
Portrayal of Misplaced and Marginalized Women in the Meira Chand's *The Bonsai Tree*

Dr. Parvaiz Ahmad Bhat

Associate Professor in English Guru Nanak University, Hyderabad

Corresponding Author: Dr. Parvaiz Ahmad Bhat E-mail: parvaiznit17@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Meira Chand is one of greater writers of contemporary era. Her novel *The Bonsai Tree* is a beautiful novel about women exploitation. Born in 1942, the author currently resides in Singapore. Her beautiful novel, *The Bonsai Tree* is considered as one of the good novels in diaspora. To talk about the main theme of this novel is the exploitation of women in so many ways. So far as her works are concerned these type of characters are always involved in alienation, sense of belongingness and subjugation. Meira Chand in this novel vividly explores the rich experiences of women who are displaced from their native places, either through their will or in forced condition. Such type of women could always face a sense of dislocation and cultural alienation as they tried to navigate their new surroundings and to preserve their identities and find a sense of belonging. Meira Chand's this work in true sense explores the theme of marginalized and misplaced women, shedding light on their struggles, aspirations, and the societal forces that contribute to their disenfranchisement. The author has tried her best to curb this exploitation and slavery system by exposing it in her work. Women are misused in every sector especially when they start their working in some organisation. The current paper focus on portrayal of Misplaced and Marginalized Women in author's literary work, *The Bonsai Tree*. She has not left any stone unturned in exploring it. The present novel portrays these women with depth and sensitivity, allowing the readers to empathize with their experiences.

1. Introduction

In this beautiful literary work of Meira Chand it has been depicted that *The Bonsai Tree* is a true representation of author's sufferings that she herself had suffered when she was an outsider in Japanese land. In this novel it has been shown that how the protagonist got new understanding of culture. *The Bonsai Tree* quiet clearly depicts the camouflaged face of Japan Kate had been unprepared for, it was the dissolute world of the bars, of women and drink, that seemed to play such a part in everyday life, and the same was seemed essential for business and overcoming daily fatigue. The tough conditions over there in an alien land mad her completely alienated & marginalized. "It is the custom, I cannot help it, I cannot refuse. I cannot escape even if I wished to. You must understand, it is only a drink. Nothing more.' Jun told her gently and firmly". (*The Bonsai Tree* 37)

In present times, women are facing a lot of exploitation. Exploitation not in terms of physical assault but also in terms of gender bias. Women in present era are exploited in many ways. They feel insecure in every

aspect and respect. Despite standing shoulder by shoulder to men they are still considered as an inferior race. They are maltreated everywhere. Throughout the world, it has been observed that men holding big chairs simply exploit them in many ways. They become victim of sexual exploitation not only inside their houses but also outside as well.

To speak more about this exploitation “Until recently women were regarded as a disposable commodity throughout the far East”. (*The Bonsai Tree* 57) There were a set of rules for the prostitutes who were allowed beyond the walls of brothel on certain days. Tragedy was that a parent either himself makes his female children sex slaves or sells them to a brothel management or other clients. “Today we view the selling of parents of female children as a vicious practice; surplus daughters were a burden and advantageously sold into prostitution”. (*The Bonsai Tree* 58)

Slavery is also highlighted by the author in this novel. Slavery is an institution where human rights are constantly violated. The barbaric treatment that slaves endure with patient shrug, rents the sole purpose of universal declaration of human rights. “For men sex was by no means sinful, but women, as part of the self-abnegating role imposed upon them by men and culture, were necessarily restricted. Chastity was expected of them while men were allowed the greatest freedom both before and after marriage”. (*The Bonsai Tree* 59)

As the novel proceeds, Meira Chand has brilliantly depicted some multicultural issues in this novel and has rightly highlighted the sufferings encountered by the foreigners while living in a different culture. In Japan, the wives were considered merely as child producing machines. Extramarital affair was a common thing found among Japanese men. Women were just a playful commodity whose job was to satisfy the male counterpart who used her and threw her away like a puppet.

Briefly speaking here about this novel, the Japanese character Jun before marrying Kate had an illicit affair with a woman namely Chieko who had met him in a brothel. He had developed physical relations with her and the result was an illicit child. After marrying Kate, Jun wanted to get the rid from her and promised her to send the expenses of the child and herself. Due to Kate in his life, he tried to avoid Chieko and her child but she threatened him to reveal the secret to Kate if Jun would not pay a visit frequently to Chieko. Jun tried his utmost to keep Kate unaware of this fact that he already had a wife and a child before getting married to her. He did not want to hurt her sentiments. So he used to pay his visit frequently to Chieko and bear their expenses. Once, when he reached Chieko’s rented house, he could not resist himself and took a heavy drink along with Chieko and indulged in an illicit act with her. She was still seductive and attractive, so Jun every time falls in her trap.

She was devilishly attractive to him still. In spite of everything, he couldn’t rid himself of the effect she had upon him; it was the reason she had trapped him. She wound herself artfully about him and soon drew him to that point from which there was never a return. (*The Bonsai Tree* 49)

The author has shown the similar scene in her another novel *The Painted Cage* where one of the important characters of the novel Reggie Redmore, used to visit brothel named as Number Nine in spite of having a seductive wife, Amy Redmore. He also had a child from his illicit relation with a woman, Annie Luke. This very novel has been set in Japan too. Despite all this he still used to visit brothel and satisfy his sexual urge:

The street lights were extinguished when he returned to the Bluff. He groped his way in the darkness, entering the sleeping house. In his pocket his hand touched a crumpled bill he could put off paying Mother Jesus no longer. He wanted to cough, his head reeled. They had served him something with raw rum at Number Nine. (*The Painted Cage* 116)

In her one more novel *A Different Sky*, author speaks about this slavery and prostitution in a meticulous way where in the protagonist Mei Lan gets suffocated while listening such type of tales from one of the characters in the novel “Mei Lan’s heart gave a lurch. Ah Siew had never spoken like this before. That

girls could be sold for a kati or rice of three pieces of silver turned her blood to ice. Mei Lan, stared at Ah Siew, imagining the tunnel in her mind leading back to a past of dark images”. (*A Different Sky* 187)

This novel has been set in Japan where women exploitation is on peek. Japan is a country full of class distinctions; every class has a name and position. According to the author, Japan is not a suitable place for an outsider. An outsider is never accepted in their culture. Outsiders are regarded as still strangers if they live for one hundred years there. Author herself spent many years of her life there and how she felt there has been nicely depicted here. All those sufferings which she herself had faced have been delineated through the life of Kate. No doubt, she has been given a special place in the novel, but one has to accept her only as a foreigner. There is pain in her every breath. She disliked herself for this reason to be an outsider in an alien land. ‘She had fallen on the thorns of life and bleed.’ She hated that moment when she confronted Jun for the first time. Life has taught her many lessons that too in an immigrant land. Kate in true sense is the manifestation of author. Like Kate, author has proclaimed this thing that Japan is no body’s home especially immigrants strangle there in an adverse atmosphere. One can find there immorality at every step. Even author has confessed that home is the only place where a person can find peace. Kate also wanted to return to the England but she had to admit this proverb that “there is no use crying over spilt milk”.

Meira Chand has used a term ‘third culture kid’ in this novel. All those overseas children from wherever, are called third culture kids in Japanese states. “It just means a child from one culture who lands in another and must fuse his native culture and host culture into his own unique reality, his third culture”. (*The Bonsai Tree* 87) There were numerous difficulties and all kinds of problems of alienation for a third culture person like Kate.

The notorious place in Japan namely Kamagaski as stated by the novel was also a hub of prostitution. There was an area called the ‘Tobita’. The poor girls in the houses of Tobita were rarely allowed out; they could sit in the porch or at a window. They only left those houses by way of death. Those girls were different from the bar hostesses or other prostitutes, who although victimised by the gangs have a different status. These girls were at the last rung of prostitution ladder in Japan, and the gangs controlled it all. As per Father Ota, these girls could never escape. They had no choice against the gangs who employed special surveillance divisions to prevent runways. If they could escape they were found sooner or later. There were hard and cruel punishments for any breach of rules. Like other Japanese women they were also treated as a bonded commodity. The women in those tiny houses were prisoners to tradition in a shocking and vivid way. The brothel houses were well kept, traditional with tiled roofs and carved wooden entrances. These were looking attractive and tempting by flower arrangements or red carpets spread over there at the entrances. Perhaps it was worse than earlier about these houses. They were contracts before, and however they might be manipulated, they were legal agreements warranted by the law. There was a hope of way out and return to ordinary life.

Traditionally too, the practice of running a brothel, however odious and vicious in reality, was maintained with considerable status by families with pretensions to social acceptance. The underworld had control only over street walkers. When legal prostitution ended the underworld took over. The brothels were not called by the name of brothels; they were given other names to get round the law. The police even knowing the facts were hard of doing anything.

The girls there mostly were runaways, farm girls in their teens, fed up with a monotonous life or unhappy homes. They were actually lured or eloped for fantasy things. They eloped for jobs, works or relationships.

The Bonsai Tree has thrown light on how prostitution had got acceptable and synonyms. The sex industry in Japan used a variety of names. Soaplands, Fashion health, Pink salons, Image clubs. Soap lands were bath houses where customers were soaped up and serviced by staff. Fashion health shops and pink salons were notionally massage or aesthetic treatment parlors. Image clubs were themed versions of the same. The actual act of prostitution was legally called 'Enjo Kosai' or "compensated dating" to avoid legal trouble. There were more than twelve thousand sex related businesses in Japan. Not only was the sex business impressive in its size, it was also impressive in its variety. In Japan one could find brothels that fell under different above given names. The competition was stiff to give customers what they wanted and attracted regular customers. Some pink establishments were open twenty four hours. Some offered alibis to wives, mothers, and girlfriends.

The prostitution haunted the streets of red light district at night fall, flitching about like the spirits of the damned carrying a roll of matting whose use requires no explanation. They had noses damaged away by syphilis disease and the damage was repaired by coloured candle drippings. These women were deaf and dumb and lame, suffering from all the last degree maladies of venereal disease, which prevented their practicing in a regular brothel. The naming of courtesans were; Faint clouds, Little purple, Fragrance, Nine folded, Floral fan, Pine mountain, Flower willow etc.

In the end of the novel Meira Chand has again revealed the difficulties an outsider faced in Japan, due to rigid and strict culture. The apathy towards the women in general and towards a western lady like Kate in particular was the norm of Japanese society. Even Father Ota had the realisation of this fact. His heart felt for Kate as a stranger in Japan. The Japanese society was not easier for an outsider. Not only the foreigners but the churches sponsored by Western Christian missionaries also faced such problems of alienation. It was looked down with a strange eye:

I can understand your difficulties. Our society is not easy for a Westerner. You must understand and accept that even married to a Japanese you will always live on the periphery. But the church too has a hard time here, if it is any comfort to you. In some way our problems are somewhat like yours. We do better in other parts of the East where the division of the flesh and spirit is more clearly defined. And I must tell you that I carry in myself some of the conflicts that have unsettled you. (*The Bonsai Tree* 219)

After going through the detailed analysis of this novel, it can be said that this research paper is a real and detailed expression of all the stages of women position in Japan. The place and position of a woman with her husband is more comfortable.

In my lifetime the position of women in Japan has changed in an undreamed way. But there are women now, who would have us, ape some kind of westernized freedom, although this, thank goodness, is not yet widespread. The average Japanese women still feels her place in the home. This is as it should be. I believe most women see their strength and power more truly there than in other roles, with their imported ideas of emancipation. (*The Bonsai Tree* 68)

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