from women. Roy records in the novel how women themselves become the instruments of oppression guided by several ideological apparatuses such as family, marriage, religion, caste, education etc. Baby Kochamma and Mammachi's lack of any female agency to repel the trap of patriarchal ideology make them patriarchal subjects. They utterly fail to sympathize with Ammu's plight and allow themselves to be transformed as the perpetrators of tragedy in the life of Ammu and Velutha.

Arundhati Roy champions the right of women and outcaste who are marginalized and victimized by patriarchy. The graphic description of Velutha's torture and the mutilation of his body by police parallels the tragedy Ammu had to face after the death of velutha. The most shocking passage is the gradual dehumanization of Ammu in her family by the ones who are supposed to back her in the tumultuous moments of grief which eventually leads to

her miserable death in ignominy in an isolated room of Bharat Lodge. Even her death does not absolve her of her sin of defying the prescribed “love-Laws”. These incidences pose staggering questions before the readers in general challenging the dominant dogmas of the stilted patriarchal society which does not grant them any ‘locus standi’. Both the sections are equally marginalized and subjected to similar treatment.

Roy’s minute observation on the functioning of Indian patriarchal society is both authentic and plausible. She relies on her first hand experience of living in a Syrian Christian society of Kerala for the depiction of her story which goes to the heart and mind of the Indian readers. Corporal transgressions and graphic descriptions of Ammu’s sexuality can not be termed as coarse and obscene; rather they form an intrinsic part of the novel that subverts the patriarchal dominion. These descriptions can be held as shock value which prods the readers to question the efficacy of unequal laws and qualifies the text as a protest novel.

The novels of Bharati Mukherjee are women centric and replete with the woman’s question. She portrays her female protagonists’ readiness to be assimilated in the alien culture. The questions of identity, settlement and survival of the immigrant women in the host country are the key issues in the first phase of writing which includes *The Tiger’s Daughter*, *Wife* and *Jasmine*. In an interview with Geoff Hancock in *The Canadian Fiction Magazine*, says, “I don’t think about my fiction as being about alienation...on the contrary, I mean for it to be about assimilation...My stories are about conquests and not about loss...My characters choose to uproot themselves from their native countries. For my characters breaking away is a part of maturing” (17). However, her women characters do not simply assimilate their host country’s cultures; rather they keep a critical view of both the United States and India. They present disruptive behaviour as they play the roles of wife, sister, daughter, mother, and widow in their adopted homes which are quite different from the way they had been trained to conduct themselves in India. Gender, class, caste, education and social condition are some general factors that distinguish each character’s diasporic experience and influence their response and disruptive attitudes. As a consequence of their diasporic movements, the women of Mukherjee’s novels question the gender roles that they were taught to play in their homeland and suffer transformations in their subjectivities.

Tara Banerjee in *The Tiger’s Daughter* is a sheltered daughter of a Patriarch, the Bengal Tiger and her movements are well guarded till she stays in India but her American experience, emboldens her to commit a cultural transgression by marrying a Christian. However her status of being the daughter of the Bengal Tiger absolves her of the sin which is deemed to be a radical transgression in a patriarchal set up. Moreover, her tacit acquiescence to Tuntunwala’s seduction is the result of her allegiance to liberal ideas that America offered to her. Tara did it to vindicate her position as an ‘Americawali’ and it was not the result of any compulsion. Dimple Das Gupta in *Wife* gets transformed though, partially, when she reaches America. She faces the equal pull from the Indian ghetto and the American sense of liberty. Her middle class family background inhibits her to go all out for cultural transgressions but her aspirations to be rooted in American soil make her condition all the more miserable. She eventually gives in to the American promise and does invert the role of an ideal wife by forging a sexual relation with Milt. The limited mobility and confinement that she is subjected to in America, make her neurotic which results in her gory act of stabbing her husband to death. In *Jasmine*, Joyti’s transformation from a village girl to an assertive and life affirming Jasmine is possible only when she reaches America. She rejects to be a victim of rape and kills the rapist. She has nothing to loose and this proves to be her

advantage as she displays the chameleon adaptability to the alien culture and crosses the stifling boundaries of caste, religion and sexual sanctions. She willfully denies her ghettoisation in America by moving out from the sheltered abode of her late husband's teacher, Devendra Vadhera. She goes on doing permutations and combinations to her persona, facing the challenges of survival in an alien culture. She is on the move and the process of her transformation as it appears, would continue. As the protagonist gets rooted in American soil so the novelist with this novel finds her niche among the writers of American mainstream. Hannah Easton in *The Holder of The World* faces typical othering of a woman akin to contemporary Indian scenario in the 18th century American puritan society. Her reaching to Indian soil has provided her with an agency to challenge the patriarchal codes of the American puritan society. She does enact bold transgressions, rejecting her American identity she becomes the Salem bibi and eventually allows herself to be a lover of Raja Jadav Singh. She negates the cultural, linguistic, religious and moral determinants and shows a great deal of adaptability in the Indian soil. She resists the racial as well as gender discrimination boldly. In *Leave it To Me*, Debby is no ordinary girl who would accept her given identity; instead she is determined to undertake her mission to find her bio-parents. Her journey does not involve crossing the continents but gives her a chance to save herself from alienation in the DiMartino's family. She is certainly an individual who does not want to accept the traditional fate of the DiMartino girls. In her search, she discovers her true self and becomes self dependent despite the tragedy she encounters in the last part of the novel. Tara Chatterjee in *Desirable Daughters* does not find courage to break away with gender roles while staying in India. In America, she is exposed to the liberal ideals of the country and rejects the traditional notion of a wife perpetuated through the customs and rituals in Indian society. She prefers divorcing her husband to accepting those rigid rules. Her sister Padma is also a transgressor who marries a divorcee out of her caste and reverses the gender role by assuming the role of a bread winner for her family in America. She also had a son out of her wedlock. In *The Tree Bride*, Tara Lata Gangooly is subjected to the patriarchal tyranny in her childhood and forced to marry a Tree to wad off the evil spirits which might ruin the household of her father. She is sent to Mistigunj. She does not succumb to these oppressions; rather she educates and empowers herself. She grows out to be a universal mother and is worshipped as 'Tara ma' by the people of Mistigunj. She becomes a paragon of Indian freedom Struggle and formidable enemy of the British forces. Eventually, she sacrifices herself for her people and nation. Anjali Bose in *Miss New India* suffers sexual assault by her would be husband which shatters her romantic imagination about arranged marriages. She breaks away with her family and goes to Bangalore to reposition her stars. Bangalore opens before her a number of options. It is there where she reclaims her sexuality and true self.

A close study reveals the fact that the novels of Arundhati Roy and Bharati Mukherjee advocate Indian feminist sensibilities though in varied degrees. Roy minutely and perceptively depicts how orthodox family system in India creates impediments in the life of women and their useful contributions regarding sustenance of the family, is grossly ignored. All the women characters in *The God of Small Things* are subjected to the oppression in the family. Unlike Roy, Bharati Mukherjee does not penetrate into the deep structures of Indian patriarchal family setup in her novels and stresses more on gendering of female identity through consent formation. Mukherjee's characters are never at war against their family while staying in India. They simply seem to be nicely placed and are largely submissive

within their family environs until they are displaced to an alien land. In this regard Tara Banerjee, Dimple, Jasmine, Tara Chatterjee and Anjali Bose are the representative characters. It is inferred from this that Mukherjee's personal experience of being a daughter of an elite brahmin father who provided her all the luxury, convent education, permission to go abroad and finally accepting her love marriage with Clarke distances her from the realities of other women. As a matter of fact, she fails to portray family as a site of patriarchal oppressions; rather the characters, Tara Banerjee and Dimple Das Gupta long for family support even when they are in abroad. The sense of reversing the gender roles only dawns upon the characters when they face any violent assault for example, the dutiful wife, Joyti could never have been transformed into Jasmine if her husband was not killed in a bomb accident and she was not raped by the Half face. Similarly Anjali Bose would have been confined to the domestic role of a wife in an arranged marriage had she not been sexually assaulted by her would be life partner selected by her parents. So it is always the external agency, situation or tragedy that triggers the feminist consciousness of Mukherjee's characters. Staying in the coziness of sheltered domesticity literally blinds the characters of any female agency. In contrast, Ammu in *The God of Small Things* has an acute sense of awareness of her subjection and she revolts accordingly. Arundhati Roy exposes the discrimination against a girl child in a patriarchal family by contrasting the girl's subjections to the privilege received by a male child in the same family. Bharati Mukherjee with an exception to *Jasmine*, fails to portray such discriminations. Even in the case of *Jasmine*, Mukherjee is not able to faithfully represent the material realities of a patriarchal family since she lacks the insight of Roy. It is evident from my reading that Mukherjee does not portray Joyti's brothers in great contrast with the protagonist's plight in a family set up whereas the delineation of Chako by Roy is purposefully done to accentuate Ammu's sad state of affair in her own family.

Traditional marriage in Indian scenario has been in the centre of criticism in both Roy and Mukherjee's novels. There is an apparent agreement between both the novelists in criticizing the fossilized concept of traditional caste marriage. They seem to have taken cudgels against the practice of forcing a girl to accept the choice made by appropriating her consent by parents. Roy's female protagonists emphatically challenge the very notion of marriage and assert their individual selves in selecting the match of their own. Ammu breaks away with her family ideals by marrying an inter-caste, Bengali and suffers the indifference of her family members. Rahel who is cast in her mother's image repeats the same and Margaret Kochamma invites the fury of her father by marrying Chacko. Though all these marriages eventually fail yet the female protagonists are successful in exercising their right to make choice. They simply reject to be lifeless puppets dictated by the deft maneuverings of the patriarchal cult. The failure of their marriages is not to be attributed to the choices these characters made; rather it is the lack of compatibility on the part of their partners. Bharati Mukherjee's characters like Tara Chatterjee, Padma Banerjee and Anjali Bose refute the patriarchy in the line Roys's characters as they opt for their own choices. However there are characters like Dimple, Joyti, Hannah, and Tara Banerjee who initially accept the love match arranged by their parents but they outrageously transgress the role of an ideal wife showing their dissent to arranged marriages when they gain their individual consciousness and selfhood. Dimple's extramarital affair with Milt, Joyti's rejection of leading the life of a widow, Hannah's love for Raja Jadav Singh and Tara Banerjee's live-in relation with Andy speak volume of their subversive acts that remain unthinkable for girls socialized under the dictates of patriarchy.

Education system in India has also been diagnosed by both the novelists and their novels present a valid criticism of it. Their novels establish the fact that traditional education system prevailing in Indian scenario acts as a powerful instrument to disseminate patriarchal ideologies. Roy focuses more on lack of opportunities presented to girls to imbibe quality education in a gendered family as compared to Mukherjee's foregrounding of traditional education as mechanism of consent formation and legitimatizing the subservient plight of girls. Bhaskar Chatterjee comments are significant in this regard:

Gender disparity in education are directly linked with gender inequalities existing at the level of the family, educational institutions and society...It is difficult to achieve gender parity in education without moving towards equality between sexes in terms on entitlements, opportunities and experiences. Further, socialization in the context of women is dominated by tradition and dichotomizing of masculine and feminine roles (73)

Despite Mammachi's expertise in music, she is never allowed to hone her skills; Ammu is deprived of opportunities to get quality education at par with her brother and Rahel is visibly exasperated despite her education. Tara Banerjee is trained to behave like ladies in the premiere convent school run by the grey nuns. Dimple wants her B.A degree only to secure her eligibility for the marriage market. Hannah is trained and accustomed to inherit the gender specific skills of needle work and embroidery. Debby's education does not offer her any tangible respite. Tara, Padma and Parvati's exposure to education system makes them imitate stereotypical images of womanhood in a male dominated society. However Mukherjee seems to be suggesting a counter narrative to the biased form of education in two instances where girls can effectively use education for their empowerment. 'Tara Ma', the tree bride does not receive formal education but is guided by and inspired from her 'Mist Jethu' aka John Mist's rational ideologies and progressive thoughts. She trains herself to read and learn and is able to stun her rivals by her perceptibility and awareness of latest updates of socio-political incidents in the contemporary world. She reverses the gendered role of women and scripts her success as a leader in the freedom struggle of the nation. Anjali Bose in *Miss New India* is able to challenge the construction of femininity in Gauripur, the rural village of Bihar. She does not accept the fate of her fellow batch-mates who have been 'disposed off' to the realm of domesticity after completing their study. Peter Champion, the American expatriate is the man who trains her to use education for empowerment instead of being a passive subject. She unleashes her potential reaching there in Bangalore. Bose's education and the support of her mentor are the assets which pay her rich dividend in realizing her dream to get a space of her own.

Female sexuality has also been probed by both the novelists. They present a critique of a patriarchal conceptualization of female sexuality in Indian context. Mukherjee, however lacks the boldness of Roy's graphic and detailed description of Women's sexuality. Though she does not portray the details in which her characters debunk the social, cultural and gender taboos yet the insinuations emanate from the radical subversions enacted by the characters are powerful enough to shock the readers. Apparently the reclaiming of the sexuality by female characters is in the centre of the discourse of the both the novelists. It is also noteworthy that all the male counterparts have not been projected in glaring opposition with female characters; rather the female protagonists are helped in one way or other by them in asserting the claim on their sexuality. Ammu's receives the passionate love and care from Velutha. Tara Chatterjee finds her patronage from The Bengal Tiger, Dimple gets her solace

with Milt, Jasmine is helped by Prakash, Prof Vadhera, Tylor and Bud, Hannah gets her emotional support in Raja Jadav Singh's love, Debbi is helped by Fred in her search for bio parents. Tara Banerjee is supported by Andy in the moments of distress, 'Tara Ma' comes to know the purpose of her life through the rationality of John Mist and Anjali Bose receives the selfless help by Peter Champion, Rabi and Girish Gujral.

Through their stories Bharati Mukherjee and Arundhati Roy vindicate their positions as the true crusaders of Indian women's cause. However both of the novelists deny the epithet of being 'feminists' but analyzing their novels we can not stop using the tag of 'feminist' for them. Even Mukherjee's preference of being addressed as an American novelist does not deter us to root her in the tradition of Indian writing in English. She has kept her Indian sensibilities intact despite her assimilation in a foreign soil. Her latest novel, *Miss New India* is to be taken as her literary claim to re-root herself in Indian soil. Arundhati Roy has been engaged with the socio-political concerns of India in her non-fiction writings and extremely vocal against any form of oppressions since the publication of her ground breaking novel, *The God of Small Things*. The fiery speeches, interviews and the penetrating insight in her non-fiction writings seem to have taken off from the platform she has created for herself after the publication of her maiden novel. This could be an interesting study to find out the inherent connectivity between her novel and non-fiction writing from the multi-focal perspectives. Nonetheless, both of the authors epitomize the spirit of modern women as Fleski in her article, "Visions of the New: Feminist Discourse of Evolution and Revolution" points out that these modern women, "epitomize a new spirit, refusing the dead weight of the past and tyranny of the present in a quest for a more liberating and emancipated future" (158). In their endeavour to reflect their experience as women in the novels, they faithfully conform to the tradition of fiction written in English by Indian women writers.

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