

Identity Crisis on the Native Land in Bharati Mukherjee's *Miss New India*

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Abstract

This paper aims to study Bharati Mukherjee's latest novel *Miss New India*, published in 2011, which portrays the modern India. The female protagonist of the novel is a young woman, Anjali Bose, who is in constant search for ways to escape the conservative environment of Gauripur, a small-town in Bihar. The author has depicted the restlessness of a young woman who is in pursuit of happiness. She is not like the other Gauripur girls who would allow others to write her destiny. She had high aspirations in life. Although she is born in a conservative middle class family but she wants a westernized lifestyle. The image of women in fiction has undergone a transformation during the last four decades. Women writers have moved away from traditional portrayals of enduring, self-sacrificing women towards aggressive female characters searching for identity. They are no longer characterized and defined simply in terms of their victim status. In contrast to earlier writings, female characters from the 1980s onwards assert themselves and defy marriage and motherhood. Bharati Mukherjee's writings depict both the diversity of women and the diversity within each woman, rather than limiting the lives of women to one ideal. . The novel attempts to capture the modern India through Anjali's journey in the 21st century India's city of hopes and dreams. The author's description of Anjali's cultural dislocation is characterized by a keen psychological insight .

Key Words: dislocation, cultural, conservative, aspirations, westernized

Women in the 20th and 21st century face identity issues which leads to a lot of emotional baggage which they have to carry in order to be good wife, daughter and mother. All these issues have been dealt by writers like Virginia Woolf, May Swenson and Ursula K. Le Guin in their fiction. Woolf feels that when the path is marginally open, there are a number of obstacles that come in the way of women. A woman is determined to do whatever she wants but her prejudiced image comes in her way. Mukherjee's novels are self actualizing and portray the quest of women to search for their identity. She feels that women are often caught in the flux of tradition and modernity.

Recent writers depict both the diversity of women and the diversity within each woman, rather than limiting the lives of women to one ideal. The novels emerging in the twenty-first century furnish examples of a whole range of attitudes towards the imposition of tradition, some offering an analysis of the family structure and the caste system as the key elements of patriarchal social organization. They also re-interpret mythology by using new symbols and subverting the canonic versions. Indian women writers like Bharati Mukherjee have made a significant contribution in making the society aware of women's demands, and in providing a medium for self-expression and thus, re-writing history.

. Mukherjee's works focus on the phenomenon of migration, the status of new immigrants, and the feeling of alienation often experienced by expatriates as well as on Indian women and their struggle. Her own struggle for identity first as an Indian expatriate in Canada, and finally as a immigrant in the United States has been reflected in her writings. Most of her novels deal with the theme of alienation of the protagonist on the foreign land.

Bharati Mukherjee's latest novel *Miss New India*, published in 2011, portrays the modern India. The female protagonist of the novel is a young woman, Anjali Bose, who is in constant search of ways to escape the conservative environment of Gauripur, a small-town in Bihar. The author has pictured the restlessness of a young woman who is in pursuit of happiness. She is not like the other Gauripur girls who would allow others to write her

destiny. She had high aspirations in life. Although she is born in a conservative middle-class family she wants a Westernized lifestyle.

Bharati Mukherjee's expatriate sensibility has overpowered the feminine issues which she is not unaware of. Her psyche has a high degree of Indianans but she has avoided getting into the controversies of stigma attached to feminine issues by the Indian society. She has portrayed her protagonists as docile and submissive females who struggle hard to find solutions for their problems without dominating their male counterparts. Her characters keep experimenting with various options.

Bharati Mukherjee has written this novel in the backdrop of the "new" India which has imbibed the Western culture significantly. This novel has portrayed India's seismic shift, its growing culture of call centres and development of megacities leading to technological and economic boom. Bangalore has been presented as American replica of a city. It has been shown as the Silicon valley of India synonymous to America as the Silicon Valley of the world. As the protagonist, Anjali Bose reaches Bangalore, she finds herself in a totally different planet.

Her biggest strength of proficiency in English language seems to be shattered in the American

accent of Bangalore. She craves for her lost identity. She experiences cultural shock as she belongs to a small town and is unable to fit in the mega city culture. This paper aims to study Anjali's life and struggle in Bangalore in terms of her assimilation in the alien city and its culture and how she struggles to overcome all the problems and at the end acquires a new identity.

The novel opens with the description of Anjali's life in the small backwater town of Bihar. Anjali likes to be called as Angie. Anjali is a typical middle class Indian girl, born and brought up in the traditional patriarchal society. But she is an ambitious girl who was determined to write her own destiny. She would not accept the kind of life she was living in Gauripur, "She'd always imagined herself in Mumbai or may be on the beaches of Goa, and so she mentioned those possibilities to him. Eventually even in America, she thought." (p) The author has depicted the restlessness of a young woman who is in pursuit of happiness. She is not like the other Gauripur girls who would allow others to write her destiny. She had high aspirations in life. Although she is born in a conservative middle class family but she

wants a westernized lifestyle. Her quest for freedom makes her rebellious. The following lines exhibit her quest to be independent. “ She liked the idea of not having to go right back home to her father’s bullying and her mother’s tearful silence.They were obsessed with finding a respectable son-in –law who would overlook negatives such as green eyes, a stubborn personality and a nominal dowry.”(p.12)

Anjali’s domineering parents did not allow her to mingle with boys due to the fear of people in Gauripur ,who were supposed to be very orthodox and old fashioned .Their anxiety to find a suitable bridegroom for their daughter baffled Anjali .Bharati Mukherjee has depicted the frustration in her protagonist which makes her defiant towards her parents. She was not bothered about following the norms of the conservative society in which she lived. This can be seen in her following statement of her father. “When the word got out,as it inevitably would, that Anjali Bose,daughter of “Railways Bose” of Indian Railways, sister of working woman divorcee, was riding off in plain sight’ with her arms around the stomach of a foreigner, her parents would find it harder to make a proper-caste Bengali matrimonial match for her.” (p.13)

The author has depicted the dilemma faced by her female protagonist , who is constantly weighing her assets and liabilities in the marriage market .Bharati Mukherjee has depicted the agony which a young girl of marriageable age goes through in an Indian society where only arranged marriages are accepted. “She lacked accomplishments such as singing, dancing and sewing, traditionally expected of bridal candidates.She was also stubborn, headstrong and impulsive and by middle class Gauripur standards,inappropriately outgoing.” (p.20)

Anjali’s English teacher,Mr Champion recognizes her talent and advises her to write her own destiny rather than allowing her destiny to be written by others without her consent. Mr. Champion boosts her self esteem and inspires her to rebel against arranged marriage which was predestined for her.She wanted to be Angie, a modern girl in front of her English Teacher This is evident from the following lines: “She was about to lift her arm and signal, but no, she could not, not in a sari, with jingling gold bracelets. Angie- in- sari was Anjali,a stranger to her student self.” (p.32,33)

Despite of trying very hard , Anjali could not prevent her father to stop the search for a bridegroom. Her parents were very conservative and in spite of facing a setback in their elder daughter's marriage, continued with the same approach for finding a match for their younger daughter, Anjali. Anjali ,with her modern outlook and thinking was dead against these old conventional ideas. The following lines depict the mindset of the protagonist. "She was part of bold new India , an equal to anywhere, a land poised for take off. Her parents were irremediably alien, part of a suspicious, impoverished, humiliated India."(23P)

.A horrible experience took place in the marriage market. A sadistic person chosen by her father as a perspective bridegroom behaved in an atrocious manner forcing Anjali to move out of her cocoon into the streets of Bangalore. The author sketches the absurdities that occur in tying young boys and girls in marital bond through arranged marriages. Anjali detested arranged marriages and considered the bondage similar to that of living in a jail in Andaman Islands. " Angie found 99 percent of boys simply unappealing. 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 lifetime put the idea of marriage in a category with a life sentence on the Andaman Islands" (p.30-31)

Bharati Mukherjee has shown that in her female protagonist's journey from traditional to the modern world she had encountered a variety of male characters and her experience with them has been bitter most of the times . The following lines reveal her opinion about male folk. " Anjali Bose decided she had already encountered at least one version of every likely male she would ever meet. Not every man was befuddled as Nirmal Gupta or a bulley like her father, or a rapist like Subodh Mitra, or a lying cheat like Sonali's ex- husband or an exploiter like Sonali's current boss or a brutish John like the truck driver of Nizambagh."(P 98)

A clash between contemporary and traditional India takes place when the female protagonist of the novel moves to Bangalore ,the Silicon valley of the Asian subcontinent. The novel attempts to capture the modern India through Anjali's journey in the 21st century India's city of hopes and dreams. In Bangalore the identities are fluid and they keep evolving with the passage of time. Here we find inhabitants with complex identities like American expatriates, Indian repatriates ,NRI's and native born Indians from all parts of the country. In Bangalore Anjali is one among the huge crowd who aspires to be call centre employees. These

employees are trained to speak English in American accent and are given American names. It is a city in which people come from all over the world to enjoy more independence and free themselves from conventions.

Bharati Mukherjee choreographs her protagonists struggle in Bangalore. She is perplexed about her own identity- She is called Anjali, Angie and Anjoli. She ponders over it. In Bagehot house, when confronted by Minnie Bagehot she reacted to show her Indianans. "I am an Indian, she thought. I am Indian in ways no one else in this house is Indian, except maybe poor little Sunita Sampath. I have no roots anywhere but in India." (p.138)

The author has portrayed the change that India is experiencing through the protagonist of the novel. She has sketched Anjali's adventures in Bangalore, an IT hub of modern India. This is a city where call centres have created new culture, where Indians from small towns look for job opportunities which promises them a lucrative pay package.

Anjali's visit to Bangalore was sponsored by her English teacher, Peter Champion. She was asked to find accommodation at Bagehot House which was an old mansion of the British colonial era. There Anjali tries to adapt herself to American lifestyle like other girls living in that mansion. This is the kind of life she had aspired for. She tried to be professional but could not resist the temptation to explore the young, wild world. In Bangalore she was totally confused about her Identity as a young girl who hailed from a very conservative family. "Bangalore was not about global economics. It was an emotional and moral Tsunami ; it washed away old beliefs and traditions, the comforting ones together with the crippling and if you survived, you knew you had the spunk and grit to rebuild." (p 165)

Initially Anjali felt that she has succeeded in her mission of redefining her identity in that great city of opportunities. She is full of confidence and enthusiasm. This is evident from her following statement which she makes to Girish Gujral, a wealthy industrialist whom she meets in Bangalore. "I have been in Bangalore only three weeks. I have no job, no paycheck, and no family here. But I have seen more and learned more in Bangalore than I have from twenty years in Gauripur. Here I feel I can do anything. I feel I can change my life if that's what I want." (p.166)

Anjali is an epitome in the novel. The author has portrayed her as an iconic figure. In the novel Parvati has made this gloomy observation about her; “The best I can come up with is you are like a reflecting pool. You give back wavy clues to what we are or what we are going to be.” In Bangalore she works at a call center. In her journey there she meets dynamic young entrepreneurs and feels happy with the opportunities being created all around her. She encounters lots of hardships but ultimately she succeeds in gaining a new identity which she had always longed for.

The author’s description of Anjali’s cultural dislocation is characterised by a keen psychological insight. The author has defined the “New India” as a bewildering mix of the old and the new. Bharati Mukherjee’s expatriate sensibility has overpowered the feminine issues which she is not unaware of. Her psyche has a high degree of Indianness but she has avoided to get into the controversies of stigma attached to feminine issues by the Indian society. She has portrayed her protagonists as docile and submissive females who struggle hard to find solutions for their problems without dominating their male counterparts. Her characters keep experimenting with various options and thus sometimes appear abnormal. They have an innate desire to live life on their own terms and conditions. In spite of her association with traditional American writers, her fiction is untouched by obscenity which clearly defines her Indian roots.

Bharati Mukherjee chronicles the discovery of the New India where Anjali is an emblem of 'Miss New India'. Her migration from Gauripur to Bangalore is almost like a shift to a new country. She makes some strong and bold decisions and finds a space for herself. Bharati Mukherjee remarks about Anjali that she survives and assimilates in the new city because she does not stop or halt but moves on unlike her mother and sister who compromised with their fate. The author shows 21st century India where American customs and ethics are introduced and altered by a young Indian woman who ends up staying in her own country. Roots and routes are negotiated in the novel in unique ways, leading to the augment of new kinds of cultural identities. Miss New India is an example of being American by converting Indian in modern India through the adoption of hybrid culture.

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