

## ***Desirable Daughters: Assimilation of Culture & Transformation of Identities***

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Bharati Mukherjee, an India born Canadian/ American novelist, has made a deep impression on the literary canvass. She is an investigative pioneer--of innovative terrains, practices, and literatures—co-existent with her wide-ranging mission to discover new worlds. Her novels, honestly, depict the issues of her own cultural location in West Bengal in India, her displacement (alienation) from her land of origin to Canada where she was “simultaneously invisible” as a writer and “overexposed” as a racial minority and her final re-location (assimilation) to USA as a naturalized citizen. Acculturation is the depressing upshot of post-modern scenario, which Mukherjee had comprehended much early in her life.

That is why, as a postmodern writer, her foremost concern has been the life of South-Asian expatriates and the dilemma of ‘acculturation’ and ‘assimilation.’ Through her female characters who are autobiographical projections of her experience as an expatriate she represents in her novels the contemporary woman’s struggle to define herself and attain an autonomous selfhood, especially in cross-cultural crisis, a subject which has assumed a great significance in the present world of globalization. She endeavors to dive deep into the distorted psyche of those immigrant women who have been surviving in the conflict of traditional Indian values; inherent in their

personality and their fascination for western mode of living. Her five novels and short stories delineate her evolution from alienation to adoption and assimilation.

The novel *Desirable Daughters* belongs to that genre of American literature which deals with issues of immigrant life and cultural assimilation. There are sufficient works in this genre that represent Hispanic, African and Chinese ethnic minorities in the United States, but relatively few that speak for South Asian immigrants in general and Indian Americans in particular. Bharati Mukherjee’s work fills this void in the American literary canon. One can say that the novel is written by a woman for women audience, as the story’s central female protagonists. There are also elements of feminist thought that is woven into the passages of the novel, although, in its entirety, the novel was not meant to propagate the idea of feminism. The rest of this essay will elucidate the important themes dealt with in the novel.

*Desirable Daughters* is a brilliantly woven thoughtful novel about three India born upper class sisters-Padma, Parvati and Tara—who live as Indian immigrants in USA. The novel basically explores the diasporic experiences of Tara, the protagonist, who is more removed from her native Indian culture than her two sisters. It registers her sense of alienation, lack of belongingness, memory and fragmented identity; nevertheless it does not describe her nostalgia, urge to return to her homeland. Unlike earlier novels such as *The Tiger’s Daughter* and *Wife*, it celebrates immigration as the process of gain rather than a case of loss and dissolution of native culture. The protagonist undertakes the journey from expatriation to immigration; from strangeness

to familiarity and from alienation to adoption and assimilation. It is a wonderful synthesis of feminist and diasporic ideologies.

With one of the all-time great opening chapters, a traditional Hindu marriage of a five-year-old girl, Mukherjee establishes her themes, conflicts, and contrasts. Amidst the lyrical, atmospheric details of flickering oil lamps, the impenetrable jungle, banks of fog, and smoke from cooking fires, she inserts the singular detail of retching coughs from tuberculosis, suddenly shocking the reader and abruptly signaling that this is not a novel which will sugarcoat reality. And when the bride's and groom's families differ in interpreting the events which occur on the way to the ceremony and the bride ends up married to a tree, "It seems all the sorrow of history, all that is unjust in society and cruel in religion has settled on her."

The foremost and recurrent theme of *Desirable Daughters* is the conflict arising from native and foreign cultures. The main characters in the novel grapple with the challenge of accommodating the American feminist culture into their traditional Indian one. But, as schools of thoughts go, these two concepts are incompatible. The conventional role assigned to women in India is the very antithesis of what American feminists espouse. For example, Tara Lata was first married to a tree in a ceremonious ritual; as a measure to mitigate the malefic aspects of her horoscope. It was earlier predicted by a Hindu astrologer that Tara's married life would be short lived as a result of this malefic aspect. Such conceptions of marriage are mere superstitions from the point of view of feminism. The American

feminist movement, which was informed by scientific, sociological and historical knowledge would never approve of such primitive practices in the name of orthodoxy. This is a typical example of the sorts of conflict that Tara Lata and her sisters confront throughout the narrative text.

Tara belongs to a conservative Bengali Brahmin family of Calcutta which constricts her future prospects in life and career. Marriage with millionaire Bishwapriya Chatterjee transplants her in U.S.A. where she absorbs energy and vitality of western life to fulfill all her desires and encroaches every code of conduct and restriction laid for ladies in Indian society. American society provides her those opportunities which were denied to her till then, but Bish's traditional outlook estranges her from her husband and she is divorced. To embrace Americanism in totality she accepts divorce. Divorce leads to solitariness and solitariness causes wantonness. In an attempt to satisfy her feminist urges-unlimited liberty, sexual adventure with a Hungarian lover and career building-she loses her family, that is, husband and son. She does not realize her loss until a mysterious fellow Chris Dey enters her life and links her with her past. By introducing Chris, Bharati Mukherjee explores the psyche of Tara and her diasporic feelings. Chris compels her to search her cultural identity, to make self assessment and to reexamine her past life.

Tara is a modern educated lady, when she migrates to San Francisco, she accepts the challenges of host country; she does not look backward. Instead of being afflicted with

nostalgia she looks ahead for adjustment and survival. She agrees with her once said statement, “Sometimes, *bishey bish khai*, the only antidote for power is poison.” (*Desirable Daughters*, p.304) The conservative and strangulating Indian background works as a strong stimulus to let her enjoy a free and liberal atmosphere of America. She wears jeans and t-shirt in place of sari, drives car, establishes live in relationship with Andy, accepts divorce, an ominous word in Indian dictionary and also grants her son Ravi gay sexuality. She indulges in the process of adaptation and assimilation like Bharati Mukherjee herself. Being an autobiographical presentation of the novelist herself; Tara journeys from aloofness of expatriation to the exuberance of immigration. She becomes ready to be changed like Jyoti of Mukherjee’s other novel *Jasmine*. She would echo Jasmine’s words: “I changed because I wanted to. To bunker oneself inside nostalgia, to sheathe the heart in a bullet proof vest, was to be a coward.” (*Jasmine*, p. 185)

The three women from Calcutta grapple what to choose: their choices being an oppressive but known Indian tradition and a liberating but unknown feminist way of life. In this context, it is inevitable that some parts of their identity had to be destroyed and new facets to be developed. As these processes of self-destruction and self-construction take place in parallel, Indian American women portrayed by Bharati Mukherjee invariably seem to evolve into modern feminists. Feminist critics of the novel *Desirable Daughters* tend to perceive, “the same distinction as a gender difference within Anglo-American

*bildungsroman*, with the result that the genre itself is a form for examining (and symbolically reconciling) this tension within women’s texts”. An integral part of this process of assimilation for the Indian American writer, the critics argue, “is the invention of a *bildungsroman* that describes a subject who combines independence, mobility and outspokenness with a deep sense of affinity with familial and communal others; as a group, these texts work to affirm that both halves of this equation are American and both are Asian. While others have focused on plots of second-generation separation and independence, however, my study questions the Asian American recasting of marriage plots.”

This theme is to be found in one of Mukherjee’s earlier novels *Jasmine*. In *Desirable Daughters*, as in *Jasmine*, the author revisits the ‘interracial immigrant romance’ from the perspective of the Indian American woman. In as much as these narratives are directed at women readers, they nevertheless serve to show how such narratives are different from that of male authors’. As part of the theme of self-construction of the characters, in *Desirable Daughters* we find that, “the immigrant woman’s Americanization is accomplished with the help of white romantic partners, but in order to win their support the woman must submit to their alienating and sanitizing preconceptions of her, thereby renouncing the very past that renders her unique.”

The aforementioned example also brings to light the different ways in which societies are organized in India and in America.

In India, the happiness of the individual is subordinate to the collective good of his/her community. More importantly, the role of women is to be supportive to their husbands in all circumstances. The individual needs and aspirations of women were not given due importance in what is essentially a patriarchal society. But the three sisters from Calcutta are no longer strictly bound by this primitive culture, for they find themselves in the midst of liberal America, where the scope of their freedom and expression is at its furthest from realities in India. Paul Briens, who has written a nuanced interpretation of the novel, makes a relevant observation:

The contrasts between life in Calcutta and Atherton, between her ex-husband and her lover, and between her traditional, protected life in India and her free and independent life in the U.S. are very obvious throughout, but as Tara deals with the complexities of Christopher Dey's appearance, we also see how tradition and family stories also guide her inner world, shape her responses, and affect both her views of the external world and her behavior within it--even after she has "changed worlds."

At times the contrasts in Tara's life seem exaggerated and perhaps less realistic than they could be, with the dramatic plot and its violence somewhat at odds with the more subtle (and, to me, more interesting) internal conflicts she faces. The shocking climax, which causes Tara to reevaluate her connections to the past and plan for the future, brings the themes full circle, while leaving some of the details unresolved, perhaps appropriate to a novel about cultural differences.

Tara proves that survivor is one who accepts change and transforms oneself according to situation. Bharati Mukherjee's heroines break the myth of single identity and try to balance the 'world of origin' and the 'world of adoption' through the process of assimilation. Unlike other Indian writers such as Kamala Markandaya and Anita Desai who treated the Indian immigrant situation as one of conflict and adjustment, Bharati Mukherjee gives it a new and challenging perspective enabling the immigrants to emerge out of their cocoons of defense into the openness of assertion.

Although Tara tries to get rid of her native identity, yet she cannot completely desert it, for it flows in her blood. Her oscillation between Indian ethos and American value system thrusts her into a dilemma. She realizes that she is neither an Indian, nor an American. Her outer self is American, but her inner self is Indian. A character named Sidhu says to her, "You seem so American, but you have got an obsession with India." (*Desirable Daughters*, 145) Despite her openness, she is not ready to digest the matter of her didi's illegal son because she still believes virginity is essential before marriage. She is divorced and lives freely with Andy, nevertheless she aspires for her family (husband Bish and son Ravi). She feels that her identity is fragmented, composed of multiple selves, accepting or rejecting certain aspects of both Indian and American culture. She comes to terms with the idea that she will never have a single identity, but rather be dispersed between being Indian and American. She does not fight with her multiplicity, rather accepts them as part of her progressive

capacity. In this way, Tara keeps on changing and evolving, but at the same time, she does not completely lose her former identity. This is Taralata's segmented assimilation in the novel. While Tara's elder sisters Padma and Parvati try to transplant Indian culture in America and try to preserve it, she moulds and reshapes it to adjust to the world of adoption through her assimilative capacity.

Tara is more akin to Jyoti of *Jasmine* than Dimple of *Wife*. Like in *Jasmine*, Tara welcomes American life style and prepares to make a new identity. She differs from Dimple who fails to adjust with alien atmosphere; becomes neurotic due to experiences of Diaspora; kills her husband and commits suicide, because she has hope and confidence to assimilate the host culture and adjust to the changed socio-cultural and geographical conditions.

Despite her positive response to displacement, Tara always feels herself a stranger. She agrees with Bish' opinion, "I have learned that another person is not necessarily the answer of loneliness." (*Desirable Daughters*, p.270) She cannot change her inferior black race, nor can she control American outlook towards Indians. Like other Indian Diasporas she suffers from the pangs of alienation, lack of belongingness and crisis of identity. She says: "I am sick of feeling an alien." (*Desirable Daughters*, p. 87) "I am not the only Indian on the block. All the same, I stand out, I'm convinced. I don't belong here." (*Desirable Daughters*, p.79) She is a victim of racial discrimination, a common behavior of humiliation practiced with every Indian in

western countries. Tara says: "I didn't have a single close friend in San Francisco...The Atherton wives treated me as a pariah I didn't belong in India or in the Silicon Valley...." (*Desirable Daughters*, p.109)

It is however noticeable that Tara never wishes to return to her homeland because Calcutta evokes memories of constriction and conservative ideologies. Her desire to visit her native land is temporary to satisfy some queries related to her family prestige.

While undergoing the process of assimilation the identity of Tara is transformed. Mukherjee elucidates her concept of fluid and changing identity through Tara. She agrees with the lines of Stuart Hall, "The Diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference." (401-402)

Hence, in summary, through the lives of Tara Lata and her two sisters, author Bharati Mukherjee competently portrays the themes of changing identity, western feminism versus Indian tradition and self-discovery. In a way these three themes are interrelated. For example, as Tara Lata and her sisters attempt to resolve for themselves their true identities and set out to apply newly adopted values in their lives, they progress as individuals and end up discovering more about themselves. By



depicting in detail the complex difficulties confronting these women, Mukherjee also illustrates the underlying vulnerabilities.

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