

In quest of liberation: A feminist reading of short fiction of Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri

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Abstract

“Man’s First Disobedience” to God’s will triggers his diasporic journey. Hence, the term “Diaspora” is not any recent phenomenon, but an increasingly unavoidable aspect of global life. In recent times it has oozed in the very core of human existence where people even of the remotest villages are not spared of its affect. The migration that began as a compulsion is now a voluntary activity for material gains, luxurious life and, higher studies. The connection of diaspora with India is quite ancient as Indians have travelled as merchants, scholars, indentured laborers from time to time and after independence, a surge in it is quite visible. Initially, women accompanied their men as an appendage and most of the diasporic writings of earlier writers tend to stereotype women’s role within the diasporic domain as a preserver of culture, inflexible to adapt. Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri are two celebrated names in the diasporic field of recent history who have challenged the stereotype notion that exists within diasporic domain regarding South Asian women’s condition in the host culture. Their short fictions not only give a fresh outlook regarding women’s positive future in their adopted land but also highlights the inflexibility of men to respond to the gender neutral society of the West. This paper aims at reading four short stories, “A Father” and “Angela” by Mukherjee and “A Temporary Matter” and “This Blessed House” by Lahiri from a fresh perspective regarding their portrayal of a positive future of women in their adopted country who are breaking multiple boundaries to fit into their chosen existence, whereas Asian men lagging behind to respond to the reversal of gender role.

Keywords- Diaspora, Women, Adopt, Adapt, Feminism, Liberation, Flexibility

“Man’s First Disobedience” to God’s will triggers his diasporic journey. Since then men are wandering on earth from place to place in search of food, shelter and better life-sustaining environment. Hence, the term “Diaspora” is not any recent phenomenon, but an increasingly

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unavoidable aspect of global life. In recent times it has oozed in the very core of human existence where people even of the remotest villages are not spared of its affect. The migration that began as a compulsion is now a voluntary activity for material gains, luxurious life and, higher studies. In recent years people from diverse places frequently migrating in the first world countries to live their dreams as the West promises them better future and peaceful life. The connection of diaspora with India is quite ancient as Indians have travelled as merchants, scholars, indentured laborers from time to time and after independence, a surge in it is quite visible. Today, educated youths from South Asian countries settling down in the West who are benefitting both the host country and their motherlands, as narrow boundaries of countries are falling apart in the emergence of global culture.

Initially, women accompanied their men as an appendage to the West. They strictly maintained their old-world division of labour between men and woman taught by the patriarchal society where women must preserve her old culture before the constant threat of the dominant culture of the host society. Diasporic writings of earlier writers tend to stereotype women's role within the diasporic domain as a preserver of culture, inflexible to adapt. However, women have come a long way with better education which has given her the courage to step out of her domestic space to seek self-fulfillment outside. She is making her presence felt within the working world challenging the notion of her inability to meet the demands of the professional domain. Hence, men who solely occupied the outer world are now facing challenges from the new age empowered women. Asian men though in the West are part of liberal society; however, the changed ambience has not changed their stereotyped attitude towards women. These men who enjoyed full privilege in the east being men are facing trouble to change their outlook towards women as women are negating the conventional roles and redefining their relationship with men as well as with the host culture. People living within the diasporic world live multiple lives within the one. They are restless souls; living lives in the past as well as in the present and interaction with the host culture makes them hybrids. Short Story is also a restless, hybrid genre which aptly reflects the small, crucial restless moments of such diasporic encounters in fragments. Bharati Mukherjee is a trendsetter who changed the whole course of women diasporic writings with her powerful images of self-sufficient women worriers. In America, she declared herself an American writer rather than an expatriate. Her writing brings out women's journey who are on their own to live life on their own terms. On the other hand, Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the most celebrated authors of recent history. Her simple yet capturing narratives have made her a best-seller writer. Her short story collections represent universal emotions connected with diasporic lives. Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri both have challenged the stereotype notion that exists within diasporic domain regarding South Asian women's condition in the host culture. Their short fictions not only give a fresh outlook regarding women's positive

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future in their adopted land but also highlights the inflexibility of men to respond to the gender neutral society of the West.

The story, “A Father” from the collection “Darkness” (1985) by Mukherjee set in Canada is a revolutionary story as well as much ahead of time which brings out the desire of new age women to challenge patriarchy to achieve self-realization. Bhowmik family consists of Mr. and Mrs. Bhowmik and their engineer daughter Babli. Mr. Bhowmik a man of the old world, agreed to marry his wife only to ensure his foreign education, is not a man of progressive ideas. He limits his life within his job and daily puja of goddess Kali in Canada. He was happy earlier to be in a big city like Mumbai out of a small town like Rachi. He had to immigrate to Canada because of his wife who desired to be in a liberal society like Canadian society. Mr. Bhowmik is critical about his wife’s self-assertion whom he took to abroad earlier for his own necessity. However, he never thought his wife would turn out to be a rebel in West. Later while his wife becomes a working woman leading her life in her own terms in Canada, Mr. Bhowmik alienates himself mentally from his wife because of her authoritative behavior. His daughter is also a progressive woman who made him proud being only woman engineer within his Bengali community. Yet, Mr. Bhowmik feels dissatisfied because for Mr. Bhowmik his daughter is not girlish enough the way girls are in India. Babli an independent strong headed woman appears to be quite manly to him. As the story proceeds, we see Mr. Bhowmik discovers Babli’s pregnancy which becomes a matter of great surprise to him as he cannot believe that anyone could find his manly daughter loving enough to court. Babli, on the other hand, uses the technique of insemination to get pregnant as she abhors men. She says, “Who needs a man?” she hissed. “The father of my baby is a bottle and a syringe. Men louse up your lives. I just want a baby. Oh, don’t worry- he’s a certified fit donor. No diseases, college graduate, above average, and he made the easiest twenty-five dollars of his life-”. (Darkness 63).

Babli’s act infuriates her father who takes it as an insult to the entire men folk and further takes a rolling pin to attack Babli in a fit of madness. Mukherjee here authentically captures the baffling situation of a father whose mind is the creation of old patriarchal values. Mr. Bhowmik accepts that his wife and daughter are more adaptive and progressive in ideas. However, as a male of the old world, he is not ready to change himself to allow his wife and daughter to be equal and self-reliant.

The opening story of the same collection, “Angela” speaks about the same issue. An American family adopts Angela from Bangladesh, a victim of war. Angela very quickly adopts the lifestyle of her new country and feels lucky to relive her life in a liberated society like America. A doctor called Mr. Minzee falls in love with Angela who expresses his desire to marry her. As the story rolls, we get to know the real character of that doctor who is having a special motive in his desire to marry Angela as she belongs to the east and appeared non-threatening, unlike western women. He tempts Angela with big house, kids, dogs, with all

kinds of domestic comfort without asking ever what Angela wants to do with her own life, “domesticity. Phantom duplexes, babies tucked tight into cribs, dogs running playfully off with the barbecued steak.”(Darkness 14). He further tells her that she does not need to work after marriage as most Asian women do. The very proposal makes Angela realize the need to be independent as she takes her life as a mission to serve humanity instead of becoming someone’s wife.

Jhumpa Lahiri enters into the literary circle with a bang. From the very first short story collection, she becomes the reader’s favorite. Her “Interpreter of Maladies” has bought her Pulitzer Prize. The story “Temporary Matter” takes the reader into the house of Shukumar and Shoba who are struggling hard to come out of the trauma of losing their first born. Lahiri here subtly hints the change of gender roles that has gradually enter into the domestic space of the second generation Indian Americans. Shukumar a research scholar never minds accepting Sobha a working woman as his life partner. Sobha, on the other hand, takes the responsibility of refilling all household goods for which Shukumar always admires her. Sobha takes control of the house, take care of all household requirements even in pregnancy, she let her husband go to attend a seminar so that he can make connections for a future job. Everything was fine until their baby dies. The death of the child causes a rift between the couple. Here we see while Sobha shows courage to go out and take additional work to cope up with her irreparable loss. On the other hand, Shukumar stays at home encaging himself inside the four walls. Additionally, he even fails to communicate his pain with his wife who being a mother suffers more than him. Shukumar feels infertile, vulnerable. He could not focus on his studies and suffers from inferiority complex. There was news of power cut for few days. Sobha plays a game of telling some secrets every day to each other with Shukumar. While they play the game, Sukumar got suspicious about Shobha that she may not love him anymore as he is unemployed. He even thinks Shobha may be seeing someone else. During that period we see Shukumar cooking as it makes him feel creative. He cooks for Shobha who stay most of the time out as to avoid the memories of the baby. At the end of the story we see Shobha leaves Shukumar as she wanted to give her life a new start. “I’ve been looking for an apartment and I’ve found one” It was nobody’s fault,...She needed some time alone.” (IOM 21). Shukumar accepts her decision but cannot stop himself from taking revenge and reveals the sex of the baby which makes Shoba break down in tears.

“This Blessed House” is a story of a newly married couple who buys a new house. The house creates a rift between the couple as they discover Christian artifacts one after another. Sanjeev a man from India marries Twinkle after a short courtship. Sanjeev a man from old world fails to understand the psyche of his Indian-American wife. Twinkle is different from average Indian women and not trained to follow all the orders of their husbands. She is a master’s student, does not like cooking. She loves talking to her friends, spending time in relaxing rather than immersing completely in doing household chores.

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When she discovers statues of Jesus she feels excited and wanted to keep them in her house. Sanjeev, on the other hand, feels threaten as he is a Hindu and a minority in America. He wanted to throw those things out but Twinkle stands in front of him. She reminds him that she also a member of the house, the house belongs to her too. Hence, her opinion also matters. She says, "Don't you dare,...I hate you," again when Sanjeev ask her if she is going to leave the house? Twinkle conscious of her equal status reminds him, "This is our house. We own it together." (IOM 149). Her declaration jars Sanjeev as he wishes to go back to his bachelor life even thinks that he should have married to an Indian woman who would have cooked and followed all his orders like meek, docile Indian women. However, in the house warming party, everyone praises Twinkle, Sanjeev although jealous decides to take the backseat. He serves foods while Twinkle plays the role of a perfect host. At the end unwillingly Sanjeev agrees to keep a christen statue in his home and follows Twinkle. Sanjeev is living many years in America, however, he could not adopt the American multicultural society. He feels he has done mistake by marrying a woman like Twinkle who does not fit into the model of an ideal Indian wife.

In all the four stories women appear to be keen in redefining their lives. They are bold, open to newness, courageous, self-assertive and ready to go to any extent to keep their freedom intact. Angela by rejecting a secure life with Dr. Minzee, Shoba in her decision to come out of her rotten relationship, Twinkle by displaying her importance in decision making reflect their quest for a liberated existence. Babli is far ahead as she decides to have a child without being physical with any man. Where women in these stories reflect their adaptability, men seem to be yet not ready to accept the positive change as Dr. Minzee wish to imprison Angela by making her a mere housewife, Sanjeev regretting his decision of marrying Twinkle or Shukumar failing to understand the psyche of a woman who lost her baby as he starts suspecting Shoba being in having extramarital affair. Babli's parents even try to attack her physically as she threatens entire existence of male race by getting pregnant through artificial insemination.

James Stuart Mill writes in his seminal text, "The Subjection of Women" (1869), the main obstacle to the total progress of humanity is the gender-based discrimination.

That the principle that which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes-the legal subordination of one sex to the other-is wrong in itself, and now chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by the principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other. (The Subjection of Women 1)

Mill further says by denying opportunity to women we are denying our society to have the best as talent does not depend on any particular gender but on the intelligence of a being. Hence there should be free competition irrespective of any gender. Mary Wollstonecraft's "Vindication for the rights of women" (1792) too advocates the need to reconstruct the

mindset of the society and to open opportunity for women to get best of any talent. Virginia Woolf states the same fact through her epoch-making book, “A Room of one’s own” (1929) as she creates an imaginary sister of Shakespeare who being deprived by the societal norms wastes her talent and dies unnoticed. In western civilization, women have achieved a sense of equity as they successfully came together to seek equality but in the east women never had any collective movement as such. Therefore, Eastern men have always enjoyed the privilege being superior to women. The shift of geographical location has done very little to change gender orientation in such men as showcased by above stories. In a way, they are also the victim of patriarchy which shapes their psyche subconsciously and works as a barrier to accept women as their equal. These men although accepts women as they struggle to a make decision of their own lives but never willingly rather out of disillusionment. Hence, they sometimes panic, even attacks violently out of anxiety. However, there is an urgent need for men need to reorient their minds so to have a harmonious future as well as to save their own sex of being victims of a malicious disease called patriarchy.

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