

**Issues of Identity and Selfhood in the Novels of Bharati Mukherjee,  
Asha Bage and Usha Priyamvada: A Comparative Study**

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**Abstract**

*Prior to the rise of the novel, many Indian women composed poetry and short stories in Hindi, Punjabi, Bengali, Marathi, Urdu, Tamil, Malayalam and Kannada. Women were the chief upholders of a rich oral tradition of story-telling, through myths, legends, songs and fables. Once literacy began to filter through society, those stories were transformed into poetry and drama. The novel was not at first a common form, perhaps because the majority of women had less access to education than men. But in the last two decades there has been an astonishing flowering of Indian women writings, the literature of this period being published both in India and elsewhere. The authors are mostly educated middle-class women, who express in their writing their discontent with the plight of upper-caste and class traditional Hindu women trapped in repressive institutions such as child-marriage, dowry, prohibitions on women's education, arranged marriages, suttee and enforced widowhood. The issues of Identity and selfhood have become a very dominant theme in literature since the rise and development of feminism, which studies various problems of women and creates awareness among them. Feminism is a criticism of the prevailing social conditions, which have excluded women from the dominant male culture, social, sexual, political and intellectual pursuits. As women have experienced displacement and dislocations in personal lives, they are better suited for adaptability in an alien culture. The present paper is an attempt to have comparative analysis of three women writers from three different languages and examines the suffering embedded in the lives of Indian women and their experience portrayed in the novels of Bharati Mukherjee, Asha Bage and Usha Priyamvada.*

**Key Words:** *Feminism, identity, selfhood, gender prejudice, immigrant*



## **Introduction**

Traditionally, the work of Indian women writers has been undervalued due to patriarchal assumptions about the superior worth of male experience. One factor contributing to this prejudice is the fact that most of these women write about the enclosed domestic space, and women's perceptions of their experience within it. Consequently, it is assumed that their work will automatically rank below the works of male writers who deal with 'weightier' themes. Additionally, Indian women writers in English are victims of a second prejudice, vis-à-vis their regional counterparts. Since proficiency in English is available only to writers of the intellectual, affluent, educated classes, a frequent judgment is made that the writers, and their works, belong to a high social stratum, and are cut off from the reality of Indian life. The majority of these novels depict the psychological suffering of the frustrated housewife, this subject matter often being considered superficial compared to the depiction of the repressed and oppressed lives of women of the lower classes that we find in regional authors writing in Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, Malayalam, Urdu, Tamil, Telugu, and other native languages.

In western countries women give more importance to individualism and believe in rejecting the family and home and are in antagonism of the masculine gender. Indian women are more 'Relational' in that sense. Feminism in India has changed over time in relation to historical and cultural realities. Indian women struggle for identity through different hierarchies. Patriarchy is one of them but women in India also have to struggle with other female members within families for their identity. That may be called another hierarchy which goes unnoticed.

The quests for identity and freedom have become some of the most important themes of the modern novel. From time to time Indian women novelists in English have discussed the problems of women and their quest for identity. Indian women writers are conscious of the marginal status of women in society where the power of decision making is in the hands of men. There have been different approaches to explore self within Indian philosophical, religious and spiritual traditions: the Vedic approach was dynamic with focus on things outside the self such as rituals, as it celebrated man's relationship with nature, cosmos, earth, sky, etc. The Upanishadic approach was more inward and introspective. Another approach was devotional which postulated itself in relation to God/god and then to humankind. The search for self in Indian religious and philosophical tradition becomes a major concern for the sages through meditation. For ordinary mortals, it progresses as a

dialectic in terms of various relationships of man, woman and God/god. The women novelists of the feminist movement set examples of search for women's identity within Indian feminist tradition.

There are several Indian novels which have touched this aspect and revealed the truth of how Indian women are treated by the male society. They present feminist philosophy in an authentic manner. The struggle and quest for self identity of an Indian woman is presented by the most of the woman writers. There are many novels which deal with this subject matter. Moreover, we have some women novelists who have represented the life of Indian women through their novels which require the attention of the researchers and scholars so that the women's plight may be focused. Likewise, many Indian novelists, writing in English and regional languages, have written various novels and given a new dimension to this genre; but very few of them were praised for their works.

This shows that women novelists in India have written their novels on various themes and aspects and shown a true picture of women in regard with their status. Bharati Mukherjee, Asha Bage and Usha Priyamvada, these three women novelists from three major languages English, Marathi and Hindi respectively have constantly struggled against the male dominated system which still prevails in Indian society for stating their identity. Their protagonists are always fearless women upholding feminine dignity, who suffer and resist the male domination and try to put themselves as individuals. These three writers are bold and forthright for their powerful idiomatic language and uninhibited treatment they are the most talked about authors today.

### **Immigrant experience and Self Identity**

Bharati Mukherjee, an Indian-born American novelist and short-story writer, her works reflect Indian culture and immigrant's experiences. Unlike many other immigrant writers, "Mukherjee identifies herself as an unhyphenated American rather than calling herself a hyphenated Indian- American writer. . . . Her writing describes the old world but also new perspectives along with the changes upon assimilation into the new society" ("Images of Women in Bharati Mukherjee's Novels" 65). She often writes about the problem of cross-cultural conflict experienced by Indian immigrant women. Taking into account the complexity of life, different histories, culture and different structures of values, the woman's question despite basic solidarity, needs to be tackled in relation to the socio-cultural situation. The novels of Bharati Mukherjee are self actualizing. Quest for the definition of self and search for identity are the main features of her women who are seen caught in the flux of tradition and modernity. Neither can they completely detach themselves from their past, nor do they have any certitude in the future. Bharati Mukherjee has interceded and reworked the study of feminism in her writings. Mukherjee's depiction of women and their different relationships portrays the dominance of patriarchal practices in traditional society, as well as the forms of liberation and empowerment which are available to women in their diasporic situation. Bharati Mukherjee, like many other women novelists centers her novels round the marriages of women protagonists and her place in the family which serves as a reflection of Indian women in the society. A close study of Bharati Mukherjee's novels reveals her views on the role of Indian women and their struggle to find their own self, their frustration and their alienation. Mukherjee's novels *The Tiger's*

*Daughters, Wife, Jasmine, Leave it to Me, The Holder of the World, Desirable Daughters, and The Tree Bride* have shown her views about the issues of identity and selfhood.

In Mukherjee's first novel *The Tiger's Daughter*, the protagonist Tara Banerjee returns to India after seven years stay in America. The story is drawn on Mukherjee's own experience and those of her sisters who had gone to study in America. When Tara land sat Bombay airport, she is not comfortable with her relatives. Here, Tara's Bombay families cannot receive a woman who not accompanied by her husband, David. According to Bharathiya tradition, a man should lead the woman. He plays a shielding role. Travelling alone, living alone and moving alone are part of unfamiliarity in many parts of India. In Indian tradition, one should marry from her own caste, if she is not following it, she will be treated as an outcast or a sinner. But the protagonist Tara violating these rules and marries a foreign man who is a Jew. She entirely forgets her caste and religion through her marriages. Ironically, Mukherjee makes a criticism of the conservative attitude of the Indians who are crazy of foreign things and clothes but they do not appear of marriage with foreign people. In the presence of her mother, Tara feels alienated. Within herself, Tara becomes psychologically turbulent and makes her return to the USA. Thus, in the first novel one finds the feeling of alienation of Tara.

In her second novel *Wife*, the protagonist Dimple wants to break through the traditional taboos of a wife. This novel tells the story of Dimple, a seemingly docile young Bengali girl who, as any other normal girl, is full of dreams about her married life and so she eagerly and impatiently waits for marriage. She marries Amit Basu. She visualizes a new life for herself in America where Amit is expecting to immigrate. She is expected to play the role of an ideal Indian wife, stay at home and keep the house for the husband. Her frustration is built up gradually by the circumstances. She resents being wife in the Basu family and rebels against wifedom in many ways. One such way is here including a miscarriage by skipping herself free from her pregnancy, which she views as a Basu's property even in her womb. But herself-identity is avoided by marriage. She aspires for self-recognition and dream fulfillment. But Basu behaves in a different way. He wants her to a docile and submissive. So Dimple hates Basu and his behaviour. He needs her only for sexual harassment. She feels it's a sort guilty. Finally, in her mentally upset state, she kills Amit in an act of self-liberation and eventually commits suicide.

The third and her magnum opus *Jasmine* is an account of adaptation and not a defeat. It is the story of a Punjabi rural girl, Jyothi. Prakash, an energetic and enthusiastic young man enters in Jyothi's life as her husband. When Prakash prepares to go to America, she says, "I'll go with you and if you leave me, I'll jump into a well". A woman has to accept, the path of her husband, Renamed as Jasmine, joyously sharing the ambition of her husband, she looks forward going to America, a land of opportunities even this dream gets shattered by the murder of Prakash on the eve of his departure. She decides to go America and fulfill Prakash's mission and perform "Sati". Having learned to "Walk and Talk" like an American, she grabs every opportunity to become American. Jasmine becomes Jase. At the end, she kills Sukhawinder, the Khalsa lion who killed Prakash. After that she goes to Iowa assuming a new name "Jase". The manifold facets or roles played by Jasmine as Jase and Jase assault the power in woman. This power can be equal to Shakti which is command over quality that destroys and fights against all evils. Jasmine has broken away from the shackles of caste, gender and family. She has learnt to live not for her husband or for her children but herself. Jasmine is a survivor, a fighter and an adaptor. She figures against Unfavourable circumstances, comes out a winner and carves out a new life in an alien country.

Mukherjee's succeeding novel *The Holder of the World* reinforces expatriation as a Journey of the human mind. Like Jasmine who travels westward, Hannah Estean's, *Voyage to the Orient* tells us the protagonist's latest tensions, aspirations and ambitions. Hannah is born in Massachusetts who travels to India. She becomes involved with a few Indian lovers and eventually a king who gives her a diamond known as true "Emperor's Tear". The story is told the detective's searching for the diamond and Hannah's view point. The physical journey of the female hero not only leads to probing of the self but also makes her recognize the side of herself. She returns to her native land, not as a reformed American but a rebel living on the fringes of society.

In her next novel, *Leave it to Me*, Mukherjee tells the story of a young woman sociopath named Debby Dimartino, short name Debi who seeks revenge on parents who abandoned her. The story reveals her ungrateful interaction with kind adoptive parents and a vengeful search for her real parents (described as a murderer and a flower child). The novel also looks at the conflict between Eastern and Western worlds and at mother-daughter relationships through the political and emotional involvement of the chief character in her quest for revenge.

Mukherjee's novel *Desirable Daughters* is a tale of immigrants and the attitude of three sisters and their ways of dealing with situations. *Desirable Daughters* as the title suggests, one kind of daughter, which parents would be proud of and for whom every parent would crave. The three sisters, who are the daughters of Motilal Bhattacharya and the great-grand-daughters of Jai Krishna Gangooli, belong to a traditional Bengali Brahmin family. Padma, Parvathi and Tara are symbolic names of Shakti (Goddess of Hindu) do not flaunt some ethical values but have the grit to carve a niche for them. They are a blend of traditional and modern outlook. Padma and Parvathi do not regret their choices, the former an immigrant of ethnic origin in New Jersey, and the latter married to a boy of her own choice and settled in the plush locality of Bombay with an encouragement of servants to catch her. Tara, the narrator of the novel marries Bishwapriya Chatterjee, goes on arranged marriage. Tara finds that her married life is not fulfilling and she walks out of her traditional life, a typical American divorce settlement follows. Tara works as a volunteer in a pre-school. She enjoys her love life with Andy. Tara sends his son with his father as a divorce settlement. The fluidity of her identity, testifies not only his own but also the fluidity of the immigrants. Finally, Tara returns to her father's house for solace. This novel to a certain extent seems to be the autobiography of Mukherjee who has two sisters.

Mukherjee's novel *The Tree Bride* is the root-search links the past incidents with the present happenings of Tara's life of *Desirable Daughters*. The search to find out the identity of her stalker leads to several revelations. The plot of *The Tree Bird* moves back and forth from colonial India of the pre-independence times to San Francisco and back.

Mukherjee's female characters are real, modern lifelike. They are typical representatives of young woman particularly of The Third World countries who cherish the dream of emigrating to America for higher education and higher wages, and then after arrival there, aspire to settle there permanently. Their situations and the difficulties they face are also realistically portrayed. In nearly, all novels there is a fixed pattern. In the first part of each novel, the focus is on narrating the situation of an immigrant who is in the process of immigration or settling down and in the second part who is in the process of immigration or settling down and in the second part the protagonist is invariably given to making love with a partner of the opposite sex who is rooted in the American soil.

## Indian Women Psyche

Asha Arvind Bage, renowned Marathi Novelist, awarded with Sahitya Academy Award for her novel on tsunami, *Bhoomi*. Her maiden story appeared in the Diwali issue of *Tarun Bharat* (A Marathi Daily) in 1972 and ever since she has made a glorious literary career as a short story writer and a novelist. Born in a middle class Brahmin family, had her early training in literature from her mother and grandmother. She was brought up in an atmosphere rich in music and festivals. She studied Marathi literature and music for her post graduation and took keen interest in extra-curricular activities like staging dramas and one act plays and writing plays for the radio. She is a connoisseur of Hindustani classical music and it has a definitive influence on her work. The titles of her short-story collections like *Marwa* or *Malhar* bear testimony to her deep interest in music.

Asha Bage's novels are serious in nature, artful and very individualistic. Her works deal with feminism in a very forceful and thought-provoking manner. The true nature of Bage's personality is revealed through her writing, providing an independent, original and fresh perspective on woman and the reality that surrounds her. Her characters depict an activist dealing more directly with contemporary issues. Her writing is largely based on self experiences. She offers a feminist and cosmopolitan view but beyond that also probes the various forms for man's loneliness. Her stories reflect the anguish, dilemma, bewilderment of people who see the old order slipping away, and are not yet prepared to accept the new one which seems so far removed from everything they knew. But there is a moment of epiphany and most of her stories end on a positive note.

Marathi literary tradition is enriched by the depiction of modernity in the works of Asha Bage, her works explore the incoherence, incongruity and absurdity of life highlighting the brokenness, the loneliness and the unavoidable distances in human relationships. This literature, thoughtful by nature, made the reader restless and introspective. She has largely contributed to Marathi literature and has given different dimensions to the thinking of modern women. She is bold and adamant in the presentation of her voice which has given vent to the suffering voices of the women in particular. Her women protagonists are very dominant in representing their identity and selfhood. They are rebellious in nature and challenge the supremacy of patriarchy. Her most notable works which worth to mention are *Bhoomi*, *Setu* and *Zambar*, where we find her representation of identity and selfhood.

Asha Bage's fiction can be described as women centered but not as feminist. She does not seem to commit herself to any 'ism' or ideology; nor does she imitate any established role models. She is not interested in developing a value based, women centered cultural perspective either. She has no attractions for female stereotypes and she avoids the trap of creating an image of a modern woman who believes in her own honesty, is uninterested in intrigue of any kind, one who makes adjustments without native self-surrender an image founded in rational principles. The woman in her fiction grows in the company of the others, transforms them by her presence and association and establishes rapport with them by her understanding and interaction carried out with natural ease. Though she is surrounded by the relentless *avaatars* of age-old male ego and a socio-cultural atmosphere that suffocates her female self, she courageously faces reality in terms of her eternal female consciousness. Therefore, her short stories do not have a tragic ending, though they powerfully depict pain and suffering interestingly enough, her stories have nothing to do with the heroic image of man as a sensualist, a benefactor, an advisor or a master. Her woman characters, however, do meet the animus in their unconscious. The culturally supported image of Krishna as a playmate enriching the feelings of companionship, peculiar to Indian mythology, attracts her women characters. Women in her short stories, therefore, never insult or humiliate men or submit themselves before their

egotism. Bage describes a relationship of mutuality which makes men change themselves and women find psychological enhancement. Rukhmini and Anant in *Marwa* or Meenakshi and Mukund in *Chandan* are a few instances.

Her four novels examine various phases of human relationships, both practical and emotional, on different levels. In *Tridal*, for instance, she depicts with a sure touch in all its colourful variety. The fulfillment of roles in the family, the chance relations generated by professional contacts and companionship beyond role fulfillment. In *Setu*, she presents human relationships on levels that are almost kaleidoscopic in their wide-ranging treatment the traditional shaped by the institution of marriage, the amoral born out of the rational intellectual viewpoint, the friendly going beyond the common rut and blooming, owing to the artistic and cultural exposure, the attraction or otherwise between individuals, generated by the memories of the past and modern progressive attitudes and their tense desire for accord. A fluent style of dialogue that captures the harmony and discord of human togetherness, a vision of values that connects tradition and modernity and a mode of narration that creates new, pure humanitarian values are the qualities of Bage's fiction that assure her a place of pride in the post-sixties period of Marathi literature of the last century.

## Voice of Women

Usha Priyamvadais a Hindi fiction writer. An eminent writer in Hindi, Usha Priyamvadahas many novels to her credit. She writes prolifically in her novels on the current issues concerning women, and adopts a questioning, daring and challenging stance in her writings. Best known are *Bhaya kabir Udas*, *Ek Koi doosra*, *Kitna Bada Jhoot*, *Pachpan Khambe Lal Deewaren* and *Rookogi Nahi Radhika*. She has released Hindi literature from the closed and suffocating orthodoxies of women's issues into the open spaces of thoughts, in a way that no Hindi writer has done before. She has given new definitions to both our bookish titles and language. Since she is the only woman writer in Hindi who has chosen to write about exploration of identity and quest for identity of women, her writing is a constant struggle against the male dominated system which still prevails in Indian villages. Her protagonists are always fearless women upholding feminine dignity, who suffer and resist the male domination. No other woman writer in Hindi grapples with and depicts the male politics and reality better than Usha Priyamvada. She is bold and forthright. For her powerful idiomatic language and uninhibited treatment, she is the most talked about author today. An image and struggle for self-identity of woman depicted only by the female novelists can be credible; when we take into account the voices of the women on the same issue, it gets some value and we can get the answer with required objectivity. As stated earlier, there is a constant struggle of women for gaining identity and exploring self-image. This is very relevant in the modern times as it portrays the women who have made enough progress and also focus on a number of socio-political and religious taboos which are working as hindrances in the progress of these women.

## Conclusion

The Hindu moral code known as The Laws of Manu denies woman an existence apart from that of her husband or his family, and since the publication of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife* in 1864 a significant number of authors have portrayed Indian women as long-suffering wives and mothers silenced by patriarchy. The ideal of the traditional, oppressed woman persisted in a culture permeated by religious images of virtuous goddesses devoted to their husbands, the Hindu goddesses Sita and Savitri serving as powerful cultural ideals for women. In mythical terms, the dominant feminine prototype

is the chaste, patient, self-denying wife, Sita, supported by other figures such as Savitri, Draupadi and Gandhari. When looking at these narratives silence/speech can be a useful guide to interpreting women's responses to patriarchal hegemony. Silence is a symbol of oppression, a characteristic of the subaltern condition, while speech signifies self-expression and liberation.

The image of women in fiction has undergone a change during the last four decades. Women writers have moved away from traditional portrayals of enduring, self-sacrificing women toward conflicted female characters searching for identity, no longer characterized and defined simply in terms of their victim status. In contrast to earlier novels, female characters from the 1980s onwards assert themselves and defy marriage and motherhood.

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. In conclusion, the work of Indian women writers is significant in making society aware of women's demands, and in providing a medium for self-expression and, thus, re-writing the History of India. All these women novelists belong to the Indian Sensibility, tradition and culture. They represent different languages i.e. Bharati Mukherjee writes in English, Asha Bage writes in Marathi and Usha Priyamvada writes in Hindi. These novelists have given comprehensive picture of the Indian women as depicted by the women writers in their novels.

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