

***Bharati Mukherjee's Miss New India Presents
A Bewildering Mix of the Archaic and the Modern***

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Abstract:

Cultures have taken up new shape and definition in recent times; Immigrants tales fill every sphere of life, which is replete with experiences of confrontation and agony. Emerging market economy, globalization, consumerism, trans-nationalism have added to the issues of Diaspora; Which is becoming increasingly complex because of journeys and border crossings, resulting in cultural hybridity and identity crisis. Hence, these elements have become a new motif in the postcolonial literatures. Migration leads to separation, which is marked by new culture and new adjustments in an alien land. The new issues give rise to identity crisis and feelings of incongruity in a socio-cultural setup, with an innocuous blend of tradition and modernity. The syndrome of culture within culture, a nagging tussle between the inherent and the alien, for sustenance and dominance, in the process of transformation become the norm. This new identity creates problems. In Almost all her novels, Bharati Mukherjee depicts an immigrant, who looks down the memory lane with pain and nostalgia, yet, impelled by an insistent urge to give voice to the aspirations, and to carve out a niche for self. Despite the alienated, ennui of the diasporic experience, the protagonist languishes in the angst of an alien land, struggles to hold onto the threads of aspirations, only to land in a place; where suffocation substitutes solace and suffering becomes the synonym of sanity.

Key words: *Identity, Immigrant, Diasporic, Hyberidity, Cultural Mix, Patriarchy*

Miss New India [2011] Bharati Mukherjee's eighth novel presents a picture of India where, Mukherjee employs a very classic plot: A village girl who comes from a tight-knit remote place, *Gauripur*, to pursue her dream, lands in a big city, consequently, she drops all her old conventional ways to realize her new identity - as modern girl with American twang. *Anjali Bose*, the principal character of "*Miss New India*" is a young woman, who escapes the constrictions of a small-town in Bihar, for the promise of Bangalore, one of the country's fastest growing cities. For her, It was like a move to a new country; there she works at a call centre, comes across a bunch of trendy youngsters, many of them speak a language in different accents, meets dynamic young entrepreneurs and nourishes big dreams. She feels as if fortunes are being made all around her. She gets easily swept away into this new world through a string of influential "connections" facilitated

by an expat Englishman. Furthermore, she encounters her share of hardships as well, in the process, - the police brutality, outrageous real-estate honks and brutes, etc. but ultimately succeeds in reinventing herself. This change is represented through the transform of her name from *Anjali*-to *Angie*. Anjali feels as if she is “*part of the bold India, an equal to anywhere, a land poised for a take-off*”.

In the present novel Mukherjee shifts her attention from her redundant social observations to the archetypal details of *Anjali's* experiences in Bangalore. In earlier novels like “*Jasmine*” and “*Desirable Daughters*,” Mukherjee predominantly delineates about the migrant experience, which is clearly on familiar and firmer ground, but when charting *Anjali's* struggle to orient herself in a world not so familiar to her earlier experiences, Mukharjee is seen at her narrative best to depict the ostensible parts of modernity and the newfound glory of vibrant Bangalore that stands as a sharp contrast to the oriental fabric of the nation as a whole. Mukherjee appears to have rehearsed her conventional wisdom in her descriptions of Bangalore, a city that is, both domestic and foreign popular imagination. A unique combination to represent the 21st-century India which is “*roaringly capitalistic,*” “*the new centre of the universe*”, a “*go-for-break*”, “*rule-bending*”, “*forget-about-yesterday*”, and “*let's-blow-it-all*” place, populated by tech-savvy, “*hyper confident*” young Indians, who speak in exaggerated *American* accents than the earlier generation, added with the temptations of casual sex, alcohol, and nightclubs. *Anjali* finds a different culture and language like- *fuck, shit, piss, asshole, phone-sex, cool, etc.* used by youngsters at common places. They lead a care free and permissible life, sans restrictions or remorse for anything. It's the flair of enjoyment, freedom as well as the language of liberty, that is wrought 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”. (MNI.92)

Though, *Anjali* knew the meaning of all these words, but had never seen anyone using such words with so much ease, and without any discomfort of slang or slight in her town *Gauripur*. It was a different India, which *Anjali* had never imagined in *Gauripur*. Western cultural effects are seen at everywhere that are too different, even in the wildest imagination of oriental India, and therefore, a conflict of cultural mix and problem of reorientation becomes the subject of discussion. *Mr. Peter* helps her financially and gives two addresses-of Mrs. Max and Mrs. Usha Desai for Bangalore, The city appeared just like an alien place for a small town girl like *Anjali*. *Peter* arranges a temporary shelter for her at *Bagehot* house, *Anjali* meets *Mrs. Desai*, who runs a training institute for aspirants, willing to work in a call centre.

It's worthwhile to mention here that, the narrative of modern India has changed over the last few decades. For much of its post-independence history, It was a land of desolate poverty and unassailable hierarchy-*'an area of darkness,'* as spelt in the memorable title of *V. S. Naipaul's* first book; *"Heat And Dust,"*. The story contrasts the India of 1923 with the India of the present, in spite of the dismal title of *R. P. Jhabvala's* 1975 novel. But now India is moving on, and so is the Indian narrative. The country has grown rapidly since the early 1990s, when its stereotypical socialist economy started to tilt towards market economy, a reformation that is believed nowadays, should have happened long back. Today, as India has become an assertive world power, old stories are replaced by new ones, often about boundless opportunity, tremendous wealth, social mobility, and technological prowess. In the wake of Globalization, people gained mobility across borders, as a matter of fact; the cultural collisions and encounters became a day-to-day reality. It is because of the above, there was a plight of perception in people, giving them insights into the phenomenon of immigration.

Mukherjee's heroines, as we find in all of her works, pass through the phases of uncertainty and are hunted by ennui, living under the thin layer of immigrant confidence, they finally acquire the transnational hybrid identity of a global citizen. This process of shifting identities poses innumerable dilemma before them at different levels. Her female characters in particular suffer from double colonization - first by patriarchy and the second, by self-imposed cross-cultural influences. Though of late, India has emerged as an economic world power, it has started to produce literature with striking similarities to the writings of the USA and other European countries during the dawn of the 20th century.

Aravind Adiga's "The White Tiger" (2008) recalls the seething and retaliatory class resentment of Upton Sinclair. The Mumbai mean streets in Vikram Chandra's "Sacred Games" (2007) could have come straight from Herbert Asbury's novelistic "Gangs of New York." And now Bharati Mukherjee's "Miss New India" echoes Theodore Dreiser's "Sister Carrie" it's about a young provincial woman who seeks her fortune in the big city". [sam.2011]

As the title suggests, "Miss New India" appears to be a sort of parable for the resurgent nation. Mukherjee's narratives are often evocative, and at times poetic. Her descriptions of *Anjali's* cultural dislocation are often marked by a keen psychological asperity. Mukherjee often resorts to narrative conservatism, instead of looking at the broadly disseminated platitudes to define the "New India" since the nation remains a bewildering mix of the old and the new, the archaic and the modern.

Miss New India is quite significant in a sense that, Mukherjee tries to note the minute details of a thoroughly diversified and a different India, - first one which is a depiction of axiomatic experiences that she realized in her early childhood life, full of social bondage and restrictions, and other one 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 were restricted to the four walls of houses. Their behaviours were predictably framed in a desired manner, encircled by the social/mythological norms of the society. In ‘old India’, women never crossed the borderlines or ‘laxman rekha’ of etiquettes and morality linked with the patriarchal society, but in the present 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 of traditional India who married a man chosen by her father, while, “Anjali Bose, the protagonist is presented as the representative of the new India, who not only throws off the traditional barriers, but crosses the boundaries of her house to the limits of the society in order to make her future bright and vibrant”. [Patel.2013]

“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”. (MNI. 3)

Anjali’s father Mr. Prafulla Bose, a railway clerk by profession, plans for her marriage as early as she attained marriageable age, it was just after she completed her B. Com. He discusses the matter with his relatives and friends to look for a suitable match. “To marry her off, her father’s Hindu duty: Anjali accepted that.” (MIN.17) Mr. Bose justifies his stand when he says:

“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...” (MNI.28)

Initially, Anjali shows her reluctance to marry, as she was well aware of the problems faced by her own sister, but succumbs to the wishes of her father to marry a monstrous man, who rapes her on their first outing before marriage. In spite of being well-educated, Anjali does not understand the conspiracy constituted by her fiancé *Subodh Mitra*, alleging her relation with her American, friend cum teacher - *Mr. Peter Champion*. Her fiancé Subodh takes her far away to a lonely place and rapes her, stating that she is going to become his wife. All her determination, not to yield her right to happiness, Anjali finally becomes the victim of her adherence to the social norms of patriarchy, which she might not have thought in the wildest of her imagination. This early incident shattered Anjali internally, and filled her mind with a sense of vengeance towards the men and manners, set rules, and the framework of social norms. This too became the reason to think to become independent and to find a breathing space for her.

“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”. (MIN.58)

The incident was quite shocking in the Indian cultural context, but for *Subodh* it was nothing big, since, he got educated from America and had been influenced by the cannibal culture of western barbarism where this sort of things is quite normal. Anjali was shocked deep, bruised within, and decides to leave her home to do something in search of a solace, and to heal the wound within, in doing something vibrant in her career. It was an emotional and moral tsunami; it washed away old beliefs and the footholds of traditions, this brought a sea change in her thought process as well which was comforting and crippling at the same time, she roamed in the third space of to be and not to be. Meanwhile, her teacher cum friend Mr. Peter Champion suggests her that Bangalore is the best place for a girl like her. In the process, she learnt a good American accent from Peter. Mukherjee, justifies with a fine argument in reflecting the psychological turmoil of Anjali, leading to her desperate search to become independent... she says: it is unjustified to;

“Surrender to whims of fate and manipulation of martial marketplace...what do they know need of modern women? 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.” (MNI.12)

The novel presents a compelling account of young people washing up in the call centres, coffee shops and bars of today's Bangalore. There are no scenes here set anywhere outside India, but American culture and values have never played a bigger role in Mukherjee's work than they do here. “Anjali is the queen of light and angles, always shifting between two personas—one, the faithful daughter of traditional Bengali parents, destined for arranged marriage and a life of subservience; the other—Angie—a free-spirited young woman, entitled to excitement, romance and, of course, money”. [Dafna.2011]

At home in *Gauripur*, the social isolation the Boses feel is quite severe. They are “part of a remnant Bengali community inside a sea of Hindi-speaking Biharis.” The family as a whole is still smarting from the failed marriage of Anjali’s older sister, Sonali who got married five years ago and is presently staying in Patna as a single mother, and doing a typist job, somehow making ends meet with a low-wage 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, to be a heavy drinker and a philanderer. But when Sonali finally got up her nerve to institute a divorce proceeding, their father had turned against her for wreaking on the Bose family the public shame of divorce. (MIN.7)

Nevertheless, the Boses keep up a relentless pressure on their younger daughter to get married and “settle down.” Anjali, in the meantime, has to fight these opposing forces. On the one hand the

thought of finding a “good boy” through the arranged marriage, and on the other hand a desire to settle down. Yet! She knew, as her sister had warned her, “*matchmaking might start as a small cloud on the distant horizon, but before it was over, the marital monsoon would break, and no one in the world could hold the floodwaters back.*” And she had to choose a different path on the axis of her own conscience and the dream, despite the compulsions and the duality. It was the attraction of leading an independent life in a big, cosmopolitan city like Bangalore. Peter Champion repeatedly paints a glamorous picture that appeals to “Angie” and eventually it’s one she cannot resist. Anjali leaves Gauripur for Bangalore with some money loaned from Peter. It was like a journey she was perhaps destined to, and the only path to reclaim her identity. “Anjali is presented as an emblem of rebellion,” Mukherjee adds. “She wants personal happiness, not class or caste or tribal privilege.” And the incredibly lucky Anjali does find that personal happiness she seeks, in good measure. Mukherjee chronicles Angie’s wide-eyed discovery of the new India; her migration from Gauripur to Bangalore is almost like a move to a new country. Every accent, every attitude seems incredibly foreign to the girl from a small-town of Bihar. Yet, she slowly makes her way and finds her place in the world with the help of some very generous friends.

The narration about marriage indicates the confined life of women and the fault is always laden on women regarding their morality. This, too, 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 home town, leaving long held family/social values behind. The most important thing is that- a Woman has long remained at the bottom of the social hierarchy in Indian patriarchal set-up; yet, she has always been considered as powerless and weak creature, and has always been treated as a voiceless stuff to be handled at the will of her patriarchal masters/handlers. In the changing scenario, it has changed her roles and the emerging new woman has started questioning her traditional roles, and aspires to go beyond the patriarchal forbidden territory, has become tougher and demanding, ambitious to fly high than the male counterpart in all respects. It’s worthwhile to mention here that - Every country is shaped by its particular set of ideas and myths, concepts or notions, but that has always surprised the researchers that, in spite of occasional bickering and sporadic resistances, these faiths or beliefs hold a country together by imposing certain coherence on diverse populations.

Miss New India is a puzzling novel. On the one hand, it entertainingly skims through India's post-liberalization generation, star-struck by foreign brands, stumbling towards the Holy Grail of mega bucks and quick success, deserting the debris of "values" and "ethics". On the other, a resurgent India that has changed so rapidly in the past few decades, which leaves no room for resistance, and everything flows with time of inevitability, and at times, creates a mistaken identity of native foreigners in one’s own land. Anjali (Angie) Bose, the attractive Bengal-born, but Bihar-bred girl from Gauripur is nearly metamorphosed and destroyed by the Bangalore bonanza of call centres’. Her eventual disgraceful denouncement (including a short stint in jail) finally forces her to gather her jumbled thoughts and scattered dignity, teetering back onto her rosy-pink high heels, ready to

conquer the world once more. "Anything is possible" flamboyance, per-say - as the virtual world, its characters seek to inhabit.

The characters in Mukherjee's novel develop manifold consciousness, resulting in a rather fragmented self that is neither amalgamated nor cross, As the protagonists perceive both their race and sexuality through new and different lenses, throughout the course of the journey, they come to realize that the notion of a singular identity is an erroneous belief, and the reality of the diasporic experience is the indeterminacy of multiplicity. This multiplicity at times becomes a noteworthy plight for the characters, as their different consciousnesses contradict each other; the characters are left doubtful, as to the nature of their identities, not knowing where they fit in the align society. "Finally they become competent of living in a world where individuals exist, not as an integrated one, but as many, bound by no borders, and hug the infinite in the search for possibility of inventing identities. Thus, their sensibility gets altered under the stress of circumstances at the same time they change with the situation around by putting up a brave fight" (subbiah.IOSR-40-43)

The new identity creates problems, In Almost all her novels, Bharati Mukherjee depict an immigrant who tend to look down the memory lane with pain and nostalgia yet impelled by an insistent urge to give voice to the aspirations to carve out a niche for herself, Despite the alienated, ennui of the diasporic experience, languishing in the angst of an alien land where suffocation substitutes solace and suffering becomes the synonym of sanity

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