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Re-Inventing the Self: A Reading of Bharati Mukherjee's *Miss New India*

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The contemporary time is the most suitable time for full fledged development of marginalized sections of society such as women and schedule class. Woman has become at the bottom of the social hierarchy in Indian patriarchal set for a long time. She has been considered as powerless and weak creature. But now the changing scenario has changed her roles and the emerging new woman has questioned her traditional roles and aspires to go beyond the patriarchal forbidden territory. The present paper analyses the challenges and future prospects for the protagonist Anjali Bose, a 19 years old, sportive, tall and very impressive girl in *Miss New India*. It is just the story of one woman's struggles in re-inventing herself into the modern world.

Bharati Mukherjee, an Indian diasporic, born in Kolkata in 1940 and settled in America is a third world feminist writer whose main preoccupation is to deal with the problems and issues related with South-Asian women particularly India. Like other contemporary feminist writers like Anita Desai, Ruth Praver Jabwala etc. she upholds the cause of women but she differs from them because her basic concern is to delineate the problems of cross-cultural conflicts faced by women in India. Her female characters suffer from double colonization---first one by patriarchy and the second by self-imposed cross-cultural influences due to globalization and technological advancement. Mukherjee herself born and brought up in a large joint family in India has experienced the social bondage on women imposed by patriarchal society. In her interview she says:

I grew up in Kolkata, India, in a large and loving, traditionally patriarchal Hindu family, headed by my father. Though my father was not the eldest male in the Mukherjee family, he had been co-opted as patriarch because he was the most educated, and had founded a prosperous pharmaceutical company. I watched my father accustomed himself to the demands of the role of patriarch, which meant having to provide for, and to protect, scores of uncles, aunts, cousins and strangers who claim to be our distant relatives. For him, as with Anjali Bose's father in my novel *Miss New India*, discharging duty was the utmost expression of love. In families like mine, a father's greatest obligation was to marry off his daughter to a good provider. (Interview with Amazon)

All her novels like *Jasmine*, *Wife*, *Tiger's Daughter*, *Tree Bride*, *Desirable Daughters*; and *Miss New India* are centered on female protagonist who is none but her autobiographical projections of herself. Born in Indian society she has been a direct witness to the restrictions and atrocities inflicted upon women in Indian patriarchal society. She was well aware of limited future prospects for Indian women as they are governed by Indian mythological values. In such a background, she could realize the problems and dilemma of the emerging class of young girl who is decked with western education and whose conscience is simultaneously formed and nourished by the conservative norms and values. Dr DNR Chandra writes:

Like Anita Desai, Kamala Markandey, Shashi Despande, Nayantara Sehgal, RP Jabwala and Geeta Hariharan Mukherjee exposes many facets of feminism encompassing agitation for equal opportunity, sexual autonomy and right to self determination.

Miss New India gives us a picture of India as we have never truly seen it before, as country up-to-date---and as traditional---as many places in the world. Mukherjee employs a very classic plot: A village girl goes to big city that throws off the old traditional ways and discovers her new identity—as modern girl with American accent. This transformation is also represented through change of her name from Anjali---to Angie. Anjali feels as though she is “part of the bold India, an equal to anywhere, a land poised for take-off.”

The title *Miss New India* is very significant. Mukherjee tries to expose the concept of two different India---first one which she has realized in her early childhood life full of social bondage and restrictions and other one which is at present in which a lot of global opportunities are available for a woman to grow and make some space/identity for herself in all walks of life. In ‘old India’ women/girls are restricted to the four walls of houses. Their behaviors are in a desired manner which is encircled by the social/mythological norms of the society. In ‘old India’ women do not cross the border lines or ‘laxman rekha’ of etiquettes and morality linked with the patriarchal society but in the novel *Miss New India* these two facets of old India and new India have been discussed explicitly. Sonali Das, Anjali’s elder sister may be considered as the representative of traditional woman in traditional India who has been married with a man chosen by her father and Anjali Bose, the protagonist is representative of new India who not only throws off the traditional barriers but crosses the boundaries of her house to the exceptional limits of the society to make her future bright and vibrant.

The conventional form of Indian femininity projects itself through long-lashed kohl-rimmed, startled black eyes. Modest women know to glance upward from a slightly bowed head. Anjali did not take the world with saucer eyed passivity. (3)

Anjali’s father Mr. Prafulla Bose, a railway clerk plans for her marriage as she had completed her B. Com. and attained marriageable age. He calls various relatives and friends for a suitable match. “To marry her off her father’s Hindu duty: Anjali accepted that.” (17) But Anjali does not want to marry as she realizes problem faced by her own sister, Sonali who got married five years ago and is presently staying in Patna as a single mother and doing a typist job for her survival. Sonali’s husband, a philanderer and heavy drinker beats Sonali regularly and finally leaves her alone with her daughter.

The bride groom was discovered, too late, too be a heavy drinker and a philanderer. But when Sonali finally got up her nerve to institute divorce proceeding, their father had turned against her for wreaking on the Bose family the public shame of divorce. (7)

The image used for marriage indicates the oppressive confined life of women and fault is always laid on women regarding their morality. This shows the poor match-making skill of Anjali’s father and a social change going on in today’s India as young people leave their parent town leaving long held family/social values behind.

The novelist exposes her disapproval for early marriage through the story of Sonali and Anjali. Basically, Mukherjee tries to condemn the patriarchal system which deprives woman to lead an independent life of own. In fact, Mukherjee's father had the same plan for her when she was getting her education at Iowa. But the fate did something more exciting. Here, Anjali on the other side agrees for some extent for marriage as she does not want to defame her parent. Mr. Bose gives simple explanation: "It is not a question of happiness, yours or ours. It's about our name, our reputation I will decide who is good. I have left you too much in charge. You are abusing a privilege that was never yours begin with." (28) Even at nineteen, Anjali was determined not to yield her right to happiness. After lots of struggle and consultation Mr. Bose arranges a pre-marriage ceremony at his home by calling Mitra family. In spite of being well educated, Anjali does not understand the conspiracy constituted by her fiancé Subodh Mitra, a suitor who rapes her before marriage alleging her relation with her American expat, friend cum teacher---Mr. Peter Champion. Her fiancé Subodh takes her far away at lonely place and rapes her stating that she is going to become his wife.

He (Subodh) puts his hands over her breasts on the bright green choli under the dhoni-kali sari...I am within my rights to see what I am going to getting ... just like your American... everyone knows the kind of girl you are. (58)

This is very shocking in Indian culture but for Subodh it is nothing big as he is well educated from America and has influence of western corrupt culture. But Anjali being shocked deeply decides to leave her home to do something vibrant in her career. Her teacher cum friend Mr. Peter Champion suggests her that Bangalore the best place for girl like her. She learnt good American accent from Peter. According to feminist Mukherjee, it is unjustified to "Surrender to whims of fate and manipulation of martial market place...what do they know need of modern women? " (D. Dughlass P.27) Anjali, in spite of surrendering herself to the imposed marriage system dares to face the coming fate and makes her path to Bangalore as suggested by her teacher, Peter. "Mumbai? You have been seeing too many bad movies. Mumbai is yesterday. It's a hustler's city. Bangalore's the place for a young woman like you." (12)

Mr. Peter helps her financially and gives two addresses---of Mrs. Max and Mrs. Usha Desai for Bangalore, India's fastest growing metropolis; as Bangalore is just like an alien place for a girl like Anjali, a small town girl. Peter assures her for her temporary shelter at Bagehot house, a British colonial residency owned by Mrs. Max at Kew Garden in Bangalore. Mrs. Desai runs a training institute for aspirants willing to work in a center. Anjali finds a different culture and language like—*fuck, shit, piss, asshole, phone-sex, cool* etc. used by youngsters at the restaurant Barista. Though, Anjali knows the meaning of all these words but never seen anyone using such words in her town Gauripur. It was a different India which Anjali had never imagined in Gauripur. Western cultural effects are seen at everywhere:

The woman didn't seem jealous or possessive. Most of them were plump and the men already getting stout like her father. Their friendship didn't seem like lead-ins to marriage. The young people in Bangalore had no parents, no nearby families to appease. No gossip or scandal could promise them. They had come from all over India to get away from gossip. (92)

Anjali meets with Mrs. Desai at her institute and refines her American accents to find a job in a call centre and finally she gets. Mukherjee sometimes falters in striking the exact balance between small town Anjali who has never seen women smoke, and westernized

world she lands in. She struggles to say 'fine' on p'line. It is not easy to inhibit the mind of small town of women in her 20s confronted in a new world –its more baffling than America must have seen to Indian in the 60s. This is still India, just one where young people in coffee shop say things like: "HP's is little loopy-goopy; Motorola's little uptight; they got 'tudes." When Anjali reaches Bagehot house she finds two opposite worlds---one decaying name and fame of Bagehot house which have been a relics of British historicity and the other the city Bangalore emerging as high-tech city following unrealistically the western cultures allowing woman to have equal opportunities in various jobs like call centre etc. Anjali finds three other girls in Bagehot house residing as paying guests. But *Miss New India* is more than 'sex and city diary' of trying desperately–to-be-upwardly mobile. It is not cautionary fable of dark side of dream. Mukherjee, actually telling a story that is about the best of times and worst of times, she says in an interview:

These were luckiest time to be young and adventurous, and Indian. And saddest for those like [Anjali], who knew she could be anything she wanted to be yet hadn't the foggiest idea what she wanted.

Through *Miss New India* Mukherjee reveals to all American readers a similar truth about India, with similar effect as she herself has experienced in her young age in America. Of course, the seductive pull of life in the New India does not come without a dark side. It sets for freedom of the confines of class, cast and gender. It is not only about struggle but about re-inventing of the self. The portrait of social change in India provides food for thought.

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