

A CRITICAL STUDY OF MARGINALIZED IN THE NOVELS OF TONI MORRISON AND BHARATI MUKHERJEE

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"A woman with a voice is, by definition, a strong woman."

— Melinda Gates

The study of images of women in literature has been a significant area of concern for the last four decades because these images play a vital role in shaping the perceptions and consciousness of various segments of society in relation to the lives, roles, problems and experiences of different categories of women as women and as autonomous citizen of society. This is the greatest irony that women empowerment is totally a myth today, as they are marginalized on social, economic and political fronts. Gender equality and women empowerment are human rights that lie at the heart of development, progress and achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. Empowering women mean to inspire them with courage to break themselves free from the shackles of orthodox beliefs and patterns of society that always kept them suppressed, exploited for ages and refrain them to see their real power worth and beauty. Modern women writers depicted in their writings the issues of otherness that must claim their right to occupy a position in contemporary literary discourses and challenge the male – dominated cannon by pointing to the issues of marginal identities. Contemporary women writers through their writings attempt to engage and grapple with living realities of women of various strata of society along with the projection of life in all its richness and complexities.

The present study aims at discussing the marginal identities in the fiction of Toni Morrison and Bharati Mukherjee. Both the writers manage to give the repressed other a voice and also try to explore the feminine anguish because of their marginal status in society. Their writings exhibit modern women as to be a product of the rapid transformation on account of new consciousness arising out of modern learning, knowledge and awareness. These writers have explored the physical and psychological trauma of marginalized ones.

Bharati Mukherjee, born in 1940, is one of the prominent Indian fiction writer offers a wide range of the experience of the emerging Indian women who even being rooted in the traditional roles of society, now, moves in direction to redefine her new role in the light of modern thought and consciousness. Her husband, a Canadian by birth was well recognized in Canada as a writer but her works were rejected by Canadian publishers. As an individual, she had to face racial discrimination and as a writer she faced non-recognition and neglect. After an initial bitter experience in Canada Mukherjee decided to call her an American writer :

“It is to demand that the American nation deliver the promises of its dream and its constitution to all its citizens equally.”

Therefore, she employs the theme of racial discrimination and non-recognition of marginalized in her major novels. *The Tiger's Daughter*, her first novel, was published in 1971 deals with the theme of assimilation and acculturation with the new culture and environment. Tara Cartwright Banerjee, protagonist of the novel, breaks all social taboos and marries a foreigner. The Bengal Tiger Banerjee sends his daughter, Tara to America for studies but there she faces racial discrimination and homesickness. Later on, she marries David Cartwright and visits India after a long period of seven years. Tara realizes that she has totally changed in her views, thoughts and life-style. She is, therefore, unable to adjust in her motherland and ultimately decides to leave for New York. While in India, she was raped by Mr. Tuntunwala. Her seduction is symbolic of her marginal identity and colonial exploitation. Tara always dreams of peaceful Bengal of Satyajit Ray's films but finds it shabby and people untrustworthy and uncultured in values. Her stay in India makes her to realize her marginal status among her own people and the country.

In *Desirable Daughters*, Mukherjee deals with the theme of existentialism. The expatriates are often deeply concerned with survival and existence. Expatriate women are double sufferers as they are vulnerable to

traditions, customs and gender discrimination and often to sexual exploitation. In traditional bound countries like India, women have to face all these problems right from their childhood. Their lives are confined, restricted and constrained as they get limited freedom in matters of marriage, education, social equality etc. The protagonist, Tara, wants to find her identity in her Indian past and the present of American life. It is, undoubtedly, a tough process but she faces it with equilibrium and poise. Within the limited world, Indian women make continuous efforts to empower themselves. Thus, she realizes that family ties are important for strengthening one's identity. Tara wishes to forget the past that is false hypocritical and superficial. She challenges everything that is fake and unnecessary.

Bharati Mukherjee advocates the necessity of some transformation for survival in a foreign as well as in motherland. One must adopt a new way of life and even the new mode of thinking. The major female characters of her works are in search of their real identities. They, often experience the sense of displacement and rootlessness in the initial phase but they struggle hard to overcome this trauma by making genuine efforts for re-rooting and rehousing. They raise their voice against their marginal identities and finally in the journey of transformation they achieve the status of brave, courageous, rebellious fighters. Her third novel *Jasmine* has a thematic pattern of change from old to new, from tradition to liberalism. It is a story of transformation, accommodation and liberation of fair sex. The central character of the novel Jyoti, is a born fighter. She is a rebel and therefore she refuses to surrender to useless and outdated conventions. She bluntly criticized dowry-system, forced marriages and customs related to widow-hood. Her grandmother Dida disapproves of women's education and believes that women's destiny lay in household work and within the four walls of a home not outside. Jyoti intends to create her own identity and space in society. But when Jyoti's grandmother rebukes her for her modern outlook and tells her that God was displeased with her attitude and therefore He sent that Sardarji boy to kill Prakash (Jyoti's husband) ,Jyoti's unorthodoxy blazes forth:

"Dida, I said,, if God sent Sukhi to kill my husband and then I renounce God, I spit on him."

Jyoti, therefore, takes a plunge into unknown journey with an undaunted spirit of a fighter. The journey is highly symbolic which is not merely physical but mental as well as spiritual. It involves the protagonist's transformation from Jyoti to Jasmine, Jane and Jase. She moves from the process of unhousement to rehousing, uprooting to rehousing and feudalism to liberalism and secularism. Moreover in *Jasmine*, Bharati Mukherjee quotes the lines from *Chaos* by James Gleick as an epigraph:

"The new geometry mirrors a universe that is rough, not rounded, scabrous not smooth, it is the geometry of the pitted pocket and broken up, the twisted, tangled and intertwined."

The writer has published two collections of short stories: *Darkness* (1985) and *The Middleman and other Stories* (1988). The major themes of these stories are also conflict between the old world and the new world, alienation, struggle for identity, search for home and struggle for survival.

Toni Morrison, the first black woman to receive Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993, was born as Chloe Anthony Wofford on Feb. 18, 1931, Lorain, Ohio, U.S. She is an American writer noted for her examination of black experience within the black community. The principal focus of Morrison's novels is on the black Americans who are struggling hard to seek their cultural identity. Toni Morrison is often called a black writer not only because of her parental lineage but also for her concerns for the black community. Her 'blackness' symbolically stands for her depiction of the suffering of blacks, assertion of their humanity, revision of the black myths, deconstruction of the black stereotypes, criticism of the Eurocentricism and reaffirmation of the black cultural heritage. Through her novels, she tries to delve deep to reach the marrow of black existence in America and even tries to break the silence that has been surrounded this suffering community for centuries. Therefore, her works should not be read politically only but aesthetically also, it means that literature doesn't mirror reality but it runs ahead of it. In one of her lecture series at Radcliffe Institute of American Studies, Morrison expressed her desire to talk on issues other than race:

"I have a yearning for a certain environment in which I can speak and write without every sentence formed being understood as mere protest or advocacy".

Morrison's fame mainly rests on her novels. So, in order to have a glimpse of her fictional world there are some popular works along with the theme discussed here.

The Bluest Eye (1970), her first novel deals with a victimized adolescent black girl, Picola who is obsessed by white standards of living and longs to have blue eyes; *Sula* (1973) examines the dynamics of friendship and the expectations for conformity within the community; *Song of Solomon* (1977) is a story of a man in search of his identity; *Tar Baby* (1981) explores the conflict of race, class and sex; *Beloved* (1987) is a real-life story of a run

away slave, who at the point of recapture, kills her infant daughter in order to save her from a life of slavery. Basically all her novels project the dialectics of race, class and gender. They infuse insight into the neurotic self-righteousness, exposition of black inferiority, their frustration and anguish at being kept at margin along with their eternal struggle.

“Writing out of both the black men and black women’s traditions her novels are a rejection of white patriarchal modernism, and are radical revisions of the race and male-centred Afro-American literary tradition and aims to liberate the latter from the social realism into which it has long been mired.” [Nillie Mckay : 1988]

The plight of the marginal through the cases of racial violence has been mirrored in the novels, as sexual harassment of Cholly in *The Bluest Eye*, blowing off at Pilate’s father in *Song of Solomon*, physical torture of Sethe and chaining and imprisonment of Paul D for 83 days in a box in *Beloved*, victimization of Violate’s mother and racial riots in *Jazz* etc. The poor marginalized and helpless family of the Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* is presented with distorted perception. The whole family is caught up in the vicious circle of cause and effect under capitalism that have broken their spirit to fight against it. Therefore, they inflict their anguish and misery on each other instead of mitigating it. Picola raped by her father turn mad, Cholly dead, Polly broken and Claudia announcing:

“It’s too late It’s much, much, much, too late. (*The Bluest Eye* : 160)

Consequently, the black man adopts violence against black woman as a mode of transferring his frustration and depression caused by the white system. On the other hand, black woman bears all these humiliations, abuses and oppressions silently to satisfy the former:

“The black community’s unwillingness to publicly discuss issues of sexism and male chauvinism exists because of fears that this discussion might compromise the (symbolic and actual) strong black men needed for fighting white supremacy”. [Barbara Omolade: 1994]

The other important theme of Morrison’s novels is exploration of the wounded black psyche under white duress. It drastically affect their behavior in two different ways – insanity, destructiveness and anarchy while in some other it breeds sanity, balance and constructive behavior. There are four types of strategies of survival adopted by them against the oppressors according to the novelist:

- Strategy of Acceptance
- Strategy of Escape
- Strategy of Aggression
- Strategy of Enlightened Adjustment and Affirmation

The strategy of acceptance is also termed as zero image that means a person who has little self-esteem, self-awareness and a weak ethnic self to express or assert his self. It is a defensive and no-risk strategy adopt by True Belle in *Jazz*, an ex-slave separated from her family. She compensates her loss of children by looking after the child of her mistress. Similarly, Baby Suggs in *Beloved* is an example of this. She was physically and psychologically tortured but these bitter experiences made her silent. The strategy of escape is a low-risk, stress-releasing strategy based on rejection and repudiation of the dominant culture. In other words, it is a mode of survival that provides an emotional escape as well as outlet for anxiety and depression. The characters of her novels adopt this way in the form of migration escape from hunger, humiliation and violence. Baby Suggs, Sethe, Paul D, Stamp Paid, Joe, Violet, Pauline, Cholly and Eva – all of them choose migration as a push from the miserable conditions of the south to respond to the pull of the flourishing North. Fantasy, religion, marriage, music, alcoholism, drug-addiction are the mode of escapism. For instance, characters like Cholly, Tar Baby and Plum indulge, themselves in alcohol, drug-addiction and delusion; Connie seeks help through religion to overcome anxiety of broken relationship; in *Jazz* the city is resounding with music which touch those who are great sufferers physically, mentally and spiritually. Further, fantasy and dreams are the pleasant alternative to draw out answers for the complex issues that lurks in the unconsciousness.

The strategy of aggression is a high-risk, anxiety releasing strategy of survival that may take variety of forms: hostility, retaliatory action, protest, madness, neuroticism, self-mutilation or suicide. Morrison criticizes this strategy of direct aggression as an underlying mode in her characters. But, many of her characters face this situation at some point of time in their life. For example, Claudia in *The Bluest Eye* is an aggressive who dismembers her white doll or sometimes pinches and claws white skinned girls; Ondine in *Tar Baby* crosses the height of madness when she slaps her mistress and criticizes and abuses her; even Violet and Joe directly indulge in aggression. They consider Dorcas as their real culprit. So, Joe shot her down while Violet dissects her

dead body at the funeral; Rosa Dear is a pathological case of neuroticism in *Beloved*, as her stupor and paralysis conditions are outcome of her failures in life. Finally, she ends her life by jumping into the well.

The strategy of enlightenment and adjustment is a change-oriented, critical, introspective, retrospective and high level of strategy of survival. It creates balance between self and society, exclusivity and autonomy, nature and culture within the changing phenomenon. This mode of survival is creative and humanist which aims at improving the quality of life through competence and maintaining self-pride as well as race-pride. It is, in fact, based on emotional-intellectual response for adjustment and that's why it the best form of survival as proposed by Morrison.

The survival of suffering humanity is only through self-help, self-direction and self-determination to change their destiny. As, Nel's final sign in *Sula* has been defined as the beginning of this enlightenment, Ondine and Margaret in *Tar Baby* come near enlightened adjustment towards the end of the novel, similarly, Alice and Violet in *Jazz* relieved from their complex after achieving an enlightened phase.

Toni Morrison is a staunch believer in change. Being optimistic of a change which is possible through hazardous: "Human Beings can change things" she maintains. Changes begin to occur in the black woman's relation to black man as well as to white man, who has been struggling for survival under the triple jeopardy of class, race and gender for the last century. Now, they begin to create space for themselves by honing their power in relation to each other, through education. She believes that to achieve wholeness in the relationship, it is imperative to inculcate both the feminine and the masculine and rejecting gender role divisions. This consequently leads to a healthy, developing and progressive relationship in society.

"Life demands that the duality in men and women be freed to function..... only through this duality in each can a man and a woman have empathy for each other." [Marya Manes :1991]

In this way, Morrison intends to recreate black folk culture and black history in America to strengthen them to build a community of equals. So, she is a black writer with a difference who tries to create balance through the presentation of white as well as black characters just as human beings and thus blames the system. She stresses upon the need of self – direction, self-help and self-determination to overcome this blot. Similarly, Bharati Mukherjee adheres the reader's attention through her characters and emphasizes "the survivor is the one who improvises , not one who plays by the rules". The success of any interpersonal relationship depends upon the autonomy and strength of each participant. Let these marginalized of the society be equal partners and this aspect can be achieved through education and bringing about a change in the mind-set of the people. Consequently, with the endeavour of the individual and collective consciousness of society , there is a way for the emergence of an actually empowered and emancipated identities.

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