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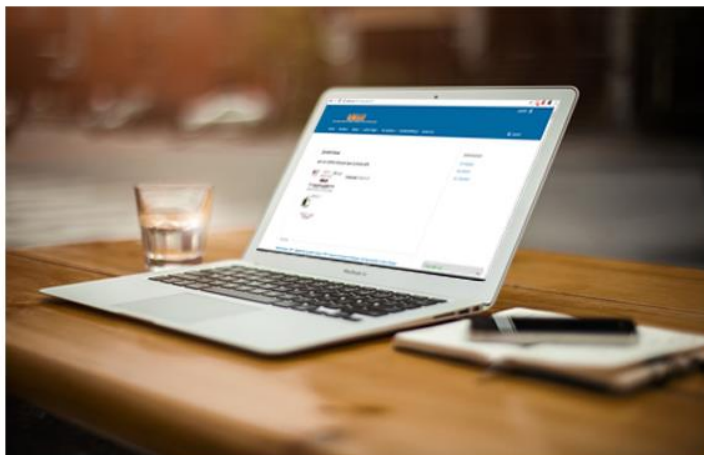


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Quest for Identity: A Woman's Perspective

Abstract: This paper attempts to explore how the social conditioning of women in a patriarchal society, hinders the overall development of their personality. By and large, women are supposed to be confined to the domestic space all the time, bear children, be subservient to the males etc. This is a major issue in our society which needs to be dealt with. Further, this can only be done when women themselves, in the first place, take steps to attain their freedom and individual identity, and secondly, when men change their outlook towards women and allow them the space to breathe, emerge out, form their opinions and fulfill their desires. This issue has been analyzed through the novels of eminent women writers- Bharati Mukherjee, Manju Kapur and Monica Ali. With the help of these works we discover how the social circumstances impel the female characters to break free from the social norms and discern their own identity. These characters have their own different ways of gaining the freedom and individuality they desire, and we see them doing so by relocating to a foreign land, educating themselves, defying conventions etc.

“One is not born, but rather becomes a woman”. This statement of Simone de Beauvoir in ‘The Second Sex’ rings true in the light of a patriarchal Indian society.

Since their birth, girls are conditioned in a manner which hammers in their minds, the restricted roles of being a female. They are supposed to be bear children; take care of the household chores; be submissive, obedient towards their male counterparts and the like. They are treated as voiceless objects of desire in the marriage market, having no independent outlook or identity of

their own. Instances of this can be spotted if we go back in time, as it is stated in 'The Laws of Manu' - "In childhood a woman should be under her father's control, in youth under her husband's, and when her husband is dead, under her sons". This clearly indicates that women had no independent right to decide the course of action of their lives.

Consequently, such social circumstances propel them to discern their own individuality by breaking free of the age-old shackles. Furthermore, in order to avoid being the 'other', there comes a need to address a larger question of women identity, which calls for their voices to be heard in the society. In view of this significant issue, I will take into consideration how the female protagonists in the novels of contemporary authors such as Bharati Mukherjee, Manju Kapur and Monica Ali, take various steps to define their individuality through myriad ways like education, financial independence, voicing their opinions and defying the age-old norms in a socio-cultural scenario.

Bharati Mukherjee delves into the lives of her female characters caught in the web of tradition and modernity. They are seen as relocating to a foreign land in order to seek different outlets for attaining liberation and power in the wake of several difficulties encountered there.

In Mukherjee's 'The Tiger's Daughter', the protagonist- Tara returns home in Calcutta after seven years of living in America, with her husband, and finds her native culture changed, which has been defined as "a cracking of axis and centre". Her thought of erasing all her "hesitations" and "shadowy fears of the time abroad" proved futile. "There were no definite points in time that one could turn to", as her native land was ridden with poverty, diseases, corruption etc. and she could no longer relate to it now.

She defied the social norms by marrying a foreigner, but, unfortunately she wasn't able to assimilate herself fully into the American culture. It was her bold step towards acquiring her freedom. But, sadly, this led to her split personality, as she calls herself a "misfit everywhere she goes" with her "inner world consisting of two cultures and the two different ideologies which are two worlds apart." Likewise, her husband, David is also not able to completely understand her native culture. Ultimately, she is seen travelling alone and migrating back to America, to live with her husband and absorb the American culture, thereby establishing her newfound identity there itself.

Similarly in her novel “Jasmine”, the protagonist - Jyoti belongs to a village in Punjab. Her plain looks make her parents worried about her marriage and other future aspects, as it is also stated in the laws of Manu “if the wife is not radiant she does not stimulate the man...the making of children does not happen”.

Her parents are not in favor of education as it proves to be a “hurdle” in a girl’s marriage. They consider village girls as “cattle”, but she detests their mentality, and begins learning English. She is an assertive woman, as she tells her father, “I want to be a doctor and setup my own clinic”. Although her dream is not fulfilled she lives a free life with her husband by migrating to America. Later, when he gets killed in a riot and she is rendered a widow, still, she defies the customs of shaving her head, wearing white sari etc.

Even after such a predicament, she emerges out, travels alone to an alien land, survives despite being an illegal immigrant by learning the ways of “Walk and Talk” of the Americans. She transforms herself and lives her life on her own terms by defying the prophecy of astrologer, that she will live a life of a widow in exile. Nevertheless, she became stronger by adopting new names like Jasmine, Jazzy, Jase, Jane etc. She had sexual encounters with men, killed her rapist, sliced her tongue, and also started teaching for a respectable earning. These were her ways to attain power and liberation.

Another novel of Mukherjee - “Wife”, charts the story of the protagonist named Dimple who “wanted a different kind of life” and was of the view that life before marriage is “a dress rehearsal for actual living”. She too planned to immigrate to a foreign land with her husband Amit Basu as she saw her marriage as a way to attain “freedom, cocktail parties...dinner...love”. Gradually, she gets frustrated with her loveless marriage and a domineering husband. Her strength and identity as a woman who rules her life, comes when in a bid to avoid being the conventional and submissive wife that she is expected to be, she plans her miscarriage by skipping ropes as she did “not want to carry any relics from her old life” with her, to a new place. For her, this unwanted pregnancy was a “relic”, an impediment which would not let her lead the life she wanted. So, by doing so she successfully rejects the traditional role of Hindu wife in bearing children. She wanted to work as a librarian but in Amit’s view “a woman shouldn’t have any time to get crazy ideas”. She felt herself as only an object to be sexually devoured by her husband. Consequently, in a fit of rage she kills him so as to liberate herself

from the role of a docile wife and also get rid of her powerlessness in that particular fixed gender role.

Equally, such dilemma has been depicted by Manju Kapur, in her novel “Difficult Daughters”. Here, the female characters are struggling to know themselves and seek a way out with the help of education, despite being intertwined in marriage and other domestic affairs, which are supposed to be their “destiny”. The word ‘difficult’ itself suggests that the daughters are not just there to easily yield to the demands of the society and their familial relations. It is true that things become complex when the daughters learn to dream, claim their individuality and think of forming a sole identity.

Here, Virmati, one of the protagonists of the novel is torn between illicit love, education, and her family. She is assertive enough to defy marriage as she says to her mother- “What is wrong with not wanting to marry?” Similarly, her cousin Shakuntala has a modern outlook as she is an educated woman, a postgraduate. She enlightens Virmati to live her life as “times are changing and women are moving out of the house, so why not you?” This statement clearly suggests that she is in favor of women being an independent entity and not a doormat in the house. But, in a patriarchal society “Study means developing the mind for the benefit of the family” as “a girl lives for others, not for herself”.

Soon after, following a prolonged sexual affair with Harish, a professor, when Virmati asks him to get married, he refuses and this makes her realize that “Men do take advantage of women.” At this juncture, education proves to be her last resort, and so, she goes for higher studies, changes her appearance and engages herself as a headmistress of a school at Nahan, Sirmaur. This certainly helped her mould an independent identity as, with education, one gains confidence enough to lash out at patriarchy by speaking up whenever required. Moreover, her daughter, Ida, did not want to be like her “mother” who was entangled in the web of marriage, patriarchy, household duties like taking care of her siblings etc., thus, continuing a parallel struggle for power. Later, she entwined her search for identity with that of her dead mother who wanted to “donate” her body so that “someone will value me after I have gone”.

Likewise, her novel “Home” portrays Nisha -a woman who is not scared to speak up and is confident about what she wants in her life. In the story, before long, an issue of her college education comes up and her aunt convinces Nisha’s mother for her education, saying that “if anything happens in the girl’s later life, she is not completely dependent...it would be shame to not educate her further”. Later, she falls in love with a boy, roams around with him, chops off her hair, experiments with her clothing by wearing jeans etc. unlike the usual salwar kameez dress. All this can be interpreted as setting aside the old conventions and taking a step towards forming a new appearance which in turn will lead to a modernized identity.

She doesn’t want to “sit at home...waiting for proposals” and “be seen by all these people” for marriage. She wants to “study fashion designing” as she asserts “Give me a chance to show you what I can do”. Shortly she is seen starting a business of clothes named “Nisha’s creation”. Her business makes her a distinctive individual. Also, when she is about to get married, she clearly tells her husband that “I work...I would like to continue...I cannot give it up”. This shows her conviction that she doesn’t want to be treated as an object of desire, she wants her free will to work even after marriage. With this she gets satisfaction, happiness, a sense of achievement in life, which helps her mould a powerful identity of her own, in an equally prevailing social setup.

Correspondingly, Monica Ali explores this theme in her novel “Brick Lane”. Here, the protagonist- a young Bangladeshi girl named Nazneen, involved in a loveless marriage with a middle aged man, relocates to London to live a new life. We learn that she is discontented with her husband, who keeps her indoors, doesn’t allow her to travel, and in a sense controls her completely- “She did not go out. Why should you go out? ...It was her place to sit and wait ... nothing else”. But with the influence of her neighbor Razia, she is able to reconsider living her life on her own terms. Razia is also a Bangladeshi woman who absorbs the western culture, smokes, learns the western ways and their language, allows her children to wear western dresses etc.

On the other hand, Nazneen’s daughters “surprised her with their intelligence, their wit”. They have dreams to fulfill in this country; and this thing compels Nazneen to take lead of her life and support her children in fulfilling their dreams, thus, helping them form an opinion and identity of their own. Subsequently her husband, losing control of his family, decides to move back to Bangladesh and save his family from the bad influence of a foreign land. This prompts Nazneen

to stand for herself and refuse to go back with him -‘I can’t go with you’ she said.” One wonders “how could such a weak woman unleash a force so strong?”, yet she did. Parallel to her is her cousin, Hasina , who is depicted as audacious enough to run away with the man she loves, and is seen fending for herself by working in factories. Just like her, Nazneen also gets involved in an affair with Karim. In addition, she sets up her own sewing business to put her creative faculties to use, thereby earning from the same and realizing her self-worth, hidden strength.

Thus, through these writings we infer that women, be it in India or abroad, are formulating diverse ways to vent out their creative energies and come to the fore as independent individuals. Their liberation, as we have examined above, is highlighted through education, working for a living, engaging in affairs, marriage as a means of going abroad for a new life, changing their appearances for good, annihilating the bad by defying oppression, absorbing a different culture, learning a new language, opinionating themselves, getting familiar with the ways of the world and the like. There is no denying the fact that education aids one to become self reliant and financially independent, which in turn shapes up one’s position, identity as well as gives one a powerful standing in the social order. In the light of this reality the statement of Virginia Woolf in “A Room of One’s Own” deems fit: “A woman must have money and a room of her own”.

As a result, women should be treated not as men’s competitors but as individual entities. They can only flourish when they change their perspective and thrust aside their prior conditioning, dependency on men by not looking up to them for getting all their needs fulfilled. In contemporary times, women are, indeed, emerging out of their confined spaces, making their voices heard, developing their consciousness and skills etc. But on the contrary, like we have seen through the above mentioned novels, while going through this process they come to blows with the challenges like rape, alienation, cultural and assimilation problems abroad, societal and familial pressures etc. Nevertheless, they are moving forward on a path of progress, and the only way this society can bring about a change, is to accept this transformation in women. In this regard, G.S Gupta in the article ‘Role of Women in Modern Society’ states that “We must accept the complementary role of men

and women in society. Women are different but not inferior. Modern educated women have to play their role in making of a new India...”

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