



ROOTED YET RISING: FEMININE RESISTANCE AND GROWTH IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S TRILOGY

¹Poornima Devi A and Malarvizhi K²
¹Research Scholar and Assistant Professor ²
Department of English
V.V.Vanniaperumal College for Women,
Virudhunagar, Tamil Nadu, India.

Corresponding author: poornimadevi@vvvcollege.org

ABSTRACT

In Indian society, although mothers are traditionally respected, women often face subjugation as wives and daughters due to deep-rooted patriarchal norms. Social evils such as child marriage, denial of education for girls, polygamy, enforced widowhood, *sati*, dowry, harassment and restrictions on financial independence continue to reflect the systemic degradation of women's status. The patriarchal setup reinforces male dominance and perpetuates various forms of oppression through cultural and religious practices. However, the rise of feminist literature has provided a platform to project and interpret women's experiences through a lens of feminine consciousness. Indian women writers have played a crucial role in portraying the realities of women's lives with sensitivity and depth. Among them, Bharati Mukherjee stands out as a significant voice in Indian English literature. Through her female protagonists drawn from diverse ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds, she delves into their inner consciousness and explores their evolving identities. This paper examines her trilogy—*Desirable Daughters* (2002), *The Tree Bride* (2004) and *Miss New India* (2011)—to trace the development of women's status in Indian society over the past three centuries, highlighting their gradual movement from suppression to self-assertion and empowerment.

Keywords: suppression, male domination, marriage, cultural norms and identity.

In Indian society, mothers get respect but are subjugated as wives and daughters. There are socio-cultural evil practices such as child marriage, denial of education for girls, polygamy, young bride enforced widowhood, sati, dowry, women harassment and denial of financial independence vividly illustrating the persistent degradation of women's status and the pervasive influence of patriarchy. The patriarchal social setup asserts men's superiority over women and recommends all modes of oppression. Women are marginalised through cultural and religious rituals. The growth of feminist writings, projects and interpretive experience, form the perspective of a feminine consciousness and sensibility. Indian women writers have incorporated the female experience into their writings and sensitively portray the women's world.

Bharati Mukherjee is regarded as one of the most influential Indian-English novelists and short story writers. By choosing her protagonists from all walks of life, having divergent ethnic, religious and cultural preoccupations, she has attempted to explore the inner consciousness of her protagonists. The paper attempts to analyse Bharati Mukherjee's Trilogy, *Desirable Daughters* (2002), *The Tree Bride* (2004) and *Miss New India* (2011) from the

perspective of the development of the status of women in Indian society over the past three centuries.

Through the protagonists of *The Tree Bride*, *Desirable Daughters* and *Miss New India*, Mukherjee explores three distinct eras—the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries—highlighting the shifts in cultural, social and personal identities across generations. Every century, women are the victims of male domination. Even though they are suppressed, everyone creates their path to success in their life.

The Tree Bride mainly focuses on the life of Tara Gangooly, from a traditional Bengali family. The titular character the Tree Bride lives in the 19th century when India was under the control of the British Raj. In the Nineteenth Century India, the most nefarious customs such as infanticide, child marriage, polygamy, forced celibacy of widows and burning of widows on the funeral pyre of their husbands were followed. In Hindu culture it was authenticated that a father should give away his daughter in marriage before she reaches puberty and if not he was considered useless. In the novel, the five year old Tara Lata is about to get married. Before she gets married, the groom passes away on his way due to snake bite. Tara Lata's father, Jai

Krishna, decides to marry his daughter to a tree to free her from the widowhood curse. To save her father from disgrace she accepts the fictional wedlock to a lifeless tree. In those years, “Other girls facing similar fates were married to rocks and crocodiles” (Mukherjee *The Tree Bride* 33). Marriage of a child at the age of five is an atrocious tradition; widely practised in those days. Getting a child married to a tree to prevent lifelong widowhood was another prevalent shortcoming of the patriarchal society. “Such conceptions of marriage are mere superstitions from the point of view of feminism” (Bijalwan 3).

After getting his daughter married to a tree, Jai Krishna proceeds to get married nine times to sire a son who would carry his name. Tara Chatterjee says,

“The Tree Bride was my mother’s collateral great-aunt, meaning that she was one of many dozen children from at least ten wives kept by my great-great-grandfather, Jai Krishna Gangooly. Not until the ninth wife did he get the only son he acknowledged, his line’s (and my mother’s) continuance. But Tara Lata, the Tree Bride, was his third-born daughter from his first wife born during his early years as a nationalist attorney” (28).

It was not at all a sin when a man married many women in those days in India. But women have to bear the curses of society as unmarriageable women when the bridegroom dies before the marriage.

Tara Lata is not a passive victim. After her marriage, she becomes the legendary Tree Bride. She comes out from the restricted circle created by the society for women and creates her own path without losing her tradition. The life-long virgin has shown tremendous courage by educating herself and fighting for the freedom struggle against the British.

“When I realized that Tara Lata had been an actual little girl who grew up surrounded by other little girl servants and had taught herself to read Bengali, English and Persian, it seemed to me a miracle on the order of Helen Keller. The fact that she then taught the languages to the girls and boys of the village made her an Annie Sullivan, and that she had fought against the colonial authorities on the side of the Indian Nationalists, a Joan of Arc” (37).

Even though she never sets foot outside the campus of her house, she keeps herself well informed through a strong network of informants in about two hundred villages in the district. She creates history.

She sacrifices her life for the freedom struggle and becomes the least known martyr.

The *Desirable Daughters* focuses on the life of Padma, Parvati and Tara from the Bhattacharjee family in the 20th Century. The daughters are the object of the family prestige. So their behaviour should be desirable, that is to say, in tune with the norms laid by society and deviant. The protagonist in the novel reports about her childhood as, “My life was one long childhood until I was thrown into marriage” (Mukherjee *Desirable Daughters* 28). Padma, the eldest daughter, was forced to turn down the movie offers. She expresses her great passion for Ronald Dey. But in Indian culture, marriages are imposed on girls. Girls are not allowed to marry a man of their choice, especially from other castes, “any violation of the codes, any breath of scandal, was unthinkable” (32). Her love for Ronald Dey shattered down. But later, she lives in Upper Montclair, New Jersey with her husband Harish Mehta. She is a ‘multicultural performance artist’ for colleges, schools and community centers. She has created her identity in the foreign soil. She has become the distinguished representative of her homeland. Her philosophy in life is to take what America

gives but do not let it tarnish us in any way. She lives in America, but she clings to Indian ways.

Parvati, the second daughter, meets Aurobindo Banerjee in Boston and falls in love. Their love marriage is considered a big adventure. Although Auro is a Bengali Brahmin from a good Tollygunge family, his caste and regional origins are considered a “matter of coincidence rather than calculation” (50). She lives within the norms of Indian Culture and her life preserves as much of the old ways as sanity permits. She is hospitable to the long string of guests who visit her house. Parvati's life is that of a domesticated, traditional and dependent Indian woman. As a traditionalist, Parvati whole heartedly accepts the pretensions and less candid relationships even between husband and wife as the cultural norm of the Indian Society.

Tara is the youngest daughter of the family and holder of a B.A. Honours and M.A. first class from the University of Calcutta. Her father decided to get her married to Bishwapriya Chatterjee at the age of 19. In the Indian marriage system, the willingness of the bride is not even considered. Tara devotes her entire life to raising her family by fulfilling the domestic responsibilities that have been ingrained in

her since birth. Bish is a conservative Indian husband. When Tara expresses her desire to go for a job, he denies her opinion. He probably didn't want people to think that he couldn't support his wife. The situation prevailed at a particular time. Though the women were educated, men did not allow them to go for jobs. Bish takes great pride in showing his parents "how well-trained this upper class girl had become, what a good cook, what an attentive wife and daughter-in-law. What a bright and obedient boy she was raising" (82). Upon her settlement in America, Tara grapples with the dilemmas of modern womanhood and evolves from a traditional "desirable daughter" into an independent and progressive new woman.

Working fifteen hours a day, at home Bish relapses into the role of a traditionally demanding Indian husband, hectoring and threatening his dreamy and artistic son Rabi. To save her son from father's crushing contempt; Tara flees the gated community and moves to San Francisco. And she lived with her punchy, balding carpenter boyfriend Andy Karolyi. Later, Tara is deeply traumatised by the terrorist attack and returns to India so as to re-evaluate the Hindu customs that shaped her and her family. She visits her parents at their home. Her mother has Parkinson's disease, but

refused to be treated in the United States, preferring to be with her husband. From her parents, she learns the wisdom of acquiescing in tradition and adhering to Hindu Dharma.

The three daughters Padma, Parvati and Tara, all agog to forge an identity of their own in very trying and complex socio-cultural situations. They never feel bogged or suffocated by a conventional society which has little regard for women. They challenge the hackneyed and confining socio-cultural order and carve out their own paths in life. Moving in different directions and different circumstances, each of them tries to carve their own unique identity.

The novel *Miss New India*, completes the trilogy. It tells the story of Anjali Bose, the middle-class girl from the small provincial town of Gauripur in Bihar. It portrays the protagonist's struggles to create her identity in the new scenario. She is an energetic and ambitious girl who does not want to waste her talent of good language skills in her backwater town. Her command of the fluent English speaking skills is encouraged and cultivated by her American teacher, Peter Champion. He acknowledges Anjali's potential and motivates her to move to Bangalore and put her talents to better use. He emphasises

Anjali “I have dreams for you. You got married to some boy from here and the dream dies. You’ll never see the world. You’ll have kids and a husband who’s jealous of your intelligence and English won’t let you out of the house and that would break my heart” (Mukherjee *Miss New India* 14). As a modern girl, Anjali wears jeans and T-shirts. When her parents started to search for a bridegroom, her parents mandated that jeans and T-shirts could be worn only inside the house and ordered her to wear sarees.

Mr. Bose, the father of Anjali, is a representation of male domination in 21st-century India. Mr. Bose irritates on her wife for giving birth to only girls, “You see what state you have reduced to me, woman, by not bearing sons? All my brothers are fathers of sons. But me? Two donkeys for daughters... donkeys for wife, donkeys for daughters— Ill luck is ill luck” (24). He considered his wife and his daughters as donkeys. In Indian society, some people think girl children are a burden for their families because of the dowry problem.

In India, a married woman is expected to be perfect, chaste and obedient to her husband. Though the marriage life may not give her any pleasure, she is not allowed to free herself from such a

restrained life and she is expected to make sacrifices for her family. Sonali, the eldest daughter of Mr. Bose married a man chosen by her father. He was a drunkard and left her with a daughter. So Sonali finally got a divorce from him. Divorce is a ridiculous thing in India. If she does it, her family will desert her. So Sonali’s father turned against her for bringing shame to his family.

Subodh Mitra, a suitor chosen by Mr. Bose for Anjali, sexually assaulted her. The traumatic incident detaches her from the family. Anjali craves for a job to make money to endorse her and achieve her targets. “Encouraged by her teacher, Peter Champion, She takes her destiny in her hands and moves ahead from her gloomy backwater town to the Silicon city of Bangalore” (Goswami 652). “The arrival in Bangalore seemed like the beginning of another ordeal” (Mukherjee *Miss New India* 78). There too she faced challenges. She comes to know that life in Bangalore is not as smooth as she expected. She struggles to amend herself in a New World. Mr. Girish Gujral guides her to attain her own identity.

“If we observe this trilogy as a whole, *Desirable Daughters* is the story of the present, *The Tree Bride* is the story of the Past and last but not least *Miss New India* is a story about the future” (Gupta 46).

Tara Lata Gangooly, Tara Chatterjee and Anjali Bose symbolize the evolving roles of women across the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Every century, women are the victims of male domination. They are suppressed in the name of protection, tradition and cultural norms. *The Tree Bride* tells the story of Tara Lata, a young girl forced into a tree marriage to avoid widowhood, reflecting the unfair customs of 19th-century India. Despite these hardships, she chooses not to remain a victim. Instead, she educates herself, stays true to her values and becomes involved in the freedom struggle. Without stepping outside her home, she becomes a quiet but strong leader, remembered as a brave and selfless woman who fought for her country.

In *The Desirable Daughters*, Bharati Mukherjee presents the lives of three sisters—Padma, Parvati, and Tara—who navigate complex cultural expectations while striving to assert their individuality. Although rooted in traditional Indian values, each sister responds differently to the socio-cultural pressures around them. Padma adapts to life in America, embracing her role as a cultural ambassador while maintaining her Indian identity. Parvati remains a traditional homemaker, upholding the norms of Indian domestic life. Tara undergoes a

significant personal transformation, breaking free from a restrictive marriage, embracing independence and ultimately returning to her roots to rediscover her cultural heritage.

In *Miss New India*, Bharati Mukherjee explores the journey of Anjali Bose, a young woman from a conservative town in Bihar, as she strives to break free from societal restrictions and claim her own identity in a rapidly changing India. Through Anjali's experiences, the novel highlights the harsh realities of gender inequality, societal expectations and the stigma surrounding issues like divorce and women's independence. Despite facing trauma, rejection and the challenges of adapting to urban life in Bangalore, Anjali shows resilience and determination to rise above her circumstances. With guidance and support from her teacher, “Anjali transforms herself from a girl of Gauripur to a woman of Bangalore” (Dwivedi 323).

In the novel *Miss New India*, Bharati Mukherjee presents Anjali Bose's transformation from a constrained small-town girl to an empowered individual, aided by supportive male figures like Mr. Peter Champion and Mr. Girish Gujral. Their encouragement reflects a hopeful shift toward a more inclusive society where men begin to recognize and support women's

aspirations. On the whole, the trilogy traces the evolving journey of Indian women from passive acceptance to active self-determination. As compared to the past, women in modern times have achieved a lot but in reality, they still have to travel a long way.

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