

Indian Sensibility: A Comparative Study of the Novels of Bharati Mukherjee and Anita Desai

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Abstract

India has been a fertile soil for the writers of fiction. A number of writers have used Indian culture and tradition for their works. The writers who took birth in India, lived abroad, have also reflected Indian sensibility in their works. Bharati Mukherjee and Anita Desai are such two names who have beautifully used Indian names, tradition, culture and prevailing social evils for their works. Almost all her novels have reflected the true spirit of Indian sensibility. All her novels express her concern for a better society, a society that can ensure justice and equality to its entire member. Bharati Mukherjee and Anita Desai reflect the problems of women living in India. This is evident and can be encounter in all her novels. The present paper intends a comparative study of the novels of Mukherjee and Desai in prospect of exploring Indian Sensibility.

Key Words: Culture, Clash, Urban, Agony, Sympathy, tradition

Bharati Mukherjee, the writer of women, raised her voice against the exploitation of women in Male-dominant society, was an award winning Indian born American writer. Women have made remarkable contribution to fiction in Indian English Literature. In fiction, there is ample scope for the expression of Indian sensibility. Women have inspired literature and the feminine theme has been a pivotal importance too. She is herself a creator of literature and is all pervading. Woman is the cause of all action. If woman is absent, there is no poetry, no song, no drama, no tears, no laughter and ultimately no life in this world. But they are still walking on a tight rope to achieve their human rights and social justice. Indian woman at the turn of century are in a transitional phase via the interface of tradition and modernity. Bharati Mukherjee

has written eight novels, two collections of short stories, two books of non-fiction and some powerful essays. It seems that she was a born writer. In an interview with Runar Vignisson Bharati confessed – “I knew from when I was very young, long before I was ten, that I was going to be a writer” (SPAN). Her *The Tiger’s Daughter* (1971), *Wife* (1975), *Jasmine* (1989), *The Holder of the World* (1993), *Leave it to Me* (1997), *Desirable Daughters* (2002) and *The Tree Bride* (2002) tell the heroine’s journey either in first person or third person or either it is from east to west or from west to east to fulfill the dreams of life.

Bharti Mukherjee has given a clear picture of thoughts and feelings of the people of different ages and castes, and also the status of the people in the Indian society. Her

writings probe into the lives and experiences of women. She rips open new grounds in Indian English fiction deliberately focusing her attention on the internal rather than the external realm. She deals mostly with the problem faced by career women, a new issue in Indian English fiction. Mukherjee, being the author, understands the women well, and had tried to project of the middle-class educated women who is finally independent. She is mainly interested in the conflict between tradition and modernity as conflict in the generation gap and conflict between women and failures. She presents with insight and understanding the focused state which modern Indian women are facing in a traditional society. She describes the unpleasant experiences of women in the traditional role which expects her to be an embodiment of sacrifice, patience and suffering. She concentrates on the marital relation and exhibits the tradition in which a woman is practiced to play her submissive role in the family. She depicts the oppressed and suppressed life of the women who are tormented consistently by inner turmoil. She explores the inner feelings and psyche of her characters.

Mukherjee's novels begin with failures and frustrations. She highlights long silence of the Indian women in her novels. Through her writing, she airs the secret wishes of a vast majority of Indian women whose lot it has been to silently suffer repression for ages at the hands of establishment.

Mukherjee deals with inner world of the Indian women and the experience of being a woman in present day India in her novels. Her novels deal with the Indian middle class women's confusion, disturbance and

disappointment and also their pitiable condition in the institution of marriage. She describes the struggle her protagonists endure in interpersonal relations, particularly with their husbands. Her novel describes a taxing situation of the Indian women placed between family and profession, tradition and modernity. She presents modern Indian women's search for self in family and society. Mukherjee's novels are concerned with a woman's quest for self; an exploration into the female psyche and an understanding of the mysteries of life and the protagonist's place in it. Mukherjee's novels end in an optimistic note despite all the suffering, tension and agony that her protagonists have undergone in their lives.

Mukherjee's central characters are women and forte in the inner mind of the married women. Her heroines are gentle, ward, submissive, intelligent, and educated and career oriented. Her characters are occupied in questioning, and evaluating the action and actions and reactions of people in personal relationship. They are trying to find a model in the past and a way for the future.

Mukherjee's women are economically independent and at the same time they are emotionally dependent on their husbands. They have to face the problem of marital adjustments. Mukherjee's heroines are strong as well as passive. They voluntarily listen to the advice of men. They endure all sufferings and face the situation very boldly. "Mukherjee's strength lies in portraying the uncertainties and doubts of women who cannot see themselves as heroic, but who want to make life possible.

Mukherjee's protagonists reject the existing tradition and social set up and long for a generous and informal ways of life. They endure various kinds of suffering throughout their lives to retain their marital status. Their balance and practical approach towards their life make them realize the importance of family and marriage. They want to live the institution of family in spite of their disagreement with tradition.

Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter* is a fictionalized story drawing from her own first years of marriage. The protagonist, Tara Banerjee, returns to India after marrying an American and faces a different Indian. In the novel, *Wife*, the protagonist Dimple is the wife of Amit, a young engineer, and this protagonist has to face many problems in her life. The novel opens with Dimple's girlish fantasy about marriage. She is eager to get married and vision of her prince charming whose amorous advances and glances would drench her with supreme bliss. Her husband, Amit an upcoming young man whom, her parents find suitable for her, fails to feed her fantasy. Dimple finds the tedium of marriage a burden. She has not bargained to live in the dark and dingy apartment with her mother-in-law. Dimple cannot see any joy in her married home in Calcutta and longs to go to the U.S. Dimple, a young, naïve Indian woman, trying to reconcile the Bengali ideal of the perfect, passive wife with the demands of her new American life.

Her Indian sensibility has rightly been expressed in her third novel *Jasmine*. *Jasmine*, the title character and the protagonist, starts her career from a village in the Indian state Punjab. When she is only seven years old, she meets an astrologer who

makes a prophecy for her and says she will become widow soon after her marriage.

Bharati Mukherjee exposes her disapproval of child marriage and consequent widowhood through intervention of the story of *Tree Bride* Tara Lata. The story of Tara Lata who is cursed and disgraced for the death of her husband and ultimately married to a tree symbolically brings out the backwardness of conservative society of India.

Anita Desai is a great Indian novelist. She has an eminent place among the Indian women writers. In her two novels- *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) and *Voices in the City* (1965) - Anita Desai has added a new dimension to the achievement of Indian women writers in English fiction. The intolerable grapple with thoughts, feelings and emotions is necessarily reflected in the language, syntax and imagery of Anita Desai's novels. *Cry, the Peacock* is Maya's story of her married life with Gautama; and almost the entire story is remembrance of things past by Maya herself. The action of the novel is located in Delhi, but the city's presence is neither obtrusive nor obsessive. There are references to places, no doubt- Birla Mandir, the Red Fort, the old Delhi garden and Jama Masjid. *Cry, the peacock*, which is really Maya's effort to tell her story to herself, to discover some meaning in her life, and even to justify herself to herself. The novel begins with the death of Maya's pet dog, Toto, and how it affects her life. Although a first novel, *Cry, the Peacock* scores because Maya is at once the centre and circumference of this world. Her intensity - whether she is sane, hysterical or

insane- fills the whole book and gives it form as well as life.

In *Voices in the City*, the scene shifts from Delhi to Calcutta- that area of smoke and darkness, of noise and squalor, of disease and death. This is called a devil city. Anita Desai is one of the most perceptive and consistent explorer of the inner life of Indian women. Alienation between husband and wife is the major theme in her novels *Cry*, *The Peacock* and *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* She deals with the interior world of women in *Fire on the Mountain* and *In Custody*. *Bye-Bye Blackbird* has the theme of frustration and loneliness which individual feels in a foreign land. Her novels basically paint the various modes, conflicting choices and inner experiences of women. Her purpose is to voice the mute miseries and helplessness of millions of married women.

Conclusion:

Both Bharati Mukherjee and Anita Desai have chosen the story of girls for their novels. The very first line of Mukherjee's

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third novel *Jasmine* reflects the Indian way of living also delineates the Indian-circumstances and Indian's belief in superstition. How a belief changes one's life. When, a seven years old girl, named Jyoti meets an astrologer who makes a prophecy of her future. It was terrible to believe. Jyoti did not believe to listen to her widowhood, and uses crazy word for the astrologer. The case of prophecy is also witnessed in the first novel of Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*. In another places, Bharati Mukherjee, a well-known novelist, has pointed out about dowry system, a social evil, prevailed in India. Mukherjee and Anita Desai have not only exploited the Indian circumstances, but for their characters, they have used the Indian names like Vimla, Jyoti, Dimple, Tara, Amit, Maya and Sunitha. Both Mukherjee and Anita Desai reflect the deep association with Indian tradition, culture and its problem through their novels. *Jasmine* and *Cry, the Peacock* are the best examples of Indian sense and sensibility.