

The Struggling Women: A comparative study of Bharati Mukherjee's

Miss New India and Manju Kapur's Custody

SAJAD AHMAD BHAT

RESEARCH SCHOLAR

DEPARTMENT OF LANGUAGES

DAVV INDORE

Abstract:

The present paper focuses on the challenges and future prospects of Indian women struggle against the age old tradition. The changing scenario of modern world has changed their roles in every field of life. Both Manju Kapoor and Bharti Mukherjee realistically paint the contemporary panorama of the modern society. The impact of westernization on Indian society has been highlighted through the characters present in the novels.

Key Words: Marriage, Infertility, Age old tradition, Divorce

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Bharati Mukherjee, born in Kolkotta in 1940, and settled in America is a third world feminist writer who features in anthologies of Indian Women writers in English, Post Colonial Literatures writers of Indian Diaspora, Asian American Literature, Canadian Multicultural Literature and in mainstream American Writing. She is considered to be the most popular contemporary Expatriate Writer living in America. Bharati Mukherjee primary concerns in her fiction are cross-cultural conflicts, acculturation, nostalgia, isolation, rootlessness, and assimilation. All her novels are centered on female protagonist.

Manju Kapur is one of the prominent writers in modern Anglo- Indian literature, with international reputation known as Jane Austen of India. Her novels present the day –to- day picture of modern women who is battling for her identity and for her rights. Manju Kapur's feministic concerns deal with lesbianism, infidelity, infertility, divorce, adoption etc.

Bharati Mukherjee and Manju Kapur both are women writers, hence there is a characteristic similarity seen in their fictions. Both women writers have focused on some common issues by one or other way. The dominant themes which are found in their

fictions are domestic violence, family relations in Indian tradition. Various faces of relationship get projected, experienced and evaluated in the present novels taken for study, but marriage is one of the most prominent one. The present novels *Miss New India* and *Custody* portrays the women characters who are struggling in their lives for their identity, freedom, rights against the age old traditions. Bharati Mukherjee and Manju Kapur have observed this ritual from their own experience. Bharati Mukherjee's recent novel *Miss New India* has again a female protagonist Anjali Bose who finds herself in dilemma what to do what not to. She is handcuffed in between hapless marriage and promising career. In Indian patriarchal society girls are allowed to leave their home only as bride with a man selected by parents. The daughter of the family and her life are directly linked with the honor of the family: Anjali Bose the protagonist, a 19 years old girl, supportive tall and very impressive girl in *Miss New India* reveals the story of women who struggles in re-inventing herself in to the modern world and displays lively picture of the country up to date and as traditional as many places in the world.

Angali Bose a daughter of "railway Bose" a talented girl having B.com has good command over English with good American accent, even better than her mother tongue Bangali. She did not want to marriage instead wants to do something unique, in her life rather than to pass her life like a Indian traditional life. When Angali refuses for her marriage, her father gets angry and, "it is not a question of happiness, yours or ours. It's about our name, our family reputation" (7) . Anjali surrenders before the parents. Mr Bose continues and says his wife, "I shall find a good boy this time" (22). Anjali is not allowed to think even about the profession of her husband as Mr Bose warns her:

You think you can give ultimatum to your elders? May be I should marry you off to a village school teacher--- would you approve of that? Iron a dhoti under a banyan tree every morning ... you think my family and my salary are not good enough for an actuary or a tooth puller (dentist)? " (23). Mr. Bose cries on her wife for having only daughters:

You see what state you have reduced to me, woman, by not bearing sons? All my brothers are fathers of son. But me? Two donkeys for daughters...Donkey for wife, donkeys for daughters... Ill luck is ill Luck.” (24).

Anjali’s elder sister Sonali a divorced woman was not even informed about the person whom she got married which proves later the main cause of the destruction of her life. Anjali was thinking over it again and again, and is not ready for marriage. Anjali was forced to accept the decision taken by her parents. To her: “The idea of sleeping in their beds, bearing their children, cooking for them, sitting across from them and watching them eat and burp and listening to their voices and opinions for a life time put the idea of marriage into a category with a life sentence on Andaman Island” (28). With the help of Mr Nirmal Gupta the Mitra Family agrees to visit Bose family to see the bride (Anjali) along with their son Subodh Mitra. Subodh Mitra in a first meet takes Anjali inside the car and drives away to a very desolate place where he rapes Anjali. Subodh destroys Anjali’s virginity and it was not shocking for him to do so before marriage. Because he was brought up in Western culture in which these things are common. Anjali was deeply shocked, because she experienced this first time in life. She was not able to reveal to her parents all that had happened to her. Anjali was compelled by the circumstances to leave her own home leaving her parents alone with a letter. Anjali don’t commit suicide nor does something like that. Anjali approaches her teacher cum friend Mr. Peter Champion who suggests her that Bangalore is the best place suitable for her: “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).

She was helped by her teacher Peter Champion in terms of money and provides her two Addresses---of Mrs Max and Mrs Usha Desia, and assures her for a temporary shelter at Bagehot house. Anjali in Bangalore experienced first time the western culture, like seeing women smoking. At Bangalore Anjali strives for her well being but were used there by several people in several ways till she adjusts herself in the same environment. Finally she

gets her place which she deserves. The curse of age old tradition ends and she explores herself in a way she can. Bharati Mukherjee tries to condemn the early marriage system of Indian society, which spoils the bright careers and sometimes the lives of their daughters.

In Manju Kapur's *Custody* the impact of westernization and fast mobilization has negatively touched the very sanctity of marriage. Manju Kapur in this novel highlights the very crux of problems which are common in Indian tradition. The story of the novel revolves around Raman and Shagun a couple along with Raman's boss Ashok Khanna and Ishita, a childless divorced. This is the story about Indian urban middle class, where women are striving in their lives in order to fulfill their own wishes. Manju Kapur's *Custody* is a tale of female woes, sufferings as well as their happiness, their way of fulfilling their desires and needs.

Manju Kapur through the character of Ishita exposes the problems of patriarchal system, where women are tortured for not being mother. Ishita's mother-in-law being a woman failed to empathize with Ishita's condition and was eager to know about the fault whether her daughter-in-law or her son suffers, so she takes a detailed discussion with the doctor. When it was declared that her daughter-in-law is infertile, her curiosity is satisfied as it is not her son and soon she changed her nature towards Ishita. When Ishita is declared infertile, Ishita, "thought it is easier to commit suicide than to live" (63). She was denied by her in-laws by one way or the other. She laments: "From the day of her wedding she thought of this family as hers, revealing in the togetherness, sharing and companionship. Now instead of love all around her, there was rejection" (63). Ishita's mother-in-law changed her behavior towards her. She does not want to waste money on her and she contemplates: "had there been something wrong with S.K, they would have moved heaven and earth to get a son's defect corrected. In an ideal world the same resources would have been put at the disposal of a daughter-in-law. But this was not an ideal world" (68). Ishita feels disembodied as she is punished not for not being mother. She lost her health and self-esteem due to her infertility: "Had not they valued her for herself? Being childless, relegate

her to the status of ‘nobody’ as she has failed to prove her femininity through child bearing. This is my Karma, nothing will break it” (68). Ishita curses her own body for all what happened to her. “She thought of the body that had known for so much love and then so much punishment. She hated her body, hated it. Tyranny of biology is what is wrong with the society” (183). Ishita’s body becomes “the battlefield where she fights for liberation. It is through her body that oppression works, reifying her. Her physicality is a medium for other’s to work on; her job is to act as their viceroy, presenting her body their ministrations, and applying to her body the treatment that have been ordained”(Greer106). Ishita is thrown out from her home and is considered a failure by her culture. Ishita is punished for the sin which neither her wish nor her deed. She is divorced by Suryakatha for not being mother. She is totally depressed now, divorce fills her life with glooming and sense of failure. After this bitter experience of life Ishita strives against the circumstances in which she was caged. She builds her self-esteem and starts her new life. Ishita starts involving herself in social activities, works as a teacher for underprivileged children. She encounters with Raman and meets Roohi the baby girl of Raman. Raman was like her because of the elopement of his wife with his boss Ashok. Ishita and Raman’s condition bring them close to each other. Ishita got married with Raman and adopts Raman’s daughter and get rid from her barrenness. She becomes step-mother to Raman’s children and attains both wifhood as well as motherhood which endows her to legitimacy. Ishita’s marital life empowers her “to the societal status as a married woman which has been rudely snatched from her by the divorce from her first husband”(303). The struggle does not end here, Ishita fights for the Raman’s children in custody and finally gets Roohi from custody.

Shagun on the other hand in the beginning of the novel falls in love with Ashok, her husband Raman’s boss. Shagun was willing to fulfill her all desire which was not possible with Raman. Shagun chooses her own path and don’t bothered about the social dogmas. Shagun breaks her marriage bond with Raman and him for divorce. But the matter of children went to the custody. Shagun overrides all social bondages that the society confers

upon human being as a part of family system. Shagun by opposing the male dominated society and age old tradition represents the modernity of Indian women. Shagun in *Custody* lost her daughter but she fulfills all her desires and enjoys her rights as well. Shagun too strives against the old age tradition in order to govern her own world according to her wishes. *Custody* becomes something more than just a social commentary and confirms Manju Kapur as great commentator of the society in which she lives.

In both novels women is seen struggling against the age old tradition. All women characters display the agony of social dogma where modern women fights against it in order to achieve the goal of freedom. Bharati Mukherjee's and Manju Kapur's heroines represent the women of modern India. Both writers feministic concern teaches a lesson humanistic and want women too should on par with other women. They are the humanists and have highlighted the pathetic plight of modern Indian women who are caged in Traditional India.

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